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FRANKLY SPEAKING

A DISCUSSION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

BY FRANK BRAMLETT, PH.D.



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Name Trouble — Part Two

While Shakespeare was busy with names in *Romeo and Juliet*, Europeans began exploring and settling the New World and immediately ran into the problem of naming. For instance, what should they call those enormous mammals that look sort of like cows but are larger, stronger, and furrier? *Buffalo*? *Bison*? *Tatanka*? And what should they call all the people they kept running into? Tradition holds that Christopher Columbus started it. He was confused because of geography; he thought he had found India, so he called the native people he met by the Spanish word *indios*, the English counterpart of which is, of course, *Indians*.

What can be said positively of the Europeans is that often they honestly tried to learn the names that already existed: many state names like *Alabama* and *Massachusetts* closely resemble the original Indian words. Some of the tribes' English names also closely approximate the native languages. For example, some Cherokee call themselves *Tsalagi*, which sounds roughly similar to *Cherokee*. Further, the word *Omaha* is quite similar to the native word it comes from, *Umonhon*.

However, these newcomers also made many mistakes. According to Barbara Robins, a pro-

fessor of Native American studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, the word *Sioux* is probably one of the most bizarre of the mix-ups. The confusion arose in the 17th century while French traders conducted business with the Ojibwa people near the Great Lakes. These French traders asked the Ojibwa what to call the Indians to the west, and the Ojibwa word *naadowesiwag* was borrowed into French as *nadouessioux*. Eventually, the French word was borrowed into English and shortened to become *Sioux*. Of course, this word was not used by the Dakota tribes themselves but was used by Ojibwa speakers to refer to Dakota. Therefore, because of naming confusion, English-speaking Americans have been calling these northern plains tribes by the wrong name for hundreds of years.

Ironically, many Native Americans today both accept and use their English names. It isn't unusual to hear "Indian," "Winnebago," or "Sioux" in place of "Native American," "Hochunk," or "Dakota," respectively. Conversely, the largest tribe in North America, the Navajo, have begun asserting their native language and culture — they name themselves *Dine'* and have made this change ubiquitous on the reservation by renaming such institutions as the tribal college in Tsaile, Arizona.

American Indians aren't the only group, of course, who deal with issues of naming: African-Americans, Chicano-Americans,

words for us gay men are *queer* or *faggot*, especially when they are pronounced with venom from hate-filled people whose intent is to hurt.

Interestingly, though, gay rights activists were able to take some of these words and attempt to invest in them positive connotation. In Part I of this article on naming, I wrote about two kinds of meaning: *referential* and *affective*. Groups like ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) in the 1980s took the word *queer* and (re)claimed it, using it as a name for themselves, thereby undercutting the negative connotation the word could carry. The referential meaning of the word *queer* has changed from meaning "deviant, strange" to "homosexual; gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered." The affective meaning, of course, has also been adapted, and it depends on the person using the word. *Queer* can be quite positive and affirming if used by gay people to refer to themselves, but like the "N" word, it shouldn't be used lightly by non-queer people. I hesitate to say that non-queer people should NOT use the word, especially given that *Showtime* has developed an immensely popular show called "Queer as Folk." I would imagine, though, that there are many gays and lesbians who do not like the word *queer* applied to themselves by anyone, gay or straight.

Naming an Identity

And what of those two young lovers from Shakespeare's play? Juliet's "What's in a name?" speech in Act II ends with a proposal: if Romeo were to renounce his name, then in return, Juliet would belong to him completely. Romeo replies, saying that he would agree to her terms: "Henceforth I never will be Romeo." The play of course ends in the deaths of the teenaged lovers, brought about not in small part because of their names, their identities. Romeo would always be a Montague, and Juliet would always be a Capulet. Even though Romeo and Juliet vow to change their names in order to love one another forever, their families ultimately intervene; the young lovers are bound to their names regardless of their intention.

But the question of naming yet remains. If we change our name, do we necessarily change our identity? Likewise, if we change our name, can we help other people change their perceptions of us? I don't know the answer to these questions. I think what we can safely say is that the right to call oneself by a particular name is inalienable. We should call other people by the names that they prefer, not by names that we wish them to have. Furthermore, if someone finds a name offensive, it is good and right to respect that person by agreeing to use another name. A rose by any other name perhaps does smell as sweet, but if the name offends, aren't we less willing, less able to enjoy the aroma?

Chinese-Americans, Korean-Americans, Latino-Americans, Sudanese-Americans, Vietnamese-Americans. Each group has its own complexities in naming. For example, the linguist Geneva Smitherman writes that not all African-Americans are happy with being called *African-American*. Historically, the terms *Colored*, *Negro*, *Black*, and *Afro-American* have been used in different ways by different people in black communities. The right to name oneself and one's own people is an ever-present thorn in the side of true democracy.

Civil Rights: Gay and Straight

Analogous to ethnic minority groups, the right to name oneself haunts gay and lesbian communities. In the late 1800s, the word *homosexual* was coined by German doctors to denote sexual practice but *not* to describe sexual identity. In the 20th century, plenty of terms arose in English to name the love that dared not speak its name. These terms range from neutral or marginally uncomfortable to the most offensive of epithets. Words for gay men have ranged from *Nancy*, *Mary* and *gay* to *homo*, *pansy* and *sissy*. Words for women have included *lesbian* and *dyke*. Probably the worst