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THE POWER OF A NAME – Granta.

[Rebecca Tamás](#)

‘Szegény egér, melynek csak egy lyuka van.’

‘It’s a poor mouse that has only one hole.’

– Hungarian proverb

I was recently invited to be part of an event where I’d be reading alongside a group of poets I deeply admire. The thought of my name sitting alongside theirs gave me small electric shocks of pleasure. Not exactly pride or self-congratulation (that was there too, of course) but the sense of a delicious, strange new reality coming into being. In this reality, my work has the opportunity to impact others the way their work has impacted me. In this reality, I am able to give my attention, my energy, my fury, to this one thing in the world that I’m actually good at.

The organisers followed up on their invitation with the publicity materials: my name was wrong, on the webpage, on the social media call-out, on the virtual poster. The acute accent on the last ‘a’, that little acid slash, had been forgotten. I felt prickly and hot with embarrassment at the thought of having to bring it up, which I had promised myself I would do, every single time. After all, I knew they’d be gracious, change it without complaint. I knew it was a tiny mistake. Yet at the same time I worried they would think I was being dramatic, fussy, to demand this correction; to be so delicate about a little smudge. There were many more pressing things in their lives, in my life, in the world. Who would care, apart from me, that my name was not my name? The *á* sat blinking in my draft email. I asked myself, ‘Is it really that important?’

*

Why did I start correcting people when they left out the accent in my name, or, more rarely, moved it about? When they wrote Tamas not Tamás. Támas not Tamás? The accent has, after all, been forgotten since I knew I had a name in the first place.

I remember waking up on 24 June 2016, wondering whether my dad or sister or brother would need a visa to visit me from Budapest. Would I need one to go to them?

I talked to my colleague, a writer of colour from outside Britain, about naming. She told me that her name was misspelled in every email, on the publicity for every reading. She said she couldn’t bear to bring it up – she was afraid of the potential awkwardness and hostility of the response, as if she should be happy simply to be invited to participate. I am white and (half) English; I speak with a middle-class English accent. English is my first language. I am wrapped in the complete privilege of being wholly assimilated, unnoticed, seemingly not foreign at all. No one ever asks me ‘where I’m from’ when I enter a room. No one gives me nicknames to make my name ‘easier’ to ‘wrap their tongue around’. If I didn’t have the guts to politely mention when a small mistake was made, how on earth was she meant to?

*

When I started correcting people in earnest I was transitioning from being a student and an 'emerging writer', to becoming someone with a 'career' in academia, someone who published books. My name appeared more often, and as it did, I couldn't help but notice the accent was forgotten perhaps two out of every three times. Initially it didn't seem like a 'big deal'. And indeed, perhaps it is not one. But how to describe the sense of deflation when someone you respect tweets an incorrect version of your name? When everywhere you go, this slightly wrong version of yourself limps after.

My name, my name spelled correctly, is the link to the other half of myself. It is the link to my family in Budapest: my siblings, dad and nephew. My grandmother who, having spent time in prison for being a communist in fascist Romania (thus escaping the Holocaust), was so scared of rats that, not only was the word 'rat' banned from the household, but 'George Orwell' and '1984' too. My name is the link to my Jewishness, such that it is; the link to boiling Hungarian summers; eating lángos in the waterpark in my bright green swimsuit; Eszterházy cake in the cool, golden billowing of Café Gerbeaud. It is the link to watching my dad leave the stage after giving a speech at a socialist gathering, only to see another man spit on his coat. It is the link to hearing my mum trying to learn from Hungarian tapes, repeating the word for 'watermelon' over and over in our lino-floored kitchen.

On the morning after the EU referendum, in Edinburgh, a taxi driver told me he voted to leave. Even though he could tell that I'd been crying, he explained that he voted leave 'because of the Eastern Europeans coming here to take money off the government.' When, feeling completely fake in my English-accented armour, I told him that I'm half Hungarian, he lapsed into silence.

At my new university job, I saw that the accent did not feature on the class timetable. This was where my students would first see my name and learn that we would be working together. I got in touch with the relevant authorities and found that 'special characters' could not be included in the timetable system. I learned that a French colleague had been fighting to change that for years, with no technical solution in sight. At my induction with all the other new staff, I pulled the paper with my name on it out of my badge, wrote the accent in with a biro, and put it back. Aware of my timetable difficulties, my department quietly made sure that in every single other place, from the webpage to the nameplate on my door, my name was perfectly correct. I felt absurdly grateful, immediately at home.

In my previous workplaces, no European colleague ever got it wrong. They are used to slipping in and out of English; taking hold of accents, umlauts and dotted vowels, is child's play. They do not, cannot, assume the easy dominance of their language in a Europe saturated with English. Yet I feel no kinship with their linguistic flexibility. Despite speaking a little as a toddler in a Budapest nursery, my Hungarian is gone. As a teenager, old women on the tram would tell me off virulently, in words I didn't understand, for not speaking the language. A Hungarian I met at a reading in the UK told me to 'Hurry up and put some effort into learning, because we need more translators!' I guiltily searched 'Hungarian Rosetta stone', only to learn that this unique language was so difficult that they had to give up on the project. Sitting in the cinema watching a new Béla Tarr film, I felt my brain stutter with confusion – how could anything this deeply familiar be incomprehensible? It felt like being played back the surreal and painful dialect of my dreams: infinitely intimate, but entirely

strange. The language pulsed deeply inside my body, down at the core of me, but the words were gone. So I remain depressingly monolingual, as utterly English-centric as every single person who gets my name wrong. I'm not better than them. I hate to think of all the mistakes I have unknowingly made myself, cutting into the tender meat of other people's names with a blunt knife.

As Solmaz Sharif says in her brilliant and excoriating collection *Look*, which interrogates the ways language was demeaned and damaged, along with human life, during America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq: 'It matters what you call a thing'. Language does not only respond to reality, but forms it, creates the contexts in which we understand, think, interact. The wrong words can unsettle not only how we see a thing, but its capacity to fully exist. Still, my small experience of un-naming has given me something. It has brought me to a practice of attention: a deeper awareness of our failure to expand our language into something wide and capacious enough to include everyone.

*

The acute accent in my name is a clue to the pronunciation; most effectively written down as 'aa-sh', rather than 'as' or 'ash'. Without it, no English speaker can be expected to know not to say 'Tamas', and even with the accent, it's extremely hard to intuit the correct sound without asking: 'Toh-mash'. A Finno-Ugaric language from the Uralic family, Hungarian has similarities to Finnish and Estonian, but few others. It's often ranked the fourth most difficult language for English speakers to learn, after Mandarin, Arabic and Japanese, despite, unlike those languages, sharing the same alphabet as English. The accent is a hint, a suggestion to find out more, in a mass of unfamiliar sounds and emphases.

At a house party, someone I've known for many years overheard me explaining the pronunciation of my name and jumped in: 'Ooh, you never pronounced it that way at school! Why are you changing it now?' As if there was something very pretentious about saying my name correctly. I laughed, not mentioning that in school I would have been far too shy and lacking in confidence to name myself correctly, in any form.

Now I love it when people ask me how to say my name right, because, hearing it said out of someone else's mouth makes me feel real. Like a TV being tuned through static that finally lands on a crisp, clear image. Ah, there I am.

The comedian Nish Kumar writes about repeatedly being called 'Nish Patel', even in newspapers advertising his own appearance in a comedy show. Or being given complimentary tickets under Ahir Shah's name, the name of another comedian of South Asian descent. My problem is a tiny scratch compared to these kinds of wounds.

It doesn't seem to matter how simple these names are, how few syllables, how easy to pronounce. It is their foreignness being rejected, not their difficulty. Almost everywhere we go as English-speaking people, we can make ourselves understood. No wonder we have become lazy, making other languages rise and meet us. It's just a name. But it is *my* name.

*

When I mentioned on Twitter that I might write this, I got a surprising barrage of responses. 'Your name on Twitter doesn't even *have* the accent!' (Twitter, also, does not allow for 'special characters' in a handle.) 'I don't know where the accent is on my computer, I can't find it! Bit of a bother to do it every time.' (It's in 'symbols', or you can copy and paste, or hold down the 'a' on your phone screen.) People with English first names tell me of how they get mangled, and I don't have enough characters to explain the difference. When English is the dominant everything, you can't help wanting to fight for the little speck of the rest of your self.

In Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, Proctor refuses to sign his name on a public confession proving his engagement in witchcraft. Everything has been taken from him, yet he fights to hold on to his name. When asked why, he says: 'Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! . . . How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!' I don't think Proctor's name matters more than his life. But evidently, he does.