

Encountering the Unfamiliar: New World Immigrants and the Linguistic Negotiation of the Exotic

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The immigrant experience in the New World was marked by strange encounters with new and unfamiliar life forms—plant and animal—and unfamiliar groups of people—other immigrants and Native Americans. These encounters inevitably required linguistic negotiation. Unfamiliar people had customs, cultural artefacts and lifeways that one's own language and cultural perspective didn't provide the linguistic resources for discussing, and unfamiliar flora and fauna needed labels. These needs, and the kinds of solutions that immigrants came upon, were constant across different ethnic groups landing in the Americas. Our focus will be on English speakers and French speakers who came to the American colonies and to Louisiana, respectively.

Explorers and immigrants devised various solutions for their onomastic needs. Occasionally a New World plant or animal reminded them of a similar one that they knew back home, and since the old species and the new one would rarely meet, the familiar name could be applied with little chance of being misunderstood. Thus, the *robins* and the *poplars* of the New World are not the same species as in Europe, and the American alligator isn't a *cocodrie* (i.e. *crocodile*) in Louisiana, but they are similar enough that the labels worked. Or, the newcomers could coin a descriptive name, often in a flight of poetic fancy: *goldenrod*, *Indian paintbrush*, *Black-eyed Susan*, *prickly ash*. But the name might also evoke the ways humans interacted with the thing or avoided it, from the *toothache tree*, seen as a useful remedy for a common ailment, to the *bois-d'arc* or 'Osage orange' whose wood was good for making bows (French *arc*), and even *poison ivy*, best avoided for its toxicity. There were also labels based on cultural practices such as *rameau*, which came to mean 'magnolia' in Louisiana, by metonymy, because, in the absence of palm trees, a stand-in was needed on Palm Sunday (*le Dimanche des Rameaux*).

A third source of labels, and perhaps the most interesting, was to borrow a name from a neighbor's language. Many cases are uncomplicated: contact with Native Americans provided labels like *hickory*, *skunk*, *squash*, *moose*, *opossum*, or the Louisiana French *chaoui* 'raccoon', *choupique* 'mudfish' and *soco* 'muscadine'. But borrowed words are isolated, unconnected with other words we already know: if the descriptive term *prickly ash* has many connections for the English speaker, to words like pricking and prickling and ashes—both as a kind of tree, and as the residue from a fire—words like *opossum* and *chaoui* did not, at first, have any such links at all. This lexical isolation often induced speakers to seek links where there weren't any, even if it meant changing the borrowed word slightly so that it would resemble an existing word family. Such folk etymologies have happened as long as *Homo sapiens* has had language. It had mattered little that crustaceans weren't really fish; that hadn't stopped English speakers from turning *crevis*, a 14th-century borrowing from French, into the 16th-century *crayfish*. The semantics were less important than the fact of anchoring an isolated word to something more familiar. Flora and fauna seem especially prone to the genius of the folk etymologist, in the New World no less than in the Old; thus, the Choctaw word *sakli* 'white crappie' became the Louisiana French *sac-à-lait* 'milk sack', a name that seemed plausible from the milky appearance of its flesh. The mundane label can even lead to the creation of folk anecdotes that purport to explain how the name came about, and even in some cases to change how people think about the thing being named.

So, together we will explore categories of folk etymology as applied to the onomastic needs of immigrants to the New World, having many strange encounters along the way.