

ASPECTS OF NAME CHANGES AMONG AMERICAN SLOVENES^{*}

Joseph Paternost

When Slovenes came to America, many of them found it either necessary or expedient to change their names somewhat. In a number of cases, such name changes occurred as a result of misreading or misinterpretation on the part of immigration (or other public) officials as well as employers or their representatives. Such name changes can be and are studied or analyzed from a strictly (socio) linguistic point of view. For example, J. Kess has written a survey of the results of Anglicization and name change on Slovene surnames in North America by assembling and classifying a representative sample of such surnames according to the patterns which characterize their appearance in American English.¹ I have given a very brief outline of a tentative general classification of Slovene name changes (in terms of full and partial assimilation and hybridization) elsewhere.²

A more comprehensive description and fuller understanding of such name changes are obtained only if extralinguistic factors and information are also taken into consideration. It is the purpose of this paper to give some examples of the views and attitudes regarding the changes of Slovene names, especially surnames, and to point out that there are interesting research opportunities also in this area of human social behavior. One particular example (The Žnideršič-Tagler Story) is discussed in some detail in order to bring out some sociolinguistic and folkloristic aspects of name changes.

A Slovene in Slovenia once entitled her account about an American Slovene "She Left As Minka, and Arrived as Mary."³ On the other hand, a young Canadian Slovene prefers

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to keep her Slovene given name and even wrote a poem about it: "My Name is Danica; but everyone calls me Donna. I often wonder /is/ it really me they call, /or/ see, /or/ know?" "Is it really true that which we call a Rose by any other word would smell as sweet?"⁴ One question that could be explored as far as even given names are concerned, might be this: When parents give first names to their children, do they take any consideration as to how that name could fit or apply to the two cultures to which their child would be exposed?

Several second-generation informants and respondents wondered about the difficulty of identifying a Slovene name or, according to one, of "so many different spellings of an obvious Slovenian name." Another person put it this way: "Is there any clue that identifies a Slovenian name? They are all so different -- sometimes names of objects or places, but some I can't figure out." The following are probably the most important recent sources of information on Slovene surnames: F. Jakopin, "A Statistical Elucidation of the Structure of Slovene Surnames" and "Some Characteristics of the Most Frequent Slovene Surnames" and F. Bezljaj's "A Provisional Dictionary of Slovene Surnames."⁵

Spelling changes and problems always come up in the discussion of names and the letter j following another consonant letter in word-final position is simply one such example. The following are several different approaches to the 'problem' of j as reported by my informants and respondents.

- (1) "My grandtather's name is Mikelj, but upon arrival here, he dropped the 'j.'"
- (2) "My mother's name was Parkelj and the European members of the family still spell it that way. However, her brother who came to the United States dropped the 'j,' since it was silent anyway, and the pronunciation changed from Slovenian Par-kul /párkəl/ to Par-kell."
- (3) "My stepfather didn't drop his silent 'j' (Kokalj). His family pronounced it Ko-ka-lee (for the benefit of Americans). To this day I have problems with others as soon as I mention the 'j.' I have no problems if I just spell it Kokal. But as soon as I mention the 'j' the other person will get totally confused, and unless I quickly assure them that the

'j' is silent, we have a major problem on our hands. It's one of the more unreasonable quirks that Americans have."

- (4) "I was told of a true story of someone in Ogden, Utah who years ago changed his name Kralj (no doubt they pronounced it Kra-lee) to Carley."

We can see from these examples how just one 'silent' letter 'j' (in word-final position after a consonant, for example) can cause problems and can bring about different (mostly socio- or psycholinguistic) solutions, e.g. the insistence on -lj producing -lee or even -ley. The last example is especially challenging and it would be interesting to learn what was the motivation for the change Kralj → (Kralee →) Carley. It probably was not a linguistically motivated 'yearning' for a return to a pre-liquid metathesis situation in Slavic, i.e. -ar → -ra → -ar. (Liquid metathesis is a transposition of the order of sounds /r/ and /l/ in Slavic, e.g., -ar → -ra.)

There is a fairly large group of Slovene names which have acquired an 'apostrophe' (plus some other changes) in the Americanization process, e.g. Oblak → O'Black or O'Block, Ogrin → O'Green,⁶ Okički → O'Kicki, Okorn → O'Korn, Omahan → O'Mahan, Opeka → O'Pecka, Ošaben → O'Shaben. One second-generation Slovene is of the opinion that "by and large, the culprits were the Irish teachers in the 1920's (and before!) who 're-coined' [these Slovene surnames] into Irish names by inserting an apostrophe." One of my colleagues doubts that because 'the Irish were seen as successful immigrants and were imitated.'

Another informant pointed out that "a few first-generation Slovenian men [in his community] were able to cross their ethnic language barrier, and marry Irish, Welsh, or other non-Slavic women. And these Slovenian names were changed with help of spouse. Thus Vodišek evolves into 'Woodyshek,' and Pilpah becomes 'Pilpot' and is thus inscribed on tombstone later on." There are of course others (men) who have not changed their surnames (except for č š ž → c s z respectively) even though they married into other nationalities. The following is a newspaper report of four brothers from Pennsylvania (I conversed with two of them in Slovenia) who carried 'the good name' of their area to Washington, D.C. "Joe, Rudy, John and Ed Kocjancic of the Kane-Johnsonburg area, who have won national fame with their

legendary feats with a woodsman's axe and crosscut saw, are back home after carrying the good name of the area to new heights at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife at Washington, D.C." "The Washington newspapers billed the Kocjancic brothers as 'Four Lumberjacks -- a Top Act.'"7

Especially interesting and telling are those changes that have been brought about at the whim of the superiors, be they foremen in the mines or factories or judges presiding over naturalization hearings. The following two stories told by two second-generation Slovenes (from California and Pennsylvania, respectively) are true stories and we can identify them as Kraševac-Wilson Story and Žnideršič-Tagler Story.

The Kraševac-Wilson Story

"Another true story was one regarding the common practice of changing spelling or entire name at the time of naturalization. A man (either in Denver or Utah, I forget which) named Kraševac [a widespread Slovene name] decided at that time to change his name to Krebs, but the judge suggested that he not change it to that name as he had just sentenced a man by that name for some serious crime. He further suggested that he take the name of some illustrious person, citing as an example the President. Wilson was President at the time, so the man changed his name to John Wilson. He later turned out to be a charter member of my own SNPJ [Slovenska Narodna Podporna Jednota] lodge." "I had always wondered how a person named Wilson came to start this lodge. He apparently left no heirs so we lost remembrance of him when he died (before I was even born)."

The Žnideršič-Tagler Story

"Žnideršič was one of the earlier immigrants, circa 1900-1910. Like 98% of healthy Slovene males he worked in the mines. Nearly all the foremen were Irish, if only because they could speak English; also because many of the miners were also Irish.

"One of the most redoubtable foremen was 'Feisty,' a corruption of 'Sylvestry' (Sylvester) and coined by so-called ignorant foreigners who could not utter 'Sylvestry.'

"Well, when Žnideršič was hired, Feisty (with about three years formal schooling -- which was the norm in those

days of poorly-enforced, or of even no child labor laws) asked him for his name. A dialogue of explanation ensued somewhat as follows: 'Žnideršič, Žnideršič! You know, just like Schneider in German. You know, Schneider is a tailor in German! Well, žnider is a tailor in Slovenian.' 'Žnideršič like žnider, you know, like tailor, you know.'

"Well, Feisty, the foreman, would have none of it. ... Heck, Feisty couldn't spell 'Schneider,' so how was he to spell Žnideršič! And so, one of life's ironies stepped in and Feisty wrote 'Tayler' because he could not spell 'tailor,' and besides, the head superintendent of the whole mining operation was one, George Taylor and everybody, including Feisty, could spell 'Taylor.'

"However, as fate would have it, and Feisty being the unlettered Irishman that he was, his poor handwriting formed a closed 'y' on top in 'Tayler' to make it look like a 'g'! So now we have Tagler ..., and Tagler it remained. All the Žnideršič 'kids' went to public school as Tagler, and besides, 'Tagler' sounds so much nicer than Žnideršič, or even 'Žnider,' even if 'Žnider' is close to 'Schneider'!"

This story was told by a second-generation Slovene from eastern Pennsylvania. It is an example of name changes brought about by the whim of the superiors, a mine foreman in this particular case. The above storyteller once mentioned to me that the "source for the foregoing saga was none other than a Joe Tagler" himself, that is, one of the "Žnideršič kids" who had died just a few years ago. The storyteller also said that he met another Žnideršič descendant (at a 75th birthday party) recently who "brought up the 'Žnideršič-Tagler Story' herself and we laughed together about it."

This true-experience story is in spite of its somewhat folkloristic coloring a story about a confrontation between two different nationalities, a Slovene and an Irishman. It is a confrontation on a sociocultural as well as sociolinguistic level, that is, between a Slovene miner and an Irish foreman, between a Slovene-speaking Žnideršič (a fairly common Slovene surname) and an English-speaking Sylvester.

As one of the "so-called ignorant foreigners," Žnideršič and other such foreigners are presented as really not being so ignorant. This exculpation or 'clarification' is on two levels, negative and positive. On the negative level, the

storyteller at first states that Sylvester became a foreman only because of his knowledge of English, but then he adds almost as an afterthought or perhaps to tone down the previous statement somewhat, that "also because many of the miners were also Irish." On the positive side, Žnideršič and other 'ignorant' foreigners are exonerated from their 'ignorance' by being able to coin an epithet or a nickname, Feisty, from Sylvester or, rather, Sylvestry. Actually, even Feisty's 'unlettered' behavior is to some extent exonerated or 'clarified' by mentioning poorly enforced formal schooling and even 'no child labor laws.' Incidentally, the storyteller first used the form Festy, but then recalled that Feisty was the proper form, because that 'redoubtable' or formidable and fearsome Irish foreman was really a feisty or spirited Irishman.

The shift of the name Žnideršič into Tagler in terms of the actual storytelling consists of two parts (separated by ⇒) and may be presented as follows: Žnideršič → Schneider → žnider → tailor ⇒ Taylor → Tayler → Tagler. In the first part, Žnideršič tries to explain his name to the foreman by pointing out the German and Slovene terms for 'tailor,' while in the second part we see Feisty's (unsuccessful) attempts to put that name into writing. That is, the surname Žnideršič consists of the stem žnider (also žnidar) 'tailor' and the derivative suffix -šič. Coming from Austria-Hungary, Žnideršič must have known some German and thus suggested to Feisty that žnider meant 'Schneider' in German. (Perhaps it should be mentioned here that the noun žnider in the meaning of 'tailor' is a Slovene dialectal form derived from the German Schneider.) Then 'one of life's ironies stepped in' and 'the unlettered Irishman' bungled the job when translating and transcribing žnider into 'tailor' or 'Taylor' or 'Tayler' by closing 'y' on top in the last variant and thus obtaining Tagler.

The narrative is presented in descriptive-expressive statements or phrases, e.g. 'like 98% of healthy Slovene males,' 'one of the most redoubtable foremen,' 'ignorant foreigners,' 'heck,' 'one of life's ironies stepped in,' 'the unlettered Irishman,' 'all the Žnideršič kids,' and the final entertaining comment, 'and besides, Tagler sounds so much nicer than Žnideršič, or even Žnider, even if Žnider is close to Schneider.'

Footnotes

¹ Joseph F. Kess, "Change and Assimilation in North American Slovene Names," Proceedings of the Annual Name Society Meetings (San Francisco, December 1975).

² Joseph Paternost, "Sociolinguistic Aspects of the Slovene Spoken in America," Slovene Studies, I:1 (1979), 20-21.

³ Ina Slokan, "Odšla je Minka, prišla pa Mary." Rodna gruda (December 1976), 33.

⁴ Danica Dolenc, "What's in a Name?," Slovene Canadian Diary, I:8 (October 1976), 8.

⁵ Franc Jakopin, "Struktura slovenskih priimkov v statistični osvetlitvi," Slavistična revija, 25 (1977), 5-25 and "Nekaj značilnosti najfrekventnejših slovenskih priimkov," Wiener slavistisches Jahrbuch, 21 (1975), 93-102; France Bezljaj, ed. Začasni slovar slovenskih priimkov (Ljubljana 1974).

⁶ Louis Adamic, "The Yugoslav Speech in America," The American Mercury, 12 (November 1927), 321.

⁷ "Kocjancic Brothers Star in Washington Folklife Festival," The Kane Republican (July 12, 1969), 1.