

Reflexive essay

Naming Errors: Globalization and Its Mispronunciations

Jesse van Amelsvoort
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam

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Naming Errors: Globalization and Its Mispronunciations

Jesse van Amelsvoort

Starting from a visit with his father to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., this essay unpacks after whom Jesse van Amelsvoort was named and how his name changes when crossing borders. The past of the author's name has been influenced by bureaucratic mistakes, while its present is marked by a very specific understanding of what names are internationally intelligible. Thus, the essay reflects on naming practices in times of globalization and growing multilingualism and transnationalism.

Keywords: globalization, Jesse Jackson, multilingualism, naming, Netherlands, onomastics

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As part of its narrative from slavery to Barack Obama, the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., depicts Jesse Jackson's presidential run as an important moment of political emancipation. When I visited the museum with my father in October 2019, he pointed at a photo of Jackson and said: 'Je weet dat je naar hem vernoemd bent, hè?' ['You know you are named after him, right?']. I did not know that. The first version of this essay was written in response to gaining that knowledge.

This is an 'onomastic autobiography' (Nicolaisen, 1999), but also an essay about globalization and its mispronunciations. What happens when a name crosses geographic and linguistic borders? More specifically, what borders are created in this border-crossing? Can names ever be truly cosmopolitan?

1

When I order a cup of tea in a coffee shop in the United States, I occasionally find an 'i' squeezed into my first name on the cup, sitting (un)comfortably between the 's' and the 'e.' Already when the barista is writing 'my' name on a cup, I see confusion on their face: isn't that a woman's name? The barista is not wrong. In that spelling, yes, it probably would more likely be a woman's name, but when it comes to the spelling of my name that is legally correct, they are incorrect. This is the United States, however, not the Netherlands, where I am from. There, 'Jesse' skews male, but it is also rather gender neutral—or rather, gender unspecific.

In the Netherlands, when I give my name to the bike repair shop owner or the volunteer who has charmed me into giving them money, the 'l' in my last name becomes an 'r' and the 'v' an 'f.' I do not have to see it written down. The flash of confusion on their faces when hearing me say 'Jesse van Amelsvoort' tells me enough: what did he say, how do I write this down?

My first name can be misspelt 'Jessie.' My last name can be misspelt 'Van Amersfoort,' 'Van Amelsfoort,' or whatever variation people think they hear. Amersfoort is a well-known city in the Netherlands after all.

As any good student of semiotics knows, signs are, ultimately, arbitrary (Chandler, 2002, pp. 22–28; Saussure, 1959, p. 67). Conventions, mere agreements. A chair is only a chair because we say it is. Yet even if language is nothing more than a bunch of letters that we say have meaning, it is this specific arrangement of those specific letters that matters; it is to a particular word that we attach ourselves.

Names, however, like every other sign, do matter in the end.

My name can be spelled in all kinds of ways. Except it should not. It is Jesse van Amelsvoort. If you want to be precise (and what academic would prefer not to?), it is Jesse Daniël van Amelsvoort. But my full name is a formalistic, legal matter, with little bearing on how I live my life from day to day. If this is an essay on how a name is always at once both linguistic and cultural, it should be noted that 'Daniël,' too, causes problems and anxiety. In Dutch, the diaeresis—tréma—on the 'e' suggests that the vowels should be read separately. Two sounds, not one: it is [da:nijel], not [da:ni:l]. Machines do not always catch this sign, or cannot process it, and so at airports, for instance, I always think: what if they make a fuss because the information on my ticket does not completely adhere to what is written in my passport? What if they keep me from traveling?

But they—airline and airport staff following rules and procedures—do not care, not enough. Maybe they don't even notice. Maybe there is some room for naming errors.

2

Jesse Jackson had run for President of the United States in 1988, and there was speculation he would run again in 1992. Ultimately, he declined to do so. But if he had agreed, he might have been able to oust George H. W. Bush from office, ending twelve years of Republican rule that had started with Ronald Reagan in 1981. In the process, he could have become the first Black President of the United States of America. But it would take until 2008 for Americans to elect their first—and, so far, only—Black president. In spring 1992, the Democratic primary electorate was charmed by Bill Clinton, and in November that year, enough people in the entire country were, too. Clinton assumed the highest political office in the United States in January 1993, reunited Fleetwood Mac, and became the nation's 'first Black president': as

Toni Morrison put it with supreme irony for *The New Yorker*, Clinton displayed 'almost every trope of blackness' (Morrison, 1998).

Also in 1992, thousands of kilometers away, my mother was pregnant with me. My parents could not be happier about this pregnancy, even if it brought some of the usual physical discomforts. It also brought another discomfort: they could not agree on the unborn baby's name, let alone the philosophy behind it. My mother, although not religious, perhaps even anti-religious, wanted a biblical name. (I recall an instance when she shouted at the TV, where the news was reporting on a visit of Pope John Paul II to one place or another: 'Murderer! AIDS! Condoms!' She has always denied this happened.) My father, just as much an atheist as his partner, wanted a non-biblical name. The result: an impasse.

The solution to this Dutch domestic problem came from the United States: from Jesse Jackson—or, perhaps more appropriately, from Jackson's parents, when they decided to name their son 'Jesse.'

Jesse, biblically: the father of David, the grandfather of Solomon, and the beginning of the tree of Jesse, which would ultimately culminate in Jesus, the Holy Son. Also known as Yishai—or, in Dutch, Isai. (Very few people I have spoken to in my life know this. Had I been raised in a Christian environment, it would probably have resonated more. But there was not a single brain cell in my parents' minds that has seriously considered raising me that way. 'Murderer!')

Jesse, non-biblically: a name from Fryslân, a province in the northern Netherlands, with an unknown meaning. (Not many people outside the Dutch province of Fryslân know that Jesse is a Frisian name. If they do, they ask if I am from there. The answer is no.)

When their son was born, on a cloudy autumn day in 1992, my parents called him Jesse. Both of them had their wishes satisfied.

3

In fact, the challenge of finding a suitable name for their son was even bigger than I have led you to believe. On top of their diverging preferences mentioned above, my parents had a third, shared wish. Their child would have a name that she or he could travel with without much difficulty. Concretely, this meant they needed to find a name both biblical and non-biblical that would not carry unfortunate connotations in English. Elsewhere, I have written about the contemporary presence of the English language in the Netherlands (van Amelsvoort, 2023): my parents' concerns show its longer lineage and pervasiveness. What I did not write about in that paper, I write about here: how the globalization—or Americanization—of Dutch culture also affects naming practices, a line of inquiry refracted through my own name.

Because of the ubiquity of English in the Netherlands and the need my parents felt for my name to be intelligible internationally (i.e., in English), several names were immediately scrapped from consideration. Dick

and Joke, acceptable Dutch names (the latter is pronounced with a short o and a soft e, [ˈjo:kə]), would be a recipe for international disaster, even if the former is in English a colloquial version of Richard: can you imagine the response when they are encountered together? (And yes, I have once met a Dutch couple with these names.) In a bar in Washington, D.C., I met a Dutch woman called Feline, with an ending that in Dutch is a similarly short e, which in its written form, I realized, is a similarly unfortunate name in English. Nothing cat-like about her. The name of a dear friend, Ties, would similarly confuse the reader accustomed to the English language.

This concern of intelligibility was not abstract, by the way: it was a lived reality of sorts for my father.

Hi, he could say to a Brit, an American, a New Zealander, I'm Goof. I'm crazy, too, they could respond.

So, in America he was Geoff. Except he wasn't. He was, and is, Goof, a combination of letters containing both the guttural Dutch 'g' [ɣ] and the drawn-out 'o' [o:]. What works in Dutch, does not have to work in English—despite these languages' close proximity.

Jesse could travel. But not, I have found out, without a little story—a joke, yes, a Joke, I should perhaps say, that is perfectly acceptable in the Netherlands, but borders on the racially insensitive in the United States. (Maybe it does, too, in the Netherlands, but the people there do not care so much—definitely not enough.)

The setting: I am introduced to someone I haven't met before.

James, they say, or Margaret, Bobby, Clarissa.

Jesse, I say.

Pardon? Excuse me?

Oh, eh, well, [dʒesi] in English. But the Dutch pronunciation is [jesɛ]. It's a little bit like... Okay, so there's this problematic joke I can only really tell white people. White men, actually. My name is like 'Yes, sir,' but without the 'r.' Although, and this is the joke, I also listen to 'Yes, sir.'

Nobody ever laughs. (Except I do.)

Nobody ever laughs, and most people look a little bit non-plussed after hearing my explanation.

The English way is fine, I have learned to say. If people get to know me better, I prefer [jesɛ], but you are fine. Meaning: we don't know each other, nor will we, apparently, move beyond that stage.

Another version has recently presented itself: a Spanish me, with the soft 'j' becoming a hard 'g.' As the Spanish language continues to grow in the United States and the American public sphere, will it move beyond the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987)? The growing influence of Spanish-language pop music suggests as much. A question for the future: what will happen to English amid the new *mestiza* that the growing Spanish-speaking population of the United States makes ever so strongly present?

4

Increasingly, I am interested in the almost unarticulated assumption that for a Dutch person's name to be able to travel across borders without too much friction (Tsing, 2005), the name has to present well in English. Here is a small country, wrapped around a delta of rivers coming from France through Belgium and from Switzerland through Germany, a continental European country, that is, investing itself so heavily in what happens across the North Sea and across the Atlantic Ocean. These naming practices speak to what we could call a globalization of the mind: a process that is not just about finances and economics, nor about the films one watches and the books one reads, but about an orientation, an indication of importance so ingrained that it changes how we name our children.

Gayatri Spivak (2012) has suggested that globalization is 'achieved by the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere' (p. 484). It is the creation out of many social worlds one flat, open space that is then called 'global' (Spivak, 2003; Orsini, 2023), although in many important domains of life—certainly in the Netherlands—this thing called 'the global' actually implies Americanization. The point, for me, is not to say that national Dutch specificities are erased in this process, for in its monolithic character such a statement is ultimately too simple. My sense is that my parent's thinking about the understandability of names through the English language brings out something more subtle and amorphous in Dutch culture. It signals a shift in which certain names will be used more frequently and others less. It is a *change* within Dutch culture—not its wholesale replacement by a vaguely Anglo-Saxon amalgam.¹ Elsewhere (van Amelsvoort, 2023), I have argued that this is a more truthful and accurate perspective to understand the rise and workings of the English language in the Netherlands. In this case, my name is not always pronounced in the way Brits and the Americans would pronounce it. Although it easily can be pronounced this way, the Dutch pronunciation and context remain crucial.

5

The first explanation I remember receiving from my family about my last name speaks about a small river known as the Amel, which is somewhere in Wallonia, the French-speaking part of Belgium. 'Voort' in this story is a point in the river where the water is not as deep: one can cross it without having to swim. In the Netherlands, you can also see this construction in Coevorden, a small city apparently founded close to a place where cows crossed a river, and internationally in Oxford—which similarly refers to cattle. 'Amelsvoort' has little to do with cattle, at least not explicitly, denoting a low point in the stream, a place where the river is traversable, a connection between its two banks.

I was not necessarily happy with this explanation, but neither was I unhappy. It meant there had not been an administrative error that somehow

changed my name, which is what I had thought before: somehow, Amersfoort had become Amelsvoort. Instead, there was some migration involved. My father's family is from the south of the Netherlands, and Wallonia is in Belgium; none of this mattered, of course, three or four hundred years ago, but today it amounted to something.

Not that I knew what exactly it amounted to.

Then, at some point, the explanation changed back to what I had thought before. There was still migration, but a different sort. The Belgian river explanation was ditched, and the administrative error(s) re-entered: our family was, in fact, from Amersfoort and, at some point, mostly migrated south (via Rotterdam) to where my aunts, uncles, and cousins still live. Now, my last name indicated I was not 'van'—from—rural flyover country, but from a city in the middle of the country.

Although in the time the name took its final shape, there were no airplanes: therefore, semantically speaking, 'flyover country' did not exist.

Then the explanation changed again. The administrative error and the city were ditched, and the river returned. But as we know from the ancient Greeks that everything flows and that one can never step in the same river twice, this time the body of water was not located in Belgium, but near 's-Hertogenbosch: the fancy but old-fashioned name of Den Bosch, the capital city of the province in which my father's side of the family live. Much closer to home: my aunts, uncles, and cousins in fact live about ten kilometres away from it.

It is probably possible to check which of these explanations is the correct: one of my uncles investigated our family's genealogy some years ago. Perhaps there might, in fact, be a surprise fourth explanation that is altogether different again. Part of me, however, does not want to put in the effort of looking this up. Each of the stories mentioned is interesting, for different reasons, and at the same time neither of them explains why my name means to me what it means.

6

The main character in Olga Tokarczuk's 2009 novel *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych* (translated into English by Antonia Lloyd-Jones as *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*) hates the names we are given. 'What a lack of imagination it is to have official first names and surnames,' she says. 'No one ever remembers them, they're so divorced from the Person, and so banal that they don't remind us of them at all' (Tokarczuk, 2020, p. 28). Her neighbors are called Big Foot, and Oddball, generic words capitalized to underscore that they only apply to one person in the world. I do not hate my name, far from it, but Tokarczuk's heroine points to the arbitrariness of names and our attachment to them.

When I was reading Tokarczuk's novel, my thoughts were pulled in another direction. Her narrator is called Janina Duszejko, she lives close

to the Polish-Czech border south of Wrocław. Wrocław is the Polish name. Apple Weather only gives the old, German name: Breslau. An unexpected place to find imperial remnants—‘postcolonial remains,’ as Robert JC Young (2012) puts it. An initiative was launched some time ago to change Czech naming customs, giving women the freedom to deviate from the habit of changing their name by adding an ‘a’ at the end as soon as they are married (Hutt, 2021). It reminds me of the Icelandic tradition whereby children’s last name indicates usually their father’s, and sometimes their mother’s, first name. All of this came to me while looking at the Danish Queen Margrethe II’s Wikipedia page, where I somehow ended up when I went online after watching *The Crown*’s third season. In the first season, Prince Philip had to confront his disappointment that his children would not carry his name—his adopted name, Mountbatten—as the surname ‘Windsor’ had been set as the British royal family’s name in 1917. Because of this, there will never be dynastic change in the United Kingdom.

All very political, and all very interesting, but let us not forget the much more subtle erasure taking place in my own surname. I talk about Van Amelsvoort, but my mother was a Buikema, and her mother a Keizer, while my paternal grandmother was named Van der Meijden. These names disappear in me, even if most of my dominant personality traits originate in these families.

7

Friends from the United States who grew up in white Christian contexts take pride in their surnames. I assume they embody a wider American tendency. They cherish their surnames as a sign of where in Europe they and their family came from, as symbols that carry a sense of history that people in the US seem to crave. I guess this makes sense: after all, one of the pillars on which their country is built is the murder of almost its entire Indigenous population, with those who remain mostly living in reservations sometimes hundreds of miles removed from their ancestral lands. Words as ‘Manhattan’ and ‘Wichita’ survive in this country only because they have been colonized by the English language, stripped of their native origins. If there is one thing the United States, this ‘country of immigrants,’ proves, it is that we cannot live without roots.

These names can be British, German, or Swedish—or ‘used’ to be, I feel compelled to say as a citizen of a country where history is palpable and present everywhere. Their origins are British, German, Swedish. Except for the English language, they do not speak the languages from which these names originated. Yet it is the feeling that matters, right? A name is an identity; a name can be read; a name can influence one’s life. A name has a history, carrying in it all other names it has usurped. It is why we refer to saying our name as saying *who we are*. Not what—who. Out of the many things I am, I am perhaps most of all my name—with all the errors it accumulates as it continues to cross borders.

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'Jesse' was meant to enable me—or my name at least, to the extent these are not the same—to easily cross borders in a globalizing world. Yet its cultural and linguistic specificities, rooted in the Dutch language, create new ones. The pronunciation and spelling of names marks insiders and outsiders; on top of those moments when Dutch people misspell my name come the instances where foreigners appropriate 'Jesse' to fit their own ways of speaking. This is perhaps how it is bound to go: names as a continuous marking and remarking of identities, feelings of belonging, and practices of inclusion and exclusion. They are bound to generate errors and mispronunciations; is that where their cosmopolitanism can be found? And to what extent is this all just not a sign of Dutch transnationalism? As an editor of this journal noted, my parents most certainly knew how 'Jesse Jackson' was pronounced and how this differed from the Dutch 'Jesse'—so, is my name not inherently double, transnational, and traveling? Back across the borders, after all.

1. As yearly numbers on the most popular names for new-born babies show, this speculation is largely correct. Many of the most frequently assigned names are Dutch names that function without complication in an English-language context. See SVB (2024).

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Author's bio

Jesse van Amelsvoort is a writer, critic, and senior lecturer in modern European culture at the University of Amsterdam. He is the author of *Post-National Worlds in Contemporary European Literature* (2026) and is currently writing a book on the cultural representations of HIV and AIDS.

Address: University of Amsterdam, Department of European Studies,
Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012 CX Amsterdam, Netherlands

E-mail: j.d.vanamelsvoort@uva.nl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9521-5447>