

CANON

The Journal of the Rocky Mountains
American Studies Association

VOLUME III

FALL 1995

NUMBER 1

IN DEFENSE OF FOLK ETYMOLOGY: THE CASE OF "GRINGO"

TAD TULEJA

The word in language is half someone else's. . . It exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one's own.

Mikhail Bakhtin

In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.

Susan Sontag

Some years ago I published a book called *The Cat's Pajamas*, an etymological spoof, or "fictionary," of specious derivations. For the expression "chewing the fat," for example, I posited an obscure Eskimo blubber exchange ritual, while for "cat's pajamas" I invented a British tailor, E. B. Katz, known for providing sleepwear to Regency gentry. The book was offered, and generally received, as a harmless joke, a modest contribution to "mockademics," and it gave me a chuckling month on talk radio, challenging callers to devise their own preposterous etymologies.

The one dark note in this cheery episode sounded when I sent a complimentary copy of the book to an English professor whose own writing I had admired. Rather than the simple thanks I had hoped for, I got from him a graceless reply, asking "what possible benefit" there could be in a dictionary of erroneous information. Suppressing the urge to remind him of Oscar Wilde's whimsical apology "The Decay of Lying," I blamed his obtuseness on personal problems and comforted myself with the simple resolution never to open one of his books again.

As I think back on the incident, however, I see his lack of humor not as idiosyncratic, but as a typical, if intemperately expressed, academic posture. The professor in question was a known linguist, and the language games I played in *The Cat's Pajamas* must, I suppose, have struck him as disrespectful. Not only had I blurred the border between truth and error, but in the process I had insulted the border guards. On two levels, I had attacked the "power to

authenticate" which, as Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett has observed, ranks high in the academy's arsenal of status prerogatives.¹

My intent had not been to expose the emperor's nakedness. The fact that at least one professor took it that way hints at a certain rigidity in the academy, at the conviction that explaining language is an expert's affair while the suppositions of amateurs—even avowedly tongue-in-cheek ones—are perilous distractions. The bias toward class and credentials implicit here is a principal ingredient of scholarly prestige, and it is useful to identify with some precision the prerogatives which that prestige maintains. The business of the academy is not simply to police the border between the "true" and the "false"—that is to some degree an ancillary enterprise—but to monopolize the certification of questions, to articulate the boundaries of permissible discourse. It is the academy that tells the amateur where she may look, that determines, whatever the discipline, "what will count."²

But the power to authenticate implies its obverse, the power to debunk and to dis-count. Here, surely, is where the leverage lies. In linguistics as in art history, it is the ability to spot a fraud, to negate rather than grant a title, that separates those who are respected from those who are feared. Hence, no doubt, the professor's irritation. In substituting invention for analysis, I had not only committed the sin of levity; I had implied that creative distortion had heuristic value, that errors might tell us something useful about language, even when their literal import was nonsense. All anathema to a serious scholar, for if frauds could not be peremptorily laughed out of court, of what utility was the power to issue imprimaturs?

This anecdote, I believe, has social implications. It speaks not only to a contrast between Order and Play, but also to attitudinal differences regarding language. I explore those differences here both in theoretical terms and by attending closely to a single example—a word whose "authenticated" origin is not in doubt, but whose resonance in North America is linked inextricably to a readily discountable folk etymology. My argument is that the debunking of such etymologies, while it may do wonders for the scholarly ego, can prevent us from understanding the ethnography of speaking. By privileging phonology and structure over usage, we slight the semantic richness inherent in discourse and isolate lexical items from their dynamic contexts. Reinserting them into their natural, conversational environments, on the other hand, can help us see more clearly how

they work. This enables us to do more than merely challenge authority. It enables us, to paraphrase Susan Sontag's comment about art, to move from an arid hermeneutics of the word to a fruitful, if rebelliously untidy, erotics of discourse.

In suggesting a path to be followed toward such an erotics, I begin with a brief description of folk etymology, a category that philologists have curtained off as a sideshow. I then examine the ethnic epithet *gringo* to show how expert and folk explanations collide. I conclude by suggesting that a discourse-centered approach can provide a fuller understanding of how words mean—of their multiple tones and voicing in social contexts—than can the strictest attention to sound change laws.

The Neogrammarian Heritage: "Etymologie Savante"

In 1856, as Charles Darwin was laboring over the manuscript of *The Origin of Species*, German philologists were finishing a parallel project: the construction of the neogrammarian hypothesis, which posited universal laws of linguistic evolution. Behind both projects stood Lyell's uniformitarianism, with its stunning rejection of scripturally sanctioned catastrophes and its promise that the secrets of nature might yet be revealed—without benefit of clergy—to those who placed their trust in the principle of Design. Since Design had been Europe's *idée fixe* for a century, it should not be construed as merely accidental that it was immediately pressed into service for both biology and language. Lyell's insight answered a long-felt need, and it was predictable that it should invigorate multiple disciplines.

In linguistics, one result of the German project was that conjecture about the derivations of words, which had been a parlor game since Plato's time, was instantly transformed into science, into what Orr nicely calls *etymologie savante*.³ As the regularity of sound change became axiomatic, the etymologist came to guard an arcane discipline whose methods—and whose methods alone—could read words' histories. Historical linguistics had been sparked by Sir William Jones's 1876 supposition that Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit shared a common course. With the methodological encouragement provided by the neogrammarians, the comparative method now took off in earnest, bearing such famous fruits as the French *Larousse* (1873-78) and Sir James Murray's *Oxford English Dictionary* (begun in 1888).

At the same time that these sturdy efforts were underway, a

1. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, "Mistaken Dichotomies," *Journal of American Folklore* 101 (1988), 145.

2. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, "Mistaken Dichotomies," 144.

3. John Orr, "L'etymologie populaire," *Revue de Linguistique Romane*, 18 (1954), 129-142.

CAÑON

small contingent of scholars bent their energies not to the elucidation of "true accounts" (the literal meaning of etymology) but to the discounting of folk or popular readings, the "systematic repudiation of unsound conjectures."⁴ This work began with F. W. Forstemann's 1852 *Volksetymologie*,⁵ and it was brought to fruition in England by A. Smythe Palmer, whose 1882 volume *Folk Etymology* appeared with the uncompromising subtitle "A Dictionary of Form or Meaning, by False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy." In a later edition Palmer lamented "the corrupting influence exercised upon the English language by the people who speak it," and this corrupting influence he dutifully, and laboriously, documented.⁶

Erudite exposes of "mis-etymologizing" comprised a relative backwater of linguistic research, but they were critical in professionalizing the endeavor. The philological ability to spot an impostor, to show how a given derivation could not be right, reinforced the homage paid to Design and established an iron border between the ignorant and the "literate"—a development that helped to certify the gap between classes.⁷ Palmer blithely conflated false etymologies with "ancient superstition and delusion in the region of Folk-lore," and the "folk" were similarly patronized by other linguists. Guarding the people from their own "verbal pathology" became noblesse oblige for the philologically astute.⁸

Not so coincidentally, the construction of the authoritative voice that we see here—the voice that alone could render a "true account"—paralleled the growth of British genealogy. The first edition of *Burke's Peerage* appeared in 1826, and the many editions that followed it made the nineteenth century a virtual golden age of ancestor worship. Comparative morphogenesis was a squire's discipline—the ideal science for well-bred acolytes of pedigree. What

counted in genealogy was the word's "original essence."⁹ Both passions rested on an Aristotelian essentialism in reverse: One understood the nature of a thing by reaching its source.

As much because they lacked the proper class credentials as because they ignored the immutable sound laws, the common folk had nothing to offer etymology. Their surmises might be charmingly ingenious; Palmer admitted that some folk guesses were "so plausible and of such respectable antiquity that we need to be reminded that they are such."¹⁰ Yet in determining a true account, they could only "disguise" and "deform."¹¹

The laws of sound, however, governed only structure. They told the linguist nothing about language dynamics, about how the structure played out in conversation, or about what their ingenious blunders meant to the folk. Such issues are tangential to the philologist, and their very absence signals the limitation of that discipline as a means of explaining *parole* rather than *langue*. Classical philology's failure to elucidate speech, in fact, was the negative necessity that engendered sociolinguistics, a discipline that bends its energies to the flow of language as a dynamic feature of culture and society. It is a sociolinguistic approach that I take here, as a tool for explaining not only the structure of errors, but their inevitability, their value, to the communities that create them.

Getting at the reality of folk etymology means displaying a concern for discourse as a Bakhtinian field, an arena of the irreducibility dialogic. It means attention to the esoteric-exoteric factor in folklore¹² and to the differential identities¹³ of intergroup contact. This is especially important when we are dealing with terms that are already laden with intercultural (hence conflicted) histories, and therefore loaded with potential for further tension. To some degree, therefore border terms, borrowed terms, are the most interesting subjects for discourse study, since they suggest the complications most vividly.

4. William Kirwin, "Folk Etymology: Remarks on Linguistic Problem-Solving and Who Does It," *Lore and Language* 4 (2) 1985, 18.

5. H. F. Lenkova, "Die sogenannte Volksetymologie," *Muttersprache* 69: (1959), 137.

6. A. Smythe Palmer, *The Folk and their Word-Lore: An Essay on Popular Etymologies* (London: George Routledge, 1904), v.

7. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 45-54.

8. A. Smythe Palmer, *Folk Etymology* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1882), viii.

9. Palmer, *The Folk and their Word-Lore*, 4.

10. Palmer, *The Folk and their Word-Lore*, 61.

11. Palmer, *The Folk and their Word-Lore*, 4.

12. William Hugh Jansen, "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore," *Fabula* 2 (1959), 205-11.

13. Richard Bauman, "Differential Identity and the Social Bases of Folklore," in Americo Paredes and Richard Bauman, eds., *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972).

As I will try to show in the following section, *gringo* amply reveals these complications.

Neighborhood Names: Who's the Gringo Here?

The most commonly repeated stories about the origin of *gringo* trace it to the U.S.-Mexican War. According to one story, American soldiers stationed in Mexico wore green uniforms, and Mexican nationals, affronted by their presence, chided them with the insult "Green go home." A variation sees the uniforms themselves as prototypical "green coats." In another story, the soldiers' favorite camp song is either Robert Burns's "Green Grow the Rashes, Oh" or the contemporary folk tune "Green Grow the Lilacs," and *gringo* is the Mexican approximation of the alliterative title.

The uniform story is easily disproved. In 1848, U.S. Army issue was still half a century away from olive drab, and the men who went to Mexico sported a variety of uniforms ranging from the leather-fringed jerkin of the Texas Ranger to the red tunic of the Mississippi rifleman to the dark blue frock coat of infantry officers. Standard field dress for the regular infantryman was a fatigue jacket and trousers of pale blue.¹⁴ If Mexicans had chosen to attack the invaders' garments, what they might have said was "*Vaya-azul*" (if one allows them the presence of mind to use their own language) or, in English, "blue-go."

The second story, though less obviously ludicrous, is also easily discounted. Although both the Burns song and the "Lilac" tune were popular nineteenth-century airs, the evidence for a military vogue is not substantial. When authors contend that "Green Grow the Lilacs" was the "marching song of the Mexican War,"¹⁵ they do so without contemporary support. Veterans' memoirs are silent on both the song and the jibe.¹⁶ One Pennsylvania volunteer calls the soldiers' favorite tune "The Leg I Left Behind Me," a parody of "The Girl I Left Behind Me" which chided Mexican general Antonio López de

Santa Anna for abandoning an artificial leg on the battlefield of Cerro Gordo.¹⁷ Later historians confirm this soldier's recollection that the military bands favored patriotic airs such as "Hail Columbia," "Yankee Doodle," and "The Star-Spangled Banner," and they do not even mention the "Green Grow" tale. One chronicler, writing only five years after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, calls *gringo* an approximate equivalent to English "greenhorn"—with no suggestion of its link to the recent conflict.¹⁸ Most telling of all, the anti-American *décimas* that were composed during the Yankee occupation of Mexico City all use the pejorative *yanqui* rather than *gringo*, while corridos of the 1850s commonly use *americano*.¹⁹ If the term arose in response to Mr. Polk's war, one would expect it to have left clearer traces.

That it did not suggests another origin, and in fact to traditional linguists that origin is obvious. The birthplace of *gringo*, according to nonfolk etymologists, was not Mexico but Spain. It is a variant of what an eminent lexicographer called the "good old Spanish term" *griego*, for "Greek,"²⁰ and it often indicates not just Greeks but all foreigners. Spanish dictionaries make this perfectly clear. To speak *en griego*, at least as early as the eighteenth century, meant to jabber unintelligibly or in poor Spanish. As a mild epithet chiding "foreign" talk, *griego/gringo* spread throughout Latin America, and was differentially employed against various non-Spaniards. In Argentina, *gringo* meant an Italian, in Central America, an Irishman, and along the border between unhappy Mexico and the giant of the North, it came to mean a citizen of the United States. According to one source—a biography of mountain man Bigfoot Wallace—it was being used in this sense along the Rio Grande six years before the Mexican War.²¹

In Spain itself, Terreros's 1787 *Diccionario Castellano* traced *gringo* to Malaga, where it meant linguistically incompetent outsiders;

17. Oswandel, *Notes*, 224.

18. George Winston Smith and Charles Judah, eds., *Chronicles of the Gringos: The U.S. Army and the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968), 314.

19. cited in Pearce, "The Southwestern Word Box," 266.

20. Americo Paredes, "On Gringo, Greaser, and Other Neighborhood Names," in Mody Boatright, Wilson Hudson, and Allen Maxwell, eds., *Singers and Storytellers* (Dallas: SMU Press, 1961), 286-87.

21. F. H. Vizetelly, Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, 13 July 1916.

14. Martin Windrow and Gerry Embleton, *Military Dress of North America, 1665-1970* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 74-79.

15. Will M. Tipton, "Notes," *Old Santa Fe* 3 (1916), 279; T. M. Pearce, "The Southwestern Word Box," *New Mexico Quarterly* 2 (1932), 263-68; William Morris and Mary Morris, *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

16. J. Jacob Oswandel, *Notes of the Mexican War, 1846-48* (Philadelphia: 1885); John James Peck, 1970, in Richard F. Fourade, ed., *The Sign of the Eagle: A View of Mexico, 1830 to 1855* (San Diego: Copley Press, 1970).

and to Madrid, where it was applied particularly to the Irish. Modern Spanish sources build on this insight. In 1925, the Argentine editor of the gaucho epic *Martin Fierro* identifies *gringo* broadly with *extraniero*, drawing a *sens* analogy between the Spanish *hablar en griego*, the Italian *parlare turco*, and the German *Das ist Spanisch*. The English equivalent of course is "That's Greek to me." The standard Mexican sources—Santamaria's dictionaries of *americanismos* and *mejicanismos*—similarly identify *gringo* as a synonym for foreigner, for one who "speaks badly,"²² or, in the Argentine particularly, one "whose native language is not Spanish."²³ Madrid's current dictionary of record, by Corominas and Pascual (1980), does not depart from Terreros's fundamental judgment.²⁴

None of these Spanish sources gives any credence to the commonly repeated story of "Green Grow the Lilacs." The standard dictionaries do not cite it at all. Tiscornia calls it a nineteenth century Mexican folk belief, but he makes no mention of the 1846 invasion.²⁵ One Argentine researcher does cite the invasion, as well as the uniform and the lilac links, but only to dismiss them both as obviously erroneous.²⁶ The Hispanic consensus is clear. *Gringo* comes from the disparaging Castilian *griego*, while the "Green Grow" story is virtually beneath contempt.

This understanding, however, is not unanimous among Anglo-American investigators of slang. What Paredes sensibly calls a "U.S. originated legend"²⁷ has numerous takers north of the Rio Grande. The experts, it is true, accept the Iberian origin and dutifully deride

the "Green Grow" story as fanciful.²⁸ But in spite of their authoritative pronouncements, the story survives. In Joseph Shipley's 1945 *Dictionary of Word Origins*, we find the griego and "Green Grow" stories offered as equally plausible alternatives. In Margaret Boni's *Fireside Book of Folk Songs* (1947), the *gringo*—"Green Grow" tale is a "colorful fable," but not one which the author takes pains to dismiss. Five years later a distinguished folksong scholar repeats the Boni "legend" with the same equanimity.²⁹ The appearance of the tale in popular publications—as newspaper filler, for example—was evidently so rampant by the 1950s that folklorist Robert Fuson was moved to write what he imagined might be the last word, in a paper that condemned the tale as "wholly erroneous."³⁰

But, as William and Mary Morris were soon to recognize, "a good story dies hard."³¹ Fuson's pique aside, city editors continued to run it as filler, and a new generation assimilated the tale. In a recent study of Southwestern vocabulary, Cornelius Smith gives a passing nod to "Terrera" [sic] while claiming that "most historians" accept the "Green Grow" tale.³² In their discussion of the "Lilacs" tune in their *Great Song Thesaurus*, Lax and Smith suppose that Mexican soldiers sang it in 1846 as "Gringo the Lilacs"—thus "introducing the term to the American vernacular."³³

22. Terreros 1787: II 240.

23. Francisco Santamaria, *Diccionario general de americanismos* (Mexico: Pedro Robredo, 1942), 33.

24. Francisco Santamaria, *Diccionario de mejicanismos* (Mexico: Forrua, 1959), 564.

25. Eleuterio Tiscornia, ed., "Martin Fierro," *comentado y anotado* (Buenos Aires: Coni, 1925).

26. Roberto Ares Pons, "Gringo y gaucho: dos enigmas etimologicos," *Plural* 191 (1987), 53.

27. Americo Paredes, "The Problem of Identity in a Changing Culture: Popular Expressions of Culture Conflict along the Lower Rio Grande Border," in *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border* (Austin: CMAS Books, 1978), 34.

28. Harold W. Bentley, *A Dictionary of Spanish Terms in English, with Special Reference to the American Southwest* (New York: Octagon Books, 1973), 142; Pearce, "The Southwestern Word Box," 265-66 William Craigie and James Hulbert, *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), 1182; H. L. Mencken, *The American Language. Supplement I* (New York: Knopf, 1945), 638-39.

29. Tristram Coffin, "A Tentative Study of a Typical Folk Lyric: 'Green Grows the Laurel,'" *Journal of American Folklore* 65 (1952), 349.

30. Robert H. Fuson, "The Origin of the Word Gringo," in Mody Boatright, Wilson Hudson, and Allen Maxwell, eds., *Singers and Storytellers* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1961), 282.

31. Morris and Morris, *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, 264.

32. Cornelius C. Smith, Jr., *A Southwestern Vocabulary: The Words They Used* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur Clark, 1984), 58-59.

33. Roger Lax and Frederick Smith, *The Great Song Thesaurus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 248.

What neither scholars nor popular writers have addressed is the reason that the story may have survived, why in spite of decades of debunking it is still "widely believed by the unlettered."³⁴ That is the question I would like to address here. In doing so, I am proceeding from the hardly daring assumption that items of belief—however "false" the authorities may show them to be—have a direct relevance to the negotiation of identity and to the construction, and reconstruction, of community values. Folklore is never neutral. Whatever a community believes, whether it is empirically verifiable or not, is an important index to how that community operates.

This is a common enough observation with regard to folklore in general; indeed, it is the organizing principle of the functionalist approach.³⁵ Surprisingly little investigation, however, has applied the principle to popular etymology. Gallacher (1949) has shown how an invented derivation of "Mormon" reinforces that religious group's self-esteem.³⁶ Reach, in a classic analysis of the expression "OK," showed how popular beliefs about its origin were strongly affected by political prejudice.³⁷ Baker, Rich, and Murray have revealed in regional place naming both the jocular creativity of amateur etymologists and a mnemonic rationale that lends it logic.³⁸ In assessing the *gringo*-*"Green Grow"* link, I follow these scholars' lead, trying to show how the error makes social sense.

What "counts" functionally about *gringo*, I suggest, is the way in which it indexes border stereotyping. I take "border" here, as Americo Paredes has long taken it, as a metaphor for various types of culture clash, but also for a specific physical border—the ribbon of the Rio Grande between the United States and Mexico along which guarded animosity has long held sway. *Gringo* is as much an

indicator of that border's tension as the more bluntly disparaging Anglo term "greaser."³⁹ What I want to point to here is the way in which the principal "error" repeated about this term reflects upon and refracts the stereotype.

When used by Spanish speakers, whether in Spain or in Mexico, *gringo* typically serves as an exclusionary label, defining non-Spanish speakers as outsiders and, at least by implication, ridiculing their incompetence. The *"Green Grow"* tale, I suggest, recasts the exclusion in a process that has been called "functional reversal."⁴⁰ If the dictionary meaning of *gringo* demeans non-Hispanics, the "U.S.-originated legend" does the opposite, by shifting attention to a supposed Mexican incompetence, the inability to produce a double Gr. *"Green Grow"* thus becomes a *blason populaire*, a mark of peculiarly Anglo capability, while the Mexicans, humorously stumbling over *"American,"* are recast as the Greeks, the speakers of *griego*. Thus the "good old Spanish term" becomes *agringada*.

This is the bald patriotic point in *The Great Song Thesaurus*, where the Anglo authors suggest (in a peculiar twist) that a Mexican soldier's blunder, *"Gringo the Lilacs,"* bridged the gap between *"Green Grow"* and *gringo*. Similar observations permeate the literature. In the "marching song" cited by the Morrisises, we learn that "the natives" described the American singers as green grows—"only what went into their ears as green-grows came out of their mouths as gringos."⁴¹ Smith's Southwestern dictionary notes the same transformation. "In attempting to ridicule the invaders, Mexicans picked out the phrase easiest to imitate: 'green grow.' Unable to pronounce the words precisely, they chanted 'green-go! green-go!' and so the word was written as 'gringo.'"⁴²

This is a particularly telling description of Mexican incompetence. Even when they select a phrase that is "easiest to imitate," they are still "unable to pronounce the words precisely." This understanding, however little related it may be to reality, conveniently recasts the slur as a badge of honor, functionally

34. Bentley, *A Dictionary of Spanish*, 142.

35. Walter Bascom, "Four Functions of Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore* (1954), 67.

36. Stuart A. Gallacher, "Mormon: An Example of Folk Etymology," *Western Folklore* 8 (1949), 22-24.

37. Reach, 1946.

38. Ronald L. Baker, "The Role of Folk Legends in Place-Name Research," *Journal of American Folklore* 85 (1972), 367-73; John Stanley Rich, "Landscapes and the Imagination: The Interplay of Folk Etymology and Place Names," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 45 (1981), 155-62; and Thomas E. Murray, "Folk Paredes Etymology in the Streets of St. Louis," *Names* 34 (1986), 373-382.

39. Paredes, "On Gringo, Greaser, and Other Neighborly Names."

40. J. D. A. Widdowson, "Language, Tradition, and Social Control," in A. E. Green and J. D. A. Widdowson, eds., *Language, Culture, and Tradition, CECTAL Conference Papers Series No. 2*, (Sheffield: Centre for English Cultural Traditions and Language, 1981), 37-38.

41. Morris and Morris, *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, 264.

42. Smith, *A Southwestern Vocabulary*, 59.

reversing its power against the attacker. In the process it pulls the border of competency northward. The story functions, then, as a "con safos" tag, an apotropaic formula that deflects the jibe, that mocks the mockers by feeding them back their own medicine.⁴³

Given its obvious relation to culture clash, it is not surprising to discover that the "Green Grow" story first surfaced in American newspapers in the 1890s, when—in spite of U.S. commercial interests in the Porfiriato—the Latin American countries were widely represented as a miasma of provincialism and intrigue. The yellow journalist Richard Harding Davis, who visited Central America in 1895, was happy to call himself and his companions "gringos," while his view of non-Anglo culture was unabashedly blunt. Central America, he told fellow jingoist Arthur Brisbane, was "the grandest country on earth for a white man to keep out of."⁴⁴

Conflict and the Circulation of Meanings

The functional reversal implicit in the "Green Grow" story is not uncommon in the battleground of "neighborly names."⁴⁵ Indeed, the elaboration of insults by tendentious fictions is an ubiquitous feature of ethnic identity management. *Gringo* itself has been related to the Mexican tourist's understanding of U.S. traffic lights: "He calls Americans *gringos* because they go on green."⁴⁶ On the other side of the border is the attempt to de-racialize "greaser" by supposing that it once referred to the greasers of wagon axles.⁴⁷

These stories, like the "Green Grow" tale, operate within a semantic universe that begins but does not end with *etymologie savante*. They all as well highlight the role of conflict in the invention and certification of local knowledge. To some degree, the question of who owns *gringo* is an academic, and academics', one. In reality, meaning circulates, in all its variety, with or without scholarly

imprimaturs; grammar exists, willy nilly, before grammarians.⁴⁸ Thus the indisputable meaning of such loaded terms may simply be that they trigger creative discourse. It is as discursive processes rather than lexical items that folk inventions animate social reality.

In saying this, I am speaking from a theoretical tradition that is fundamentally a sociolinguistic one. That tradition attends generally to what Hymes called the "ethnography of speaking" and specifically to the twists and turns of conflicted exchange—to "the processes at work at the interface of cultural difference."⁴⁹ One of the fruits of this tradition, the so-called performance school of folklore studies, emerged at the University of Texas in the 1970s, and the work of that school, as expressed particularly in the 1972 manifesto *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, provides a matrix within which this study might be viewed. Of particular relevance to the activist model I have proposed are the essays in that volume by Roger Abrahams and Richard Bauman. Abrahams stressed the manner in which folk creativity provided "expressive and projective solutions" to folk group problems. Bauman challenged the traditional notion of "boundedness" by showing how intergroup exchange promoted "differential identity." The "Green Grow" tale illustrates both processes.⁵⁰

Behind these essays lay the example of the volume's coeditor, Americo Paredes, whose explorations of folklore as intercultural conflict reflected "the stark social oppositions of the border region."⁵¹ Paredes's work on intercultural exchange provides a localized and fruitful framework for examining folk language. His own short essay on the purported origin of *gringo*, as well as his better known works on identity and ethnographic fieldwork, all reveal that sensitivity to voicing and nuance—to what might be called the

43. Sylvia Ann Grider, "Con Safos: Mexican-Americans, Names, and Graffiti," *Journal of American Folklore* 88 (1975), 132-42.

44. Arthur Brisbane, "Three Gringos at Home" *New York World*, 4 May 1895.

45. Paredes, "On Gringo, Greaser, and Other Neighborly Names."

46. Paredes, "On Gringo, Greaser, and Other Neighborly Names," 289.

47. Mencken, *The American Language*, 609; Pearce, "The Southwestern Word Box," 267-68.

48. Orr, "L'etymologie populaire," 135.

49. Dell Hymes, "The Ethnography of Speaking," in Thomas Gladwin and William Sturdevant, eds., *Anthropology and Human Behavior* (Washington, D.C.: Anthropological Society of Washington, 1962), 13-53; Greg Urban and Joel Sherzer, eds., "Introduction," *Nation-States and Indians in Latin America*, ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 7.

50. Americo Paredes, Roger Abrahams and Richard Bauman, *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972).

51. Richard Bauman, "Introduction" to Americo Paredes, *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border* (Austin: CMAS Books, 1993), xiv.

undertones of practice—that is critical for anyone investigating folk invention.⁵²

The multiple voicing emphasized by the Texas school had been a locus of interest since the 1920s for Mikhail Bakhtin, and his theories provide a retroactive gloss on their endeavors that can also be useful to the student of folk etymology. "Meaning," he insisted, was never the private property of a discrete "message sender," but always the cooperative creation of a speaking community. Every utterance was the "product of the interaction of the interlocutors and, broadly speaking, the product of the whole complex social situation in which it has occurred." All verbal communication thus was "dialogue."⁵³

Stressing the multiple resonances of even the most personal utterances, Bakhtin argued that every word is socialized not only laterally, as it were, but also vertically, that is, in history. Utterances hold a memory and anticipate a future, while the semantic weight of utterances in any exchange "is constructed in the process of their interaction."⁵⁴ The historical and interactive insights evident here are clearly of relevance to the understanding of "Green Grow." Not only does it vibrate between past and future—simultaneously announcing what I have called its laden and its loaded aspects—but it performs that juggling act "in the process of interaction." It is of no small importance that the Spanish slur *gringo* must jockey for semantic position not only with "Green Grow" but also with such inventions as "spick" and "greaser."⁵⁵ All these expressions talk back to each other in a conversation that may suitably be described as Bakhtinian.

The perspectives of Bakhtin and the performance theorists are well known. A less well-known perspective that the "Green Grow" story illustrates is that of the Canadian linguist Roger Wescott. In an obscure but provocative paper, he counters monogenetic orthodoxy

by suggesting that "lexical ancestry" may be relative rather than absolute, while the idea of morphological linearity itself—the neogrammarian insistence on one "true account"—may be "a gradient rather than a discrete aspect of lexical ancestry."⁵⁶ As an example, he cites the English verb *slurp*. The "likeliest lineal ascendant" is Dutch *slurpen*, but even if such an origin could not be determined, one could still explain the verb as a blend of *slur* and *slop*, as a "collateral" rather than lineal lexical ancestor.⁵⁷ This possibility enhances the "official" meaning—just as, I would suggest, the "Green Grow" tale enhances the original meaning of Iberian *griego*. What Wescott observes with regard to "lexemes" may thus be argued even more pointedly for semantics.

As these discourse-centered theories seem to suggest, and as I hope this study has illustrated, folk etymology allows us to examine the border not only between experts on language and the (more) "people who speak it," but also between authentic and enacted meanings, between the tidiness of language law and the flow of conversation. The origins of words may be bronzed, but meanings may not. They are inevitably and constantly mediated by social weather, and the green patina of history is part of that weather.

In their single-minded devotion to true accounts, traditional etymologists tended to ignore this. Privileging historical precision and a lexical canon, they honored what Bakhtin calls the centripetal impulse, the ideological flow toward "unitary language."⁵⁸ But they could only purchase precision at the cost of resonance, particularly the historical resonance that generates border slang. In this sense historical linguistics was always paradoxically ahistorical: Its hidden agenda suggested the banning of experience, so that words might appear prelapsarian, as if newly born.

But words are not newly born. As Bakhtin insisted, they are always "scattered, permeated with intentions, accented."⁵⁹ Taking folk etymologies seriously enables us to understand that—enables us to say of such derivational errors what Bakhtin said of street songs, folk sayings, and other "low genres": that they reveal "the life and

52. Paredes, "On *Gringo*, *Greaser*, and Other Neighborly Names"; "The Problem of Identity in a Changing Culture: Popular Expressions of Culture Conflict along the Lower Rio Grande Border"; and "On Ethnographic Work among Minority Groups: A Folklorist's Perspective," in *Folklore and Culture along the Texas-Mexican Border* (Austin: CMAS Books, 1977).

53. Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 30-32.

54. Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 55-56.

55. Arnoldo De Leon, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes toward Mexicans in Texas 1821-1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

56. Roger W. Wescott, "Lexical Polygenesis: Words as Resultants of Multiple Linguistic Pressures," *LACUS* (1979), 582.

57. Wescott, "Lexical Polygenesis," 82.

58. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Discourse in the Novel*. In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 270ff.

59. Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 56.

behavior of discourse in a contradictory and multi-languaged world.⁶⁰ The myth of "Green Grow" may be readily debunked, but it survives in the valley of its saying as an element of practice. As practice, folk etymology indexes how langue becomes erratically and erotically deployed as *parole*. Linguistically, it answers not the credential-checking query "Who was your father?" but more the playful, centrifugal question "What's going on?" Thus the U.S. originated myth of *gringo's* origin is an essential link in the chain of its social being.

60. Bakhtin, *Discourse in the Novel*, 275.