## THE WIDER WORLD

# What's in a Name?

**By Diane Chido**
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Observant viewers of the recent *Jeopardy! Masters* tournament will have noticed James Holzhauer's correct response of "Tur-kee-yay" to a question about the devastating 2022 earthquake that hit Syria and _____ country. Was he just being goofy, or does Jeopardy James know something we don't? Let's explore.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire that had contained it, the nation of Turkey was declared independent in 1923 by the Young Turks party that led the movement. Long snickered at by American Social Studies students that the country has the same name as the ungainly bird that graces our Thanksgiving tables, various efforts have been undertaken over the years to get people to pronounce it properly in English. This one might stick, mainly thanks to James.

The name change was actually made official at the United Nations in June 2022 but most of us missed it. If you traveled to Türkiye in the past year, your souvenirs have the new name spelling on them, but few other memos to the world have been sent. The most problematic issue with getting the English-speaking world to adopt the change is that the second letter, "ü" doesn't exist in English. The dots over a vowel are collectively called an *umlaut*, a word I was recently mocked for using. The addition of these dots will make "u" sound more like "eeuw." This is another obviously unfortunate part of the name change in English.

English speakers have had to adapt to many other name changes in the past few decades. In some cases, a whole new set of words, rather than a new pronunciation was required as in the change of the Sub-Saharan African country the Republic of Zaire to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 1997. As this country has been embroiled in a brutal civil war some claim is fueled by neighboring Rwandan greed for natural resources,[i] U.S. military members with experience in the country, call it the DRoC, intending all the gloom and doom this evokes.

As an aside, when countries include "democratic" in their names, they generally aren't. Think of the Democratic Republic of Korea – this is North Korea, the most authoritarian place on Earth. The German Democratic Republic was East Germany, the communist one, just as Communist Vietnam today is the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. There is also the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, which the Taliban now holds.

Once, in third grade, my teacher pulled down one of the many maps suspended above the chalkboard and began to speak about how the "world changed" after World War I. This boggled my young mind. I thought maps were the one thing you could count on that wouldn't change. She meant that all the land once governed by the Ottoman Empire had now become several different independent countries. Thus began my continued interest in geography and culture.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the whole name "Soviet Union" went away, much like the Ottoman Empire had 70 decades before. English speakers gradually learned the names of the 14 republics besides Russia that composed that enormous land area. But, as soon as they did, these names too began to change. Byelorussia became Belarus, meaning "white Russia," and Chechenia (not a republic but a region within Russia) became Chechnya, with the emphasis moved from the middle syllable to the last. In 1994, we began to learn the names of seven now independent countries that made up Yugoslavia.

When I studied in the Soviet Union in Summer 1990, we took a weeklong trip to Leningrad. You cannot do that today. We experienced White Nights when the sun never seems to go all the way down. You can still do that, but in Russia, you have to go to St. Petersburg, the historical, pre-Soviet name for that great port city on the Baltic Sea. In Russian, that city has no "s" in the second part, it is just "Sanct Peterburg."

I was such a global nerd by my twenties that I had a shower curtain that was a map of the world. Of course, it became out of date by 1991 with the Soviet Union listed. I am always attracted to globes, and whenever I see one, I check two

things to see if it is out of date. First, does it say, "Soviet Union," and second, "Is Sudan one or two countries?"

Sudan was one country until July 2013. Then the Southern part of the country seceded to form South Sudan. The two had been at war with each other until the split, but once it declared independence, South Sudan descended into its own civil war, which rages on. Things became quieter in then-autocratic Sudan, until 2019, when its leader for 30 years, Omar al-Bashir, was overthrown.

During the War on Terror, whenever the U.S. proudly announced that it had killed some terrorist group's number-one leader , I heard the news with trepidation. It is nearly a law of nature that number-two will be worse than number one. Think of the Wicked Witch of the East leaving Oz in the clutches of the much worse Wicked Witch of the West. So, it seems in Sudan. While the capital celebrated its newfound freedom for a while, infighting between two top generals meant to be working together to secure lasting peace began to turn the ancient capital, Khartoum, into rubble.

The latest change we all have noticed from various English-language news outlets covering the current war is the seeming change from Kiev to Kyiv. This is not actually a change. This is a case of lots of western journalists discovering a place for the first time and trying to pronounce it the way the locals do – typically mangling it in the attempt. Just as they turned Qatar, pronounced "ka-tár" into "gutter" at the start of the Iraq war in 2003, they have now turned Kyiv into "keev." This is incorrect.

The Ukrainian spelling correctly renders the pronunciation, but we are not accustomed to consecutive vowel variations. The correct pronunciation is "kee-iv" with the emphasis on the first syllable. However, the first syllable is also a staccato, which helps the speaker make the transition to the short "i" sound quickly while still expressing it clearly. This nuance is lost to many U.S. reporters, and it is grating to the rest of us.

While we are on the subject, permit me to air another peeve. It is critically important that English speakers not refer to that country as "the Ukraine." This simple error diminishes its right to exist and supports Putin's spurious claim that the country is part of Russia. In both languages, "krai" means frontier or border and "u" means near or at. Thus u-krai-n means on the frontier of the closest neighbor, which is largely Russia. Using the definite article "the" in English, suggests that Ukraine is not an independent country.

I remember when Peking became Beijing. In 1949, when China declared itself a communist country, it began to use the historical name Beijing for its capital, but the English world took no notice. In 1979, China demanded that foreign

press outlets follow its *pinyin* Romanized spelling standard, but few did until the mid- to late-1980s.[ii] Now the name Peking sounds antiquated and meant only to describe a cooking style.

The earlier Turkish change from Constantinople to Istanbul caused such an uproar that a famous song telling people the new name of the Turkish capital (I doubt the umlaut will catch on, so let's go with this spelling), a Turkic name, rather than the historical Greek name, it shows ignorance about why this might be desirable. For instance, it mentions that New York used to be New Amsterdam, continuing on to say, "Why they changed it I can't say. People just liked it better that way." Not exactly.

The Dutch first colonized New York and logically named it New Amsterdam. It wasn't until a bloodless showdown, which Holland lost, that New York became English in 1664 and was appropriately renamed New York for a city in northern England.[iii] In this age of Wikipedia, Siri, Alexa, etc. there is no need for such ignorance. The expression, "Who knows?" itself is nearly obsolete as most questions can now be answered instantaneously because generally somebody *actually* knows. Or you can just ask James, he knows.

[i] Kris Berwouts, Congo's Violent Peace: Conflict and Struggles Since the Great African War, London, UK: Zed Books, 2017
[ii] "Why Peking Becomes Beijing," Ann Scott Tyson, The Christian Science Monitor, January 23, 1989 available from here, 2023
[iii] New Amsterdam Becomes New York," available from here accessed on May 25

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