

AMERICA

MISUNDERSTOOD

—

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INTRODUCTION

Why people abroad have this frightening image of us?

We export equivocated “foreign” culture.

You may be surprised to find out how often and why “AMERICA” is so misunderstood by so many people around the world. Misunderstandings result from the peculiar way we see the world and from the peculiar way the world sees us. “How come?” you may say, “American films, books, and television programs are well known all over the world.” *Exactly, the fact that we downpour our culture on so many peoples creates most of those misunderstandings!*

The causes for misinterpretation vary. However, we provide almost all of them. The world sees us through fun-house mirrors provided by us. Through similar mirrors we see the world and even ourselves in a peculiar way, too. The most noticeable of these fun-house mirrors is *our language*.

After listening to claims and complaints from people all over the world, I found out that English, *our* English, causes most of these misunderstandings. “But English is almost universally spoken!” you may say. *Basic English* yes! English, no. In fact, most English speakers do not believe that those who are not native to the language will ever get to learn it well. Furthermore, being a language, which is not mutually intelligible with any other, English instills in us a sense of alienation characteristic to such languages.

England created the English language, but the USA was the nation that turned it into the richest language on earth and a formidable communication tool. It was our nation, open to changes, immigration, new mores and new ideas that made English universal. We have ethnic groups from every corner of the world and each of them has contributed to make English what it is today.

Nevertheless, absorption has been too fast sometimes, leaving no room for analysis. Once the majority accepts a simple word or phrase, that word — or phrase — freezes, allowing no correction or adjustment in spelling, meaning or pronunciation. Rectification rarely happens in English.

This inability to rectify and correct words is the *dark side of the English language*. The expression “coining” clearly describes what usage does to a new word or phrase: it makes it metal solid. Incurable *usage* gave us a multitude of traditional errors nailed them so deeply into our minds that no one can hammer them out of our heads.

Contrary to most European languages, English develops rather freely

under the suggestions of a few dictionaries. Other European languages follow the dictates of official language institutions or “academies” to cleanse usage periodically. The *Royal Academy of the Spanish Language*, for instance, controls Spanish. This institution has affiliates in every Spanish-speaking country in the world (including the U.S.A.). Consequently, it takes decades for European academies to accept a new word, and even longer to include its acceptance in their official dictionaries. In fact, by the time their Academicians allow a new word in their dictionaries the word in question might have fallen in disuse.

English, on the contrary, keeps on adding words to its already enormous list. But the absorption of words from other languages is so fast that seldom the original spelling changes (*façade*, *cañón*, *marijuana*). In some instances, those dictionaries don't copy the spelling of a foreign word correctly. However, once usage sanctions a word, no matter how wrong its *spelling* or its *meaning* may be, no further change can be done.

The fact that English seldom tolerates spelling changes, regardless of how much they are needed, became historical when *Theodore Roosevelt* wanted government documents printed with a simplified spelling. For that purpose, he suggested a list of words with simplified spelling proposed by scholar *Brander Matthews*. Roosevelt got in serious trouble with Congress and finally, he had to give up his quest for a more logical approach to spelling *or else*. All he wanted was to simplify the *tuf* spelling of a few of words.

Teddy Roosevelt gave up his dreams of seeing words like *knife*, *tough* and *laugh*, spelled *nife*, *tuf* and *laf*. However, not all the words in Matthews's list were lost. *Theater* and *center*, are universally accepted today. *Thru*, *nite* and *rite* are words often seen on highway billboards and printed ads, however, never in *formal* written English. They all belong to that *notorious* list written by a man who wanted logic to prevail upon usage.

Too-fast absorption and reluctance to change accepted usage are not only linguistic habits. They can also be applied to our handling ideas, classifications and other pieces of knowledge.

Years and years of contact with *other* cultures (please notice that I didn't say *foreign* cultures) gave me this idea of listing the most common misinterpretations that exist between the world and us. This list will help you understand why *people you don't even know*, or *people who don't know you* may be nasty to you, just because you happen to be — *American*.

The word *America* itself is the best example. You may find this surprising, but the fact that you call yourself *American* bothers a lot of people — especially those who share the same hemisphere (America) with you. Why? Because they think you stole the name “American” from them, descendants of the discoverers and conquistadors of **America** (the whole continent, not only our country).

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

How was it that our country “stole” the name of the Hemisphere?

Who suggested the name “United States of America”?

Few people ever notice that our country has no real name. The United States is not a proper name *per se*. You may call it a collective or descriptive name, but *united states* could refer to any group of states anywhere in the world.

This ambiguity was apparently corrected by adding *America* to *United States*. Instead it was then when an ambiguity really started, because people mistook the name of the continent for the name of our country. This is how it came to be that we call the U.S., *America* and the people living in the U.S. are *Americans*.

At the forming stages of our nation, an attempt was made to name our country *Columbia*, after Columbus. That is why the location of its capital was then called District of *Columbia*. Some may even remember a song titled *Columbia, Gem of the Ocean*. Some sculptors erected statues honoring Columbia, suspiciously similar to the Statue of Liberty (often seen in Columbia Picture logo). However, for some unknown and unclear reason, the name Columbia was dropped like a hot potato. All references to its proposal and refusal — but especially to its refusal — was lost in reference books and encyclopedias.

It is pure speculation whether this *lack of information* on such an important matter as the naming of a nation was a cover up or if it has something to do with the fact that the United States was first mentioned as *Columbia* in a poem dedicated to George Washington, written by a *woman*, or the fact that she was *black*, or the fact that she was a Senegal-born *slave* from Massachusetts. However, nowadays few people know that Phyllis Wheatley was behind that suggestion.

Lacking a real name, the nation and its nationals took it spontaneously out of its last word of the one artificially given, *America*. Usage sanctioned it and froze it forever. “So, big deal,” you may say; but, have you ever bothered to ponder what happened then to the other millions of *Americans*? Well, our choice tagged them with an adjective forever.

Spanish Americans or Latin Americans were never again Americans, despite the fact that the name **America** originally applied **only** to the southern part of this hemisphere. The adjective *American*, used to describe the inhabitants of the Southern Hemisphere, became by usage, *exclusive* for those born in the United States of *America*.

To an *American*, this was no big deal. To the people south of the border, it

was. They saw how Americans composed songs to *their* America, cutting it off from *theirs* and taking over its name. Vigilant Latin American intellectuals frowned at the ever-growing misused word *americano* among their own people and decided to do something.

They had to give us a name. However, since our nation didn't have one, it was difficult for them, too, to come up with nationality noun and adjective. However, upset people can be persistent. Soon they made up an adjective and noun: *estadounidense* (same for Spanish and Portuguese) — *Unitedstater*. Actually a more appropriate name would have been and would be US Americans or EU americanos.

Teachers, grammarians and writers force-fed this awkward word down the throats of their people, until every self-respecting Latin American used it — in his writings at least. However, the word *estadounidense* was more difficult to pronounce than *americano*. People stuck to *americano* or *norteamericano* (again — the same words in Spanish and Portuguese, although in the latter, it is spelled with a hyphen, *norte-americano*) in their every day oral language.

The word *estadounidense* was not a smart choice. In our Hemisphere, there were other “United States.” These are the *United States* of Mexico and the *United States* of Venezuela. The USA pressing, they changed their official names. The *United States* of Brazil had it changed to Federal Republic of Brazil — República Federativa do Brasil. But since there was no other option, *Unitedstater* would do. However the perfect fit would have been as I said before EU americano, US American.

They call us other names, too.

Everybody knows Latin Americans have coined other — not very kind — words to give *Americans* a proper national name. The most widely known is *gringo*, abused by Mexicans in derogatory form. Gringo means *foreigner* in other Latin countries, in Argentina, for instance. They also use the word, *yanqui* (in Spanish) or *ianque* (in Portuguese) applied not only to Yankees, but to all *Unitedstater*s whether from the North or the South.

This analysis may sound like a trivia game. I can assure you it is not trivia to Latin Americans. They see this misunderstanding as a serious name snatching with total impunity. Furthermore, the culprit never tires of rubbing it in every day, every hour, every second. How? The U.S. produces enormous amounts of books, musicals, films, TV programs, etc., and dumps a huge surplus not only on the rest of the world, but especially, on our Latin neighbors. To make things worse, these constant dumps, usually poorly translated, have the name *America* stamped on them, offending people *who hate our use of this term* — day after day after day.

The popular musical *West Side Story*, shows a group of Puerto Rican immigrants — usually interpreted by white Anglo American performers — singing

out how happy they are to be in America. We see them happy to be in (the United States of) *America*. Everybody else in the world interprets it differently. The show presents Puerto Ricans as if they were natives of Africa or of some other unknown continent, not born in an *American* island as they actually are.

As a matter of fact, Puerto Ricans are American twice. They are *Americans* because they are born in *America* (the continent) and they are *US Americans* because they are U.S. citizens by birth.

The words of Bates' beautiful patriotic song *America, the Beautiful* reminds you of the beautiful landscapes of our country, of course. You sit back while listening and you can almost see every land of the U.S.A. from sea to shining sea. However, what everybody else in the world sees are the landscapes of what we, also in error, call "the Americas" from Argentina to Alaska.

The *Americas* is our second most absurd product of usage. Should we use the term *Anglo America*, for instance, and then the term *Latin America*, the plural *Americas* would make sense. However, if we have one America on the one side and then one Latin America on the other, the plural makes no sense at all.

To picture this discrepancy more clearly, let's call everyone who is white just *human* and let's call everybody else "something" human, like "black humans, yellow humans, Spanish humans"? Do you understand now why Latin Americans feel so suspicious about it?

That which to a US American is the result of accepted usage, to a Latin American or to a European is, in the best of cases, carelessness. If the lack of a clear geographical definition begins by affecting our own hemisphere, no wonder nobody in the world has any trust in our geographic knowledge.

An Italian friend of mine recently criticized an ad of defunct Panam an American airline who took pride in classifying itself as representative of the United States. In its ad, Panam included Tel Aviv (in Israel, a Middle Eastern country) as one of its *European* destinations. He pointed this out to me, "I understand that an everyday citizen, who sees Israel within the European cultural framework, be confused, but an international airline?"

Not few international companies fail to see the way others see us from abroad. This is sad, because just by doing a bit of research, we Americans could give a more sophisticated image, as we do through our technology in consumer goods.

It is no surprise that *Unitedstater*s divide the regions of America following peculiar patterns different from those used by the rest of the world. For most of us, Latin America is everything south of the border. America *is* the United States — some even exclude far-away Alaska and Canada (with a group of people who "should speak English instead of French").

Well, this division is wrong.

America is the name of the whole hemisphere, not the name of our nation.

There is no such thing as “the Americas,” except in a poetic sense. Otherwise, it is the absurd combination of one America (with no adjective) with one *Latin America*.

Latin America includes all countries whose languages originated from Latin: Spanish, French and Portuguese **only**. Latin America excludes the English- and Dutch-speaking countries. Jamaica, for instance, is not part of Latin America, as some may erroneously think. Although surprisingly to some people, this term includes French Canada.

Hispanic America includes only Spanish-language countries. People tend to view Hispanic America excluding Brazil,. However, the whole Iberian peninsula — including Portugal — was called Hispania in Roman times. Therefore, Brazil and Brazilian are also part of Hispanic America. Haiti, French Canada and any English-speaking Caribbean island or country is excluded, though.

Iberoamérica (a term used only in Spanish and Portuguese) applies only to Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries, with strong family ties. It is actually synonym of Hispanic America.

Angloamérica (Anglo America) is the English-language America (this term, seldom used in English, is increasing in use in Spanish and Portuguese). It covers English-language Canada, USA, Jamaica, Belize, the former British Guiana and all English-language islands in the Caribbean.

If you think they overreact, here is a US American reacts in a similar circumstance before what he considers a *wrong* classification. White English-speaking people in Dade County strongly rejected the term “Anglo.” Anglo was an attempt to define the ethnic roots of the South Floridian population. This term meant English-speaking people.

However, since it would dump English-speaking whites and blacks into one classification, white Anglos didn’t like it. But they don’t object being called Anglos only if it meant whites or called “whites” as opposed to blacks and Hispanics. And at the same time, they are doing to others what they don’t want others to do to them. In fact, they dumped into one category, Hispanics, a culture that embraces people from all races, white, black, yellow, etc., but is **not** a *race* in itself).

Whites who object to the term Anglo, do it because they want to weed-out English-speaking blacks and to place them under a different category: American blacks or black Americans (!).

It is not easy to replace with logical terms those fostered by usage. However, if we acknowledge their existence, maybe we can undo some misunderstandings or, at least, not get upset by other peoples’ reactions.

The term “American” among is not clear either. The actual meaning of the word American, as usage has it, describes a white person, preferably blond — although not necessarily so, as long as he or she has a light complexion.

American is not an Indian (and I don't know why he cannot be an Indian American). An Indian would be an Amerindian or an American Indian, but a Black person would be a Black American or an American Black, according to which may be more important.

Some blacks now, are calling themselves *African-American*, ignoring the fact Africa is not only black and that black skinned people are not one race, but almost one hundred races with completely different culture. It is like Europeans calling themselves European American, instead of using the European country of origin name, like French American, etc.

Despite the fact that he has been living here for generations, even before the West turned US American, a California or Texan Mexican is not an *American* either. He is a Mexican American or a Hispanic American or Chicano.

Usage is constantly pouring new ethnic classifications by combining American with other national adjective: Italian American, Polish American, Cuban American, etc.

A most intriguing term is, no doubt, "*Native American*." For some, it means someone born in "America." For others, it means an American Indian, excluding Spanish-American Indians. Actually, *native* meaning a race "originated in America" is not valid. According to anthropologists, no race originated in this continent. Indians came to America from Asia through the Bering Straits.

This divisive linguistics will remain. There is nothing we can do about it because it is sanctioned by usage and the majority.

AN ISLAND LANGUAGE

English is not mutually intelligible with any other language.

The alienating effects of the word "alien"

English sprouted in an island. Nobody outside that island understands *them* and vice versa (unless he or she goes through an adequate learning process, of course). English, Icelandic, Japanese, Welsh, etc., belong in this category.

The island languages of the United Kingdom go one step further; they are not mutually intelligible even among themselves. You have to be a native to the language to speak Irish or Welsh, tongues extremely difficult even for the Irish and the Welsh. In continental Europe, except for Basque or Hungarian, one language is usually related to the other.

Portuguese, Spanish and Italian, for instance, are *mutually intelligible*. This means that if you speak Spanish, you don't need to know Italian to enjoy a

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