Ethnonyms in American Usage: The Story of a Partial Breakdown in Communication

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I

Historically, and especially in modern times, in English (as in all languages for that matter) nouns and adjectives of nationality have referred primarily to citizens or subjects of a given nation or state. Among educated American speakers and writers, this is still basically, but not always, the meaning that first springs to mind upon hearing or reading these terms (henceforth referred to generically as *ethnonyms* for short), with due regard for context. Not so, however, among the great masses of contemporary speakers of American English, for whom another seme would appear to be the primary one, judging from extensive empirical evidence.

One might venture the following definition for this favored seme: *A person tacitly acknowledged by both speaker and hearer to be a native American citizen but referred to descriptively by using the noun or adjective referring to his real or fancied ancestral country of origin, despite the fact that the person involved is not and never has been a citizen or subject thereof.* In other words we are dealing with an ellipsis of the well-known expression "hyphenated American" as applied to a specific case.

Since the adjective, on both formal and statistical-probabilistic grounds, seems to be the locus of the ethnonymic phenomenon, illustrations will be drawn chiefly from adjectives, but with occasional comparative forays into the realm of nouns.

II

One may begin with a simple statement, one heard many times by numerous informants who all had in common the fact that they had immigrated to the United States from France: "He (or she) is French." Reference is here made to a situation in which the person so referred to was completely unknown to the informant, who heard it from the lips of a native American. The universal reaction among informants was, quite naturally, to construe the

statement as an illustration of what appears as the first seme in all dictionaries of the American language, of which three examples will now be adduced:

a) *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, Concise Edition* (1962):
French . . . adj. of France, its people, their language or culture. n. the Romance language of the French.

The corresponding noun *Frenchman* is listed under the same heading as the adjective, but is not defined, which means that one is to construe its meaning as deriving directly from that of the adjective, with no modifications.

b) *Funk & Wagnalls' New Standard Dictionary of the English language* (1963):
French, a. 1. Of or pertaining to France, its people, or its language. 2. (Prov. Engl.) Uncommon, foreign.

It is specified that the corresponding noun is *Frenchman,* without further comment.

c) *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1977), a Merriam-Webster dictionary:
French . . . adj. . . .: of, relating to, or characteristic of France, its people, or their language.

(Discussion of *Webster's Collegiate*'s treatment of *Frenchman* will be found in Section IV.)

The above definitions seem quite clear, even obvious. But are they complete? I submit that they are not. They simply fail to include the "ethnonymic" seme which, on statistical-probabilistic grounds, appears to be the most widespread, the most obvious to the bulk of native speakers of American English, and the most likely to occur, in any given situation, in actual oral usage as well as in a goodly portion of written usage, i.e. that of *native American citizen of French ancestry*. Upon investigation, this was indeed what native American speakers meant, in the vast majority of cases, when they described someone as being "French." There was usually no problem of communication *as long as* these speakers were addressing other native Americans sharing their semantic code fully with them, and *provided* the extra-linguistic situation, the semantic referent, truly corresponded to the ethnonymic seme. This occurred despite the fact that, as has just been seen, several dictionaries fail to take notice of the seme involved.

But if the person addressed by a native American happened to be a recent immigrant from France (or from elsewhere for that matter, with the possible exception of Canada) then the first dictionary entry — henceforth to be referred to as "seme # 1" — was invariably the first one springing to *his* mind. And thus did a communication breakdown occur, at first unbeknowns

to both parties, the mental image evoked for each being quite different. The semantic referent of the word simply was not the same for both protagonists. For the first, the native American, it was that of a fellow native American, probably with a French surname, one of whose ancestors, perhaps generations ago, immigrated to the United States. For the immigrant from France, the descriptive term "French" evoked the image of a person just like himself, a native of France, speaking French as his native tongue and partaking of metropolitan French culture. One result of such a situation has been occasionally witnessed by several informants: these are mildly ludicrous encounters between native Frenchmen and native Americans who knew not a word of French and who had never set foot in France. If the native Frenchman was too recent an immigrant to America to have learned much English yet, the meeting between these two monolinguals would, to say the least, fail to be productive. Because of ethnonymic failure of communication, the French protagonist in such meetings had been led to believe that he was going to meet a fellow-national, while the American one may either have known the truth of the matter but thought the Frenchman knew English, or else he might have believed he was going to meet a "French-American" and that there would therefore be no language barrier since the latter would naturally have English as a mother-tongue, or at the very least be perfectly bilingual. In some extreme cases informants reported that even though the native American, one of "French extraction," knew full well that the person he was going to meet had just landed from France and knew no English, he very much wanted the meeting to take place anyway; so strong at times is the attraction of the notion of the "blood-brother," a common genetic pool, no matter how diffuse, superseding any realistic differential features such as citizenship, language, culture, life experiences, life style and education, etc., that informants could not help reaching the conclusion that such a half biological, half mystical feeling of kinship was more important to their interlocutor than any real intellectual communication.[1] Such situations were likely to arise again and

[1]One should add that such a realization did not prevent some French informants from catering to the same unscientific but quite widespread ingenuous, tacit assumption that somehow culturally acquired characteristics were transmitted genetically, and that "blood" was thus of paramount importance. One reported instance was that of a French immigrant lady in California who, in connection with her American-born fiancé, boasted that not only was the latter "French" but also "Bordelais" (Bordeaux being the hometown of the lady). Further investigation revealed that the fiancé was a third-generation American, who knew no French whatsoever, nor had he seen France, but whose grandfather had immigrated from Bordeaux. From being "national" the "blood" has thus become toponymically pinpointed and transmitted notionally across three generations. Contradictory attitudes of this kind among informants were an overtone of the more general ethnonymic problem on the American scene. It is a mere aspect of the more general intense preoccupation with ancestry quite common to most human beings. This research is, however, concerned with breakdowns in linguistic communication from a functional point of view, in practical life, resulting from the above situation, as such breakdowns may affect a society.

again until the immigrant finally learned pragmatically what most Americans really mean most of the time by their use of adjectives of nationality.

These situations might be simply comical incidents, or they might have more serious consequences. The latter might be illustrated by a case history. A lady immigrant, a native of Paris, had worked for years as a secretary for a California electronics firm. Translating documents and interpreting for visiting French businessmen were part of her duties. When she served notice that she was going to leave, a replacement was duly sought within the huge firm to take over her job, one involving the same linguistic qualifications. Native American fellow workers volunteered the information that a certain secretary in another department was "also French." Things went so far as an interview of the latter lady by the Personnel Department of the organization before it was determined that she was "as American as apple pie" and knew not a word of French, nor anything about France. Her great-grandfather had immigrated from there to America, and that was the extent of her "Frenchness." This incident illustrates the fact that in spite of the practical experience of working for years with the French immigrant lady, her native American fellow workers still had not established the functional difference between her and the American-born secretary sufficiently to avoid a mistake in vocabulary whose consequences turned out to be embarrassing and a waste of time and money for the organization.

III

An idea of both the absolute and the relative dimensions of the problem involved in such *quid pro quo* situations, which transcend ordinary homonymy in that the extra-linguistic context *must,* in most instances, be invoked in order to solve the problem in communication, may be obtained from attempting to arrive at even a very rough estimate of the frequency of the phenomenon. Such an estimate would be based on known facts, both statistical and historical, supplied by the U.S. Census Bureau, on the one hand, and the scientifically valid principle of mediocrity, on the other. One of the intellectually more spectacular areas of application of the principle of mediocrity has been its use by exobiologists (for instance, Isaac Asimov or Carl Sagan) in an effort to assess the chances of actual existence of extra-terrestrial life.

The principle of mediocrity is but a modern restatement of the old adage *in medio veritas,* as applied to calculating probabilities of occurrence. The principle may be used as follows in the case under discussion: 1) A time frame, 1900 to 1980, is chosen, coinciding historically with a paroxysm in foreign immigration to the United States, followed by a drastic reduction but encompassing the lifespans of many immigrants to this day 2) An average

figure for the total population of the United States during this time frame is set at 100,000,000 3) An average percentage of the foreign-born American population, including both new immigrants and unnaturalized aliens, is set at 10% for that same time frame 4) Of that 10%, one assumes that one-half came to America after childhood and were thus sensitive to and cognizant of the ethnonymic phenomenon; the 10% figure is thus reduced to 5% 5) The figure of 20 years is posited as the average portion of the immigrant's lifespan spent on American soil 6) It is assumed that each immigrant, on the average, has dealt with one ethnonymic *quid pro quo* situation during each of his years in America 7) It is to be remembered that since it takes two parties to create an ethnonymic *quid pro quo,* at least, the actual estimated number of people involved in each such incident is double the number of immigrants, since the American native party is also involved.

Using all of the above parameters by substituting appropriate figures for each, one arrives at the following estimates:

a) Absolute estimated number of ethnonymic "incidents" during the 1900–1980 time frame, representing four generations of immigrants:

$$4 \quad \frac{(100{,}000{,}000 \times 5 \times 20)}{100} \quad = \quad 400{,}000{,}000$$

b) Yearly average of such incidents:

$$\frac{400{,}000{,}000}{80} \quad = \quad 5{,}000{,}000 \text{ (i.e. some 13,700 daily)}$$

c) Total number of people involved during the 1900-1980 time frame: This can be estimated by taking the figure of 4 generations involved, multiplying this by the estimated relevant proportion of immigrants in the population, i.e. 5% of the total, and then doubling the number to include the American parties to the *quid pro quo* situations:

$$2 \quad \frac{(4 \times 5 \times 100{,}000{,}000)}{100} \quad = \quad 40{,}000{,}000$$

No matter how inaccurate the above arch-conservative estimates might seem, they still afford one an *order of magnitude* for the frequency of the phenomenon and the number of individuals involved. Concerning the latter, the estimate is even more conservative if it is considered that there may be instances (such as the one reported above concerning the search for a French secretary in a large California firm) when *many* people on the American side delude themselves until the confusion is cleared up. The reciprocal is far less likely to occur.

There remains the matter of philosophical interpretation of the above figures. If one adopts a purely synchronic and relative point of view, a phenomenon which affects one person out of *circa* every 730 every day in America may seem quantitatively quite small, though not negligible. But such an approach tells us nothing of the degree of qualitative gravity of each such incident. At any rate, the number of incidents and people involved is high in absolute terms. It is even more so, still in absolute terms, if a diachronic view be taken, as shown by the figure of forty million-odd individuals involved in this century. At the very least this can be taken as an indication that something is wrong with the linguistic-semantic system in an area of life that is important to each American. And if one believes, as did Hegel, that beyond a certain order of magnitude the quantitative merges into the qualitative,[2] the ethnonymic phenomenon cannot be considered as of marginal proportions either subjectively or objectively.

IV

A first hint at the semantic-lexical truth of the matter, still using "French" persons as an example, may be found under the separate entry *Frenchman* in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1977):

> "Frenchman . . . n. 1: a native or inhabitant of France
> 2: one who is of French descent

One might first wonder why what is deemed true of the noun in the second definition should not also be true, and therefore listed, of the adjective. There is a methodological inconsistency here. Moreover, while the adjectival use of *French* with seme # 2 of *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* for *Frenchman* (i.e. "one who is of French descent") is quite widespread in daily American speech, such does not seem to be the case with the noun. In other words, *Frenchman* generally does seem to refer to the "real McCoy," i.e. the continental Frenchman, whereas *French* may or may not do so. Furthermore, the definition given of *Frenchman* in seme # 2 (one confirmed almost *verbatim* in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1966) which states, under its own entry *Frenchman:* ". . . 1b: one that is of French descent") does not specify that it is dealing with the United States scene only (with the possible exception of Canada). If the definition be taken at face value as illustrating American usage one would have to be ready, for instance, to describe General Pinochet of Chile as a "Frenchman." He may well be so considered in Chile if similar lexicographicosemantic phenomena

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[2] "Im Masse sind, abstrakt ausgedrückt, Qualität and Quantität vereinigt." (HEGEL, *Logik*, I, 3)

obtain there;[3] it is very doubtful that any North American would ever describe him as such in English.

Nor is this the end of the matter. While several dictionaries do list a separate entry for *French Canadian* (e.g. *Funk & Wagnalls,* or *Webster's New Collegiate,* do so) none would seem to list or specify yet another semantic distinction which should be made in this connection: the American English adjective *French* in practice *also* refers, by ellipsis, to such inhabitants of the Province of Quebec, on the one hand, but on the other hand that same adjective can, and does, refer to yet another entire native American ethnic group as well. That group has settled mostly in the New England states. These native Americans are the descendants, not lineally of immigrants from France within the last two or three generations, but rather products of nineteenth-century Quebec immigration into New England and northern New York. As such they represent a sub-culture that is different from that of relatively recent immigrants from France, and even different from that of the mother province of Quebec, of which more below. This ethnic group has its own hyphenated appellation, one listed in some dictionaries: *Franco-Americans.*[4] Members of this ethnic group who still know French (their breed is growing thin) refer to themselves in that language as *Francos* for short. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* defines *Franco-Americans,* whether noun or adjective, as "an American of French or esp. French-Canadian descent." The "especial" category seems to correspond to linguistic reality (at least in New England and northern New York) while the broad one appears to have been misconstrued. If the hyphenated American rather than the common elliptic construction be used, then "French-American" would seem indicated, though in actual usage this form has seldom been encountered in my investigation. Its use with the meaning of *Americans of European French descent within living memory* might help clear up the confusion surrounding the ethnonym "French," which, as is by now appar-

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[3]There are grounds for believing that they pervade the entire continent, i.e. similar ethnonymic phenomena may exist in Latin American countries that have also experienced massive European immigration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (i.e. non-Iberian immigration). Argentina, Brazil and Chile are illustrations. A comparative study might well be in order, contrasting what has happened in those countries with what has happened in the United States and Canada.

[4]Dictionaries may also mention French-Canadians as an illustration, irrespective of whether they have their own dictionary entry or not. Thus *Webster's Third International Dictionary* (1966) gives the following as one of its definitions of the adjective *French*:"3. of or belonging to the overseas descendants of the French people (as the French Canadians)". One gathers that Québecois are thus typically subsumed under the appellation *French*, more so than the Franco-Americans who, while listed separately in the Dictionary, are not brought in as a direct illustration in what is after all a dictionary of American English usage. In New England it is a moot question as to which seme is paramount, and the situation may well depend in part on how close one is to the Canadian border.

ent, can refer on the American scene to no less than five different sociocultural groups: a) citizens of France b) Franco-Americans c) Québecois (i.e. French-Canadians, citizens of the Dominion of Canada living in the U.S. d) French-Americans, as just defined in the present paragraph, and e) Yet a fifth group: Acadians, of Cajuns, of Louisiana. The common ancestral genetic pool, or "blood" as used in popular parlance, implicit in the ethnonym thus obscures the quite distinct collective personality of each group of "French" people.

As regards *Franco-American,* the situation is further confused by the fact that the expression contains the combination form *Franco-,* which in common English usage serves to associate two national concepts rather than unite them into one single seme (e.g. a Franco-American alliance or treaty). This does not matter to the ethnic group itself, or to their neighbors in the American Northeast who know them, but may be misconstrued farther afield (say on the West Coast), or constitute a bit of a mystery to other native English speakers, such as the British, not to mention foreigners for whom both the American language and the use of ethnonyms in America may be unfamiliar. Translations of American novels often fail to make the situation clear to foreign readers, assuming it is clear to the translator himself.

It might be argued by some that such distinctions are too subtle to have practical importance in daily life. An interesting case in point would suffice to show that this is not so. It involves a Paris-born professor of French in American universities who, in the late sixties, taught a course in a summer National Defense Education Act Institute in Massachusetts. This NDEA Institute was specifically designed to enhance the French linguistic and teaching skills of Franco-American high school teachers. The faculty and students were a mixed bag of 1) Frenchmen from France, such as my informant 2) some French Canadians 3) a majority of Franco-Americans, and 4) native Americans of other backgrounds. The informant was entrusted with the teaching of the course in contemporary French civilization. It soon became apparent to him from the reactions of his mature Franco-American charges that they were culturally twice removed, as it were, from their very dimly remembered ancestral France. Their family and ethnic memories were of Quebec of a century ago. Quebeckers, in turn, harbored rather dim memories of France under the *Ancien Régime* of two, three, and even four centuries ago, with strong royal and ecclesiastical overtones. The French Revolution, the various French Republics, the French *Kulturkampf,* the contemporary French social, political and intellectual scene were not only practically unknown to them, but finding out about these realities from their teacher was for most of the students a distinct and sometimes severe culture shock, evidenced by reactions of disbelief or anger. The Gallic faculty, in

turn, were surprised and even dismayed by these unexpected reactions. Teaching the realities of twentieth-century France to Americans of remote French descent, who naturally harbored the ethnic consciousness and pride which are endemic in America, became an unpleasant exercise in iconoclasm which only a sadist could enjoy. My informant stated that the atmosphere in and out of the classroom became tense and unpleasant all around. This incident once again illustrates the strikingly obvious, yet oft-repressed truth, that biological common descent — gathered from surnames or ethnonymic designations — does not mean cultural identity, even if dialects of the same ancestral language are still spoken by all parties involved, as they were in this particular case.

Another case history illustrating the potential seriousness of ethnonymically-induced semantic confusion is that of a native French professor of French, teaching at a famous university on the West Coast. This informant was a native of France, a native French speaker, a French citizen, and he even had a French accent in English. Unfortunately, he was also Jewish. When his American students discovered this (he saw no reason to hide it) a distinct malaise set in, though this was in no wise due to anti-Semitism. The professor reported that his students seemed pathologically incapable of comprehending how one could be French and Jewish at the same time (for different reasons, anti-Semites in France also seem unable to understand this, but that is a mere facet of the general xenophobia and anti-Republicanism of the French Far Right). This semantic confusion was due to the fact that the adjective *Jewish,* in addition to all its other meanings, is also construed as an adjective of "nationality," i.e. as an ethnonym, in the American mind. There seemed to exist a conflict of categorizations. And the students solved it, without hesitation, and in the face of all objective evidence, by notionally denying the man his being French and sticking the label Jewish on him as the only fitting description of his identity. As proof that anti-Semitism was not involved one may adduce the reported fact that among the most vociferous student authors of the above ethnic diagnosis were American Jews, who apparently never stopped to think that if the very same criteria were applied to *them,* they would be notionally stripped of their American citizenship. What seems to happen is a universal desire in America, granted, more or less, that everyone is an American, to stick a chemically pure label of "nationality" on every individual (this is fully confirmed by the native American novelist Robert Traver, cf. *infra,* Section 6). Since both "French" and "Jewish" were *a priori* classified as ethnonyms there was a logical though mistaken fundamental incompatibility right there in the minds of the students. It is rather strange that the existence of famous Frenchmen who were, or are, Jewish (e.g. Captain Dreyfus, Léon Blum, Pierre Mendès-Frence, André Lwoff,

François Jacob, Darius Milhaud, René Cassin, etc.) should not have impinged upon their consciousness and thus caused them to dissociate the two conceptual categories (nationality or citizenship on the one hand, and "race," religion or even "ethnic group" on the other). In the event it was neither the citizenship, nor the native tongue, nor the culture of the informant, as obvious as they were, that prevailed in the classificatory process of the students, but rather the more irrelevant one, since the professor was not an American Jewish "ethnic" and still less a Jewish "national," as there is no such thing, not even in the State of Israel. At any rate the hapless teacher was the object of unwarranted gossip — he seemed to be considered as some kind of mild usurper —, his prestige suffered, and so did his teaching. He states that he was quite unaware of the cause of what was happening until quite late in the game. As a last indignity, he discovered that the best he could achieve in explaining how one could realistically be French and Jewish at the same time was to convey involuntarily the impression that one of his parents was French and the other Jewish! In reality both of them were French Jews. The semantic barrier was almost insurmountable.

Similar incomprehension has been reported by young French Jewish immigrants to the United States within the ranks of the U.S. Army, where they were made to feel in a limbo of "national" identity, a notion which seemed to matter a great deal to their fellow-G.I.s. At the other end of the spectrum directors of Education Abroad programs of U.S. universities have talked of the utter amazement of white American students in France for the first time upon discovering that there is a black population there, and that these people are native French nationals. The image of a black Frenchman simply had never occurred to them, though they had certainly read about France's colonial history.

V

We have dwelled at length on the case of the word *French,* in line with a policy that at least one instance of the ethnonymic phenomenon should be exposed exhaustively. But other nouns and adjectives of nationality on the American scene present similar problems, often less severe than the "pentasemic" *French,* but ever present. Lexicographical entries similarly either ignore the most commonly used seme or give it a low priority. In so doing they are acting more in a prescriptive than a descriptive manner, with the ever-present important potential exception that it may be editorial policy to list semes in order of historical appearance. In practice one may wonder whether the average dictionary user is always aware of such an historical sequence of definitions when he consults a dictionary. But then again since it

is a fair guess that ethnonyms hardly ever get to be looked up by *any* user (practically everyone, native, immigrant or foreigner, is quite convinced he knows what they mean) the entire question is an academic one.

There is also lexicographical inconsistency, or inequality of treatment, leading one to believe that within a given dictionary it was not the same person that was entrusted with the definitions of the various ethnonyms.

While this research has covered the treatment, in several dictionaries, of nine ethnonyms, space limitations for this article preclude an extensive report. But some of the highlights will now be listed and discussed; the discussion includes consideration of the lexicographical treatment of the word *nationality* itself.

a) *Spanish*

Funk & Wagnalls (unless otherwise noted the dictionaries mentioned or alluded to are the same as above) defines this word as: "of or pertaining to Spain, the Spaniards, or the language," without further comment. The term *Spaniard,* of course, is crystal clear and suffers no semantic disability in America, simply because it is a different lexeme (i.e. this ethnonymic noun does not coincide formally, whether phonetically or graphemically, with its corresponding adjective).

Both *Websters* go further by listing a separate entry for *Spanish American. Webster's New Collegiate* defines this as: "1: a native or inhabitant of one of the countries of America in which Spanish is the national language 2: a resident of the U.S. whose native language is Spanish and whose culture is of Spanish origin -" Several objections come to mind concerning these definitions and listings; one may well deem them unrealistic in a dictionary that came out in 1977, after so many years of ethnic increased consciousness and effervescence in America.

First of all, *Webster's New Collegiate* fails to mention that the expression *Spanish American* is usually utilized in formal speech only, or in writing, and that in the overwhelming majority of spoken utterances (empirically determined) it is a standard American linguistic pattern to use the elliptical, in this case the plain adjective, *Spanish.* In other words one would have expected under the entry *Spanish* a cross-reference to *Spanish-American.* None is forthcoming. Only Spain is referred to.

The second point is that one may well object to the definition of seme # 1 of *Spanish American* as defined in *Webster's New Collegiate.* American usage is rather *Latin-American,* or elliptical *Latin* (as in "Latin lover"), for such a person.

Third, the definition of seme # 2 speaks only of "residents" of the U.S. without even hinting that some of them, as a matter of fact a majority, are not

just residents but actual U.S. citizens, a high proportion of them natives. Their high degree of family and social cohesion may well make them native speakers of Spanish while still being native Americans. In other words, Mexican *braceros,* who are aliens, and native "Tex-Mex" or Chicanos are implicitly lumped together, whereas the bilingualism of the second group, in addition to their being native Americans, provides an important contrast with their monolingual, alien kinsmen. Such mental amalgamation, in the dictionary, of two semes which the lexicographers should have separated, by means of the probably unconscious substitution of "residents" for "citizens" (mere residents qualifying under seme # 1) appears to reflect a similar amalgamation in the minds and speech of Anglos. Such an amalgamation is not limited to "Spanish" people by any means. The impression is gathered by an attentive observer that the distinction is a bit fuzzy even among the parties most directly concerned, Chicanos for instance.

Last, an objection similar to the case of Franco-Americans might be voiced here. The culture of Spanish Americans who are "residents" of the U.S. is described as "of Spanish origin." This is at best only a partial truth. The Spanish language, with all due consideration to its dialectological varieties, is of course the same and unites all *Hispanidad,* but such unity is especially perceived at the level of highly educated people with common literary and historical memories.[5] But again, what of the great masses? The expression *Spanish American,* more precisely the term *Spanish* for short, evokes different semantic referents, in cultural terms, depending on the region of the U.S. where it is used, and this remains true whether the term be used by Anglos or by the "Spanish" people themselves. Around New York City it would refer to Puerto Ricans (e.g. "Spanish Harlem"). Around Miami it would refer to Cubans. In the vast southwestern belt stretching from Texas to California it would refer indiscriminately, as we have seen, to Mexican nationals (legal or illegal immigrants as well as *braceros,* or temporary workers) as well as to Mexican-Americans ("Tex-Mex," Chicanos, also called *la raza*). Now their cultures are at least as much products, anthropologically speaking, of Indian as of pure Spanish antecedents (Cubans excepted), and the culture of Spanish-Americans is certainly to no mean degree also a product of the American environment as a whole. The three main groups (Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Cubans) speak different Spanish dialects. In short they differ markedly among themselves. None of the above is conveyed by the dictionary, and one

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[5]The author has however observed, during his stint in the U.S. Army in Europe, that G.I.s choosing a first destination for their leave would usually prefer London but that the "Spanish" G.I.s would pick Madrid. Community of language rather than of roots proper would seem to have been the overriding, practical motive, as most of the "Spanish" G.I.s were insular Puerto Ricans whose degree of bilingualism in no way matched that of Chicanos from the Southwest.

may well suspect that this omission is but a reflection of usage with its undue amalgamation. As in the case of "pentasemic" *French,* "tetrasemic" *Spanish* is an instance of usage fraught with potential misunderstanding as soon as one is not dealing with obvious, concentrated, cohesive ethnic pockets and the nonlinguistic reality assumes more general, broader dimensions. Last, but not least, dictionaries correctly discriminate between the noun and adjective under the entry *Spanish-American,* the adjective being glossed for instance as "of both Spain and America" (e.g. the Spanish-American war), a seme to which the elliptical *Spanish* does not apply.

One thing is quite clear: when an American of any background identifies people as "Spanish" the chances are infinitesimal that he refers to peninsular Spaniards. And yet this is the *only* gloss for that word in *Webster's New World Dictionary,* an added *etc.* implying, perhaps, all of the rest.

Under the Nixon Administration's "Affirmative Action" program and thereafter, the Federal Government and state agencies, for lack of better criteria (and probably aware of the difficulties of defining who is "Spanish"), have resorted to a twin linguistic-anthroponymic one, that of people bearing "Spanish surnames." But Spanish surnames are not the exclusive apanage of "Spanish" people, as the term is now understood in the U.S. A case in point is the misadventure of one of my informants, a Jewish-American lady of Sephardic (i.e. Judeo-Spanish) descent. Though very highly qualified she was unable to get a job in a California high school. In desperation she decided to take the "Spanish surname" criterion literally, though with few illusions, and went brazenly to the local Affirmative Action program administrator to demand that she be given preference for a teaching job on the grounds that her last name was "Spanish," which it actually was linguistically and historically. Needless to say she did not achieve her purpose. The administrator pointed out that she was not a *chicana,* with or without a Spanish surname, and did not qualify for preferential treatment accorded minorities. One cannot help speculating on what an interesting lawsuit such a situation might have warranted, with an interesting concomitant question: would a naturalized peninsular Spaniard find himself eligible for Federal preferential treatment because of his Spanish surname cum Spanish "blood," though he not be "Spanish" in the U.S. ethnonymic sense of the word? It is also ironic to recall that the government of Franco Spain has extended its protection to European Sephardim seeking a port in a storm precisely on grounds of *jus sanguinis* despite the 450 years that had elapsed since the expulsion of Spanish Jews in 1492. Their use of the Ladino language (very close to Old Castilian) played a part in this decision.

The California case just described underlines how emotionally charged and even economically significant an ethnonymic classification can be in contemporary America.

A related case involves an Anglo lady, a native of Arizona, the wife of a dean on one of the University of California campuses. Though quite well educated, she failed to comprehend and very grudgingly accepted the fact that a certain Jewish girl student, a native of Tijuana (Baja California), actually was a Mexican *national*. This is yet another instance of the extension of ethnonymic categories to citizens of foreign states, and the replacement of their legal and cultural identity by the ethnonymic one thought to be more appropriate by native Americans. Just as it is apparently almost impossible to conciliate the notions of "French and Jewish," so it is with "Mexican and Jewish"; actually it is so with all terms of nationality combined with, or rather opposed to *Jewish* on the American linguistic scene, again with the possible exception of cases perceived as of "mixed" parentage. And thus the hapless Jew immigrating to America often has had to fight not only the rejection of his anti-Semitic legal countrymen in his native land but also finds upon arrival that his already outraged sense of legal, national and cultural identity (as opposed to his religious, "racial" or "ethnic" one, which he may or may not care for) is completely misunderstood and even denied in America. "Ambiguity" is a word sometimes heard in such contexts, but such ambiguity is in the mind of the beholder: there is no *objective* ambiguity. The only saving grace is that malice is usually — though of course not always — not involved there. But malaise often is.

b) *"Pure" ethnonyms*

Mention has been made earlier of the American general desire to identify people in terms of "chemically pure" labels of nationality. Outside of very cohesive geographical ethnic pockets this may, in practice, prove quite difficult, given two centuries of increased mobility and mongrelization. In such a situation an American desiring to assert his identity then spontaneously resorts to a juxtaposition or a cocktail of ethnonyms. In simpler cases he might for instance say that he is "Norwegian and Swedish," or Norwegian-Swedish, which, in the absence of more details, should be construed as meaning that one of his parents is "Norwegian" (whether a Norwegian national orginally, or himself an American native of Norwegian descent) and the other, similarly, either a national of Sweden originally or else herself an "ethnic" and hence ethnonymic Swede.[6] In more complex cases, not un-

[6]Hyphenated ethnonymic juxtapositions may be a trap to the unwary, e.g. *Scotch-Irish* may *not* mean having one Scots parent and one Irish one. If so, people are "pure" Scots in descent, with Ireland as a locale of immigration prior to the next historical step of emigration to America. In the event of dual descent the longer phraseology would have to be called on if one is bent on making the distinction. According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, *Scotch-Irish* carries both meanings. Such an ethnonymic situation is fraught with potential ambiguity.

common, an entire explanatory ethnonymic phraseology is used, e.g. "I am German and Irish on my father's side, and Italian and Polish on my mother's side." In such instances we have, in capsule form, a practical illustration of the underlying tacit assumption, one devoid of any scientific objective reality or validity, whereby national classifications, which are products of history, politics, language and culture, can somehow be transmitted, and even combined, genetically. Among other things such a conscious or unconscious view assumes the complete homogeneity of physical and mental traits within each "nationality," a notion that is largely erroneous. The fact remains that any person describing himself in such terms *only succeeds in giving some indication about his forebears but very little information about himself.* Unlike anthropological genetic combinations (e.g. mestizos) the concept of nationality, being socio-cultural, linguistic, political and legal in nature, can only be transmitted culturally and legally. Even combinations thereof are cultural and legal, not genetic, e.g. bilingual and bicultural education or dual citizenship through the intricacies of *jus sanguinis* and *jus soli*. But these elementary truths are either unknown or ignored or repressed, and the American ethnonymic vocabulary contributes to the perpetuation of a fundamental falsehood. Attempts at dispelling the falsehood generally meet with great hostility. A quasi-taboo is involved, and the iconoclastic analyst walks where angels fear to tread. Critical intellect is bound to lose against a deeply ingrained sense of self-identity, no matter how farfetched.

A further observation may be of interest: while some (not all) pseudo-genetic, "national" combinations within a single individual are socially quite acceptable in America, this does not generally apply to corresponding, and very real, cultural mixtures (such as bilingualism or plurilingualism, mastery of more than one culture in an intellectual sense, etc.), which are looked at askance as being "weird" at best and "foreign" at worst. The academic community provides a notable exception, but this article is more concerned with popular attitudes. Moreover, exacerbated ethnic pride does not seem to preclude Americanocentric chauvinistic ostracism of even one's very own kind: U.S. "ethnics" often do not care much for their fellow-"nationals" recently arrived from the old country, and vice-versa. The same attitude has been observed among German-American G.I.s on duty in Germany, whose original euphoria at the thought of what they regarded as a sort of homecoming soon gave way to the realization that Germany's Germans were decidedly alien to their experience as "Germans" in Ohio or Minnesota.

c) *The semantics of the term* nationality

It was thought of interest and relevant to this research to probe dictionaries' definitions of the word *nationality,* and compare these with actual popular usage.

Funk and Wagnalls gives, *inter alia,* the following: "Solidarity as a race or people, even when in a state of exile, or in a foreign land, or under alien rule; as the *nationality* of the Irish in America." Even if one does not challenge that particular definition, the example adduced seems rather unfortunate. One can imagine the reaction of Irish-Americans, were they to look up the word, upon discovering that they are "in a state of exile, or in a foreign land, or under alien rule" in America. This is seme # 2 and can only be even remotely justified if taken to reflect the mid-nineteenth-century situation of the Irish in America. The semantic equation of *nationality = native American ethnic group,* which is at the root of present-day ethnonymic difficulties, is *not* listed. One has to wait for seme # 4 for a more general definition: "A connection with a particular nation as by birth, membership, etc.; state, quality, or fact of being related to a particular nation, as, *as an American, he was proud of his nationality.*" This means that nationality is equated with citizenship, which may go unchallenged for practical purposes,[7] but causes one to further deplore the absence of a more indigenous ethnonymic definition. The oft-asked question "What nationality are you?", one asked by a native American to another, is in no way reflected in the dictionary.

It is emotions that sway most people, and practical results of misconceptions about the meaning of the word *nationality* can be embarrassing, to say the least, and even lead to incidents. Two actual cases will illustrate both outcomes: 1) A naturalized American lady, born in Europe and of the Jewish faith, flying to Israel, was asked, as were all passengers, to fill out an official Israeli form before landing, a form which inquired about her "Nationality" (in English). She proceeded to write "American" in the space provided. Her fellow-passengers, all American-born ladies, thereupon indignantly indicated to her that she should have written "Jewish". One wonders what kind of "Jewish" passport they were prepared to show Israeli authorities. At any rate this illustrates how the word *nationality* is *not* equated with citizenship in the minds of many native Americans, while such an equation seems obvious to Europeans or European-born American citizens. 2) That the "emotional" seme # 2 (of *Funk and Wagnalls*) takes precedence over the more factual seme # 4 in American English usage is further illustrated by the fact that a few years ago, at a time of great black ethnic effervescence in America, the Director of an American university Education Abroad program had to have his young charges fill out French official forms to obtain their visas to stay in France for one year, once the entire group had already reached French soil.

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[7]There is a subtle distinction between *national* and *citizen* as regards International Law, with little bearing on daily usage. See Gerhard von Glahn, *Law Among Nations,* fourth edition (New York, 1981), p. 201.

One of the queries in the form was, of course, *nationalité*. This, in French, means only "citizenship". Most of the American students understood this correctly, and wrote either "U.S.A." or "American". But not so the black students of the group: it did not matter to them that they were in France as Americans. They wrote "Afro-American", which was puzzling to the French police. Attempts at persuasion to make them change their entry were met with indignant protests against such "oppressive" measures designed to repress their "national" identity, as if "nationality" in this typical popular American sense mattered one iota to the French authorities. In the end the informant smoothed things out with the latter, after a brief lecture on current U.S. lexicosemantic ethnonymic usage, which they found bizarre while remaining quite tolerant of such eccentricities once these were explained in a Cartesian manner.

VI

Up to this point the analysis has been based on the reports of a great variety of informants, mostly immigrants, but also natives. A greater voice should be given to the latter in the form of literary testimony.

Generally speaking, written American usage, whether journalistic, documentary or literary, merely reflects spoken usage, which is not surprising. Any writer, of any nation, writes primarily for his compatriots and contemporaries. Some may have an eye for posterity, and a few for foreign readers, but all will use as their medium the language of their time and country. No matter what stylistic liberties they may take with the language, they share a common linguistic and semantic code with their readership (including potential misunderstandings) which they will not tamper with, at least not without explaining their reasons for doing so. As far as ethnonyms are concerned, almost no American writer seems to have felt the need to deviate from accepted usage, irrespective of whether the latter does or does not always communicate extra-linguistic reality properly, or whether it is or is not properly recorded in dictionaries. The lone exception detected so far is Robert Traver, who does not exactly deviate from contemporary ethnonymic usage but, strangely enough, has felt the need to justify it, and even to define it.

In his *Anatomy of a Murder*[8], we find two paragraphs entirely relevant to this study:

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[8] *Anatomy of a Murder*, by John Traver (alias John D. Voelker), St. Martin's Press (New York, 1958).

a) "I have called Parnell McCarthy an Irishman and perhaps I had better explain. In the polyglot Upper Peninsula of Michigan calling a man, say, an Irishman is rarely an effort to demean or stigmatize him — black eyes lie richly strewn that way — but rather an effort at description, a painless device for swiftly discovering and assessing the national origins of a person's ancestors to the simple end of getting along together. Offense is neither intended nor taken. Thus a man named Millimaki is generally known and indeed more often describes himself as a Finn, though his mother may have been a Cabot and his ancestors on both sides have fought at Valley Forge; and thus a Biegler is hopelessly stamped a German, as often called "Dutchman," though some of his ancestors may alternately have toiled and prayed in the leaky galley of the *Mayflower*."[9]

Though the noun form of the ethnonyms seem to be preferred by Traver, he also uses the adjective. The last few words of the paragraph immediately preceding the one quoted are: ". . . . . about my old Irish friend Parnell McCarthy."

This paragraph calls for a series of critical comments, remarks and questions:

- The results of our research point to the fact that no native American reader would give the matter a second thought even if no explanation were forthcoming. The motives of the author in supplying one are unclear.
- Traver restricts a pervasive, trans-American onomastic phenomenon to the Upper Peninsula of the state of Michigan. Why such a high degree of localization?
- Traver's use of the adjective "polyglot" as an initial justification of his use of ethnonyms is strange. The "Finn" adduced as an example is a seventh-generation American, the "Dutchman" a fifteenth-generation one. It is well known that immigrant languages rarely survive beyond the second generation. The Peninsula can thus hardly be described as "polyglot".
- Traver takes pains to convey that what might be called *ethno-naming* is not an offensive gesture. But this is unwittingly negated by his use of the word "assessing" as regards "the national origins of a person's ancestors. . ." Assessments are quantitative in nature and *ipso facto* constitute hierarchizing value judgments. In other words, reality, as opposed to idealization of the situation, is that some "national origins" may not be quite as good as others.
- Traver confirms that ethnonymic classifications are ascribed to people across many generations at times, and on an artificial anthroponymic basis which considers the patronym only, neglecting the distaff side. And what is

[9] *Op.cit.*, pp. 9–10.

the purpose of this "effort"? It is all done for "the simple end of getting along together". No rationale is supplied for the necessity of ethno-naming for the sake of getting along; it is certainly a habit, but its necessity is hardly obvious for the end pursued.

b) "So Parnell McCarthy was an Irishman, though he was born in the shadow of a mine shaft in Chippewa [. . . . .] Parnell's "Irishness" lay more in certain word patterns and in the subtle lilt and cadence of his speech than in any vaudevillian *Erin go bragh* Mr. Dooley talk. So Parnell McCarthy was an "Irisher," as many Finns and Swedes might call him, and an Irishman he would proudly remain, to the despair of all visiting sociologists and bemoaners of hyphenated Americans. And all of the U.P. folk were fiercely American, as any rash doubter ruefully and swiftly found out — as all-American, say, as Rocco Purgatorio the Italian, who had once broken up a memorable Liberty Bond rally in the Chippewa High School by abruptly getting up and waving a tiny flag and singing fervently: "Eef you doan lak your Unka Semmy, den go backa to da lan' w'ere you frommm — you — you *son-a-beech* . . . . ."[10] [*Italics Traver's*]

Unlike the exemplary Finn or German of the previous paragraph, the "Irishman" is to be construed, according to the linguistic terms of the description, as a second-generation native American; his "Irish" linguistic specificity is "subtle". Traver shows humor when he pokes fun at academic establishment analysts and assimilationists who are both loath to accept "hyphenated Americans". There is also humor in using a first-generation immigrant to affirm fierce American loyalty; the "dialect" transcription used by Traver shows that Rocco Purgacorio is in fact an Italian in the full sense of the word, not an "ethnonymic" Italian. But it is doubtful that the author himself makes this semantic difference consciously in spite of the humorous use of "dialect".

All in all, although the two paragraphs quoted above are certainly interesting and relevant to this survey, and though they stem from a combined generosity and wish to be informative, they are also misleading, confusing and inconsistent. For quite different reasons neither the native American reader nor the foreign one emerge much edified from Traver's "description" and "explanation". These are, however, a faithful if small mirror image of linguistic reality in America as regards ethnonyms.

VII SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

a) A rather large global amount of confusion exists in the speech and

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

writing of the American people as regards the semantics of lexemes of nationality. When such confusion occurs, it is more apparent to immigrants than to either natives or casual foreign visitors to American shores. In an absolute majority of instances the terms in questions are used by native Americans speaking to other natives about still other natives, and the unanimity of the semantic code is thereby achieved and communication established satisfactorily. But as soon as one of these conditions is modified (e.g., natives speaking to immigrants, or vice-versa, about either a native or an immigrant; or else natives speaking among themselves about either an immigrant or an outright foreigner, etc.) the risk of a communication breakdown increases, with both parties to the conversation failing to achieve full communication and remaining temporarily or even permanently unaware of this fact. Such a situation is linguistically and socially undesirable and potentially fraught with danger.

b) The potential confusion may also affect communication between Americans and other members of the English-speaking world. For instance the probability is very high that unless a sufficiently clear context is present, the mental image evoked by such words as *Pole* or *Polish* would be quite different in the minds of a native Englishman and a native American. The former would naturally understand "foreign national from Poland" while the latter would wax wroth, especially if he regards himself as "Polish", at the suggestion that the Poles he has known from his experience are foreigners in America. Such an assessment would have to be qualified by two potential factors: 1) heavy urban ethnic pockets of first-generation immigrants, such as Polish sections of Chicago 2) whether the average American regards such naturalized citizens as "foreigners" or not, irrespective of all legal considerations. American chauvinism is also a fact of life to be reckoned with at times.

c) The basic semantic and linguistic causes of the phenomenon lie in a self-perpetuating confusion between the concepts of perceived genetic descent (whatever the actual descent may be[11]) with a vague sense of cultural affinity,

[11]Genetic filiation is often "assessed", to use the term of Robert Traver, by means of anthroponymic considerations. Traver himself has indicated how flimsy a signpost of "nationality" a surname can be in a pluralistic, mongrelized society, especially when patronyms are the exclusive signposts, and maternal considerations are ignored. In the case of capsule ethnic "cocktail" appellations, there are marginal cases when they can be misleading even when the avowed intention is didactic: e.g. Isaac Asimov, who likes to pinpoint the national origins of scientists, may describe Albert Einstein as German-American, but such an expression does not carry the usual American ethnonymic denotation. Albert Einstein was not a native American of German descent. What Asimov means to convey is the fact that Einstein was successively a German citizen by birth and an American by naturalization. But in so doing Asimov is taking liberties with the accepted ethnonym, and some readers may be misled by such an idiosyncrasy. Similarly, Asimov describes the famous mathematician Lagrange as "Italian-French", without details, a puzzling description as well as an historically inaccurate one. See numerous examples in Isaac Asimov's works of scientific popularization, *inter alia* in *Extraterrestrial Civilizations* (New York, 1979), *passim*.

on the one hand, and *actual* national values, cultural identity and legal citizenship (whether present or former), on the other hand, all because of unawareness or repression of the fact that the idea of nationality is rooted in language, culture, politics, geography and history, none of which can be bequeathed biologically. Conceptually speaking, nature plays a far greater role than nurture in ethnonymic classifications. And as all the trappings of nationality become diluted and disappear more or less rapidly after immigration (language and legal citizenship most rapidly, usually together with the passing of the first generation; speech suprasegmentals, cooking and gestures more slowly, etc.) people in a pluralistic society try to hold on to a differentiating kind of identity even while wishing for Americanization. Lexicosemantic under-differentiation of ethnonyms in daily life was probably bound to arise in the midst of such an ethnic mosaic. At the lexical level it is, as it were, as if *jus sanguinis* prevailed over *jus soli*. The psychological advantages gained by a sense of belonging are paid for, at times heavily, by the concomitant state of confusion. Unless they are forewarned, which is rarely the case, newcomers to America are the primary victims. They are by no means the only ones.

d) Usage may not be legislated. The pressure of public opinion may cause sporadic changes almost overnight: we have all seen the quick disappearance of the word *Negro* and its replacement by *black*. Unfortunately ethnonymic misuse cannot be combated so easily, since the overall degree of passion generated is quite subdued by comparison, and involves a lot of isolated individuals rather than compact groups. Nevertheless a few remedies might be suggested:

- The Federal and state agencies should clarify and define their terminology more rigorously (e.g. the "Spanish surname" vagueness and incompleteness) and encourage more precision in the use of ethnonyms, on the model of what these agencies have done as regards "race", which is clearly defined by law for official purposes. There is an ambiguously encouraging precedent in the 1924 Immigration Act quota system.[12]
- Ethnonymic education, at all levels, from kindergarten to college, might have a long run cumulative beneficial effect.
- It is quite important that teachers of English for foreigners, both at home

[12]Whatever its ethical faults may have been (e.g. favoring North Europeans at the expense of southern ones; reducing Oriental immigration to a trickle, etc.) the 1924 Immigration Act at least provided an objective criterion for its very definition of the "national origin" concept, since it defined it in terms of the country of birth, an irrefutable fact for every individual. No other criterion could have been effective. While this criterion bears a relationship to that of ethnonyms, we are dealing with two distinct concepts. But this attempt at precision points the way, if there is a will to pursue a solution to the ethnonymic problem.

and abroad, as well as textbook writers, acquaint their students with the American ethnonymic situation.

- Least important on a practical plane, but very important to linguistics, would be an increase of awareness among lexicographers of their shortcomings and lack of systematic approach to this phenomenon. Paradoxically, the very existence of these shortcomings points to the fact that even native experts may not always be best qualified to perceive the impact of certain linguistic and semantic phenomena. This does not mean that lexicographers should abandon, in this case, their sacrosanct principle of remaining descriptive rather than prescriptive.
- Is the linguistic system the real culprit as regards ethnonymic misuse and confusion? It may be thought so, given the fact that in this particular case the system does not seem to have achieved full functional efficiency for the past century. But it may be argued that polysemy is a pervasive phenomenon in any language, and that context, whether internal or situational, provides speakers with the correct choice of seme. This is the way things usually work out, save for some unavoidable *quid pro quos*. The case of ethnonyms, however, is a bit special: in addition to carrying their built-in *quid pro quos*, they often deal with emotion-laden issues, and these are pervasive in American life. Extra-linguistic elements, i.e. contextual situations, are often simply insufficient to allow for a correct semantic choice, and it is this feature which may distinguish ethnonymic polysemy from polysemy in general. Leaving the language alone in this specific case, catering to sheer usage as the agent that will eventually bring about the necessary semantic efficiency, does not seem to have worked.

And so, in addition to the proper use of ethnonyms by the American people, there remains that persistent fringe of misuse whose importance, both qualitative and quantitative, just might warrant active intervention by those enlightened users of the language who are in a position to apply remedial action, this despite the traditional antipathy of Anglo-American tradition towards interference in language matters.

The big question is whether the true dimensions of the problem will be recognized. They are greater than one might think.

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