

# Gringo

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**Gringo** (/ˈɡrɪŋɡoʊ/, Spanish: [ˈɡɾiŋɡo], Portuguese: [ˈɡɾĩɡu]) is a term, mainly used in Spanish-speaking countries and in Portuguese-speaking Brazil, to refer to an English-speaking foreigner, especially an American person or, in Brazil, to refer to any foreigner. The term is, in and of itself, not derogatory.<sup>[1][2][3][4][5][6][7]</sup>

The word was originally used in Spain to denote any foreign, non-native speakers of Spanish.<sup>[8]</sup>

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## Etymology

Roger Axtell, a travel etiquette expert, notes that "the word gringo is not necessarily a bad word. It is slang but is derogatory only in its use and context."<sup>[9]</sup>

The word *gringo* was first recorded in Volume II of<sup>[10]</sup> the *Diccionario castellano con las voces de Ciencias y Artes y sus correspondientes en las 3 lenguas francesa, latina e italiana* (Castilian Dictionary including the Words of the Sciences and the Arts, and their Correspondents in 3 Languages: the French, the Latin, and the Italian, 1787), by Terreros y Pando, wherein it is defined as:

GRINGOS, llaman en Málaga a los extranjeros, que tienen cierta especie de acento, que los priva de una locución fácil, y natural Castellana; y en Madrid dan el mismo, y por la misma causa con particularidad a los irlandeses.

*Gringos* is what, in Malaga, they call foreigners who have a certain type of accent that prevents them from speaking Castilian easily and naturally; and in Madrid they give the same name, in particular, to the Irish.<sup>[11]</sup>

The dominant view among etymologists is that *gringo* is most likely a variant of *griego* ‘Greek’ speech (*cf.* Greek to me).

A purported problem with this theory is that such usage of "gringo" in Spain had to do with peoples who originated in the eastern Mediterranean, rather than the northern European stock that dominated in the United States. However, the word *gringo* originated in Spain long before there was a Spanish-speaking Mexico and at one time, the word in Spain was often used to refer specifically to the Irish. And according to a 1787 dictionary, it often referred to someone who spoke Spanish poorly.<sup>[12][13]</sup>

It has also been suggested that *griego* > *gringo* is phonetically unlikely, because the derivation requires two steps: (i) griego > grigo, and (ii) grigo > gringo. Instead it is claimed that *gringo* might derive from Caló, the language of the Romani people of Spain, as a variant of *(pere)gringo* ‘peregrine’, ‘wayfarer’, and ‘stranger’.<sup>[14][15][16][17][18]</sup>

The *gringo* entry in the *Nuevo diccionario francés-español* (New French–Spanish Dictionary, 1817), by Antonio de Capmany, records:<sup>[19]</sup>

. . . hablar en griego, en guirigay, en gringo.<sup>[20]</sup>

. . . to speak in Greek, in gibberish, in gringo.

Gringo, griego: aplicase a lo que se dice o escribe sin entenderse.<sup>[21]</sup>

Gringo, Greek : applies to what is said or written without understanding it.

Moreover, besides “Hablar en gringo”, Spanish also contains the analogous phrase “hablar en chino (To speak in Chinese)”, when referring to someone whose language is difficult to understand, thereby re-enforcing the notion that alluding to the languages of other nations is a cliché. Furthermore, in the 1840s, Johann Jakob von Tschudi said that *gringo* was common Peruvian Spanish usage in Lima:

*Gringo* is a nickname applied to Europeans. It is probably derived from *griego* (Greek). The Germans say of anything incomprehensible, “That sounds like Spanish”, — and, in like manner, the Spaniards say of anything they do not understand, “That is Greek”.<sup>[22]</sup>

## In English

"Gringo" has been in use in the English language since the 19th century.<sup>[23]</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first recorded use of the term in an English source is in John Woodhouse Audubon's *Western Journal of 1849-1850*,<sup>[24]</sup> in which Audubon reports that his party were hooted and shouted at and called "Gringoes" while passing through the town of Cerro Gordo, Veracruz.<sup>[25]</sup>

### Folk etymologies

There are several conjectures within folk etymology that purport to derive the origin of *gringo* from word coincidences.

When the Mexican-American War began in 1846, several hundred recently immigrated Irish, German, and other Roman Catholic Americans who were sent by the U.S. government to fight against Mexico came to question why they were fighting against a Catholic country for a Protestant one, combined with resentment over their treatment by their Anglo-Protestant officers, and deserted to join forces with Mexico. Led by Captain Jon Riley of County Galway, they called themselves St. Patrick's Battalion (in Spanish, *Batallón de San Patricio*)<sup>[26]</sup> and frequently sang the song "Green Grow the Rushes, O"..

One theory has it that there was no mention of the word "gringo", in any publication in New Spain, or what would later be Mexico, until 1847, following the US occupation of northern Mexico during the Mexican–American War. Marching songs reportedly sung by US soldiers, such as "(Green Grows the Grass in) My Old Kentucky Home" and "Green Grow the Lilacs", became popular in Mexico.<sup>[27]</sup> This theory also has it that native Spanish speakers have difficulty pronouncing a second "r" in "green grows", which was elided as "green-gos". Shortly afterwards Mexico City newspapers like *El Universal* and *Excelsior* began to use the word "gringos" for Americans. The English-born Frances Calderon, who published an account of her husband's terms as the first ambassador to Mexico from Spain (from 1842) never mentioned the word, even though she was fluent in Spanish, and familiar with Mexican vernacular. The word was never used in reference to the English-speakers who had settled in Texas when it was part of Mexico, although the settlers were known by names such as *filibusteros*, *presbeterianos*, *vikeños*, *judios*, *hereticos*, *protestantes*, and *barbarianos*.

In Puerto Rico, some people also believe that the word "gringo" originated from the words "green" and "go" and that it refers to the desire of some locals to have the U.S. military (who allegedly wore green uniforms) leave the island by telling them: "Green, go!"

Rafael Abal considered the word *gringo* to derive from English "green horn", a novice, or raw, inexperienced person. He claimed that in the United States, men from the west coast are called "westman", while people from the east coast are called "green horns".

The 3rd Cavalry were the only U.S. Cavalry unit to wear green stripes on their trousers, and some believed that during their campaigns in the Southwest they were referred to as Gringos because of that stripe. Because of the prominence of Irish Americans in the regiment, the regimental song was "Green Goes the Rushes, Ho".

Yet another version is on display currently at the Alamo, in an exhibit claiming that the term gringo originated from Mexican soldiers hearing their Irish counterparts yelling "Erin go bragh" (the Irish battle cry) whenever they charged.

Another version of the origin of the word is in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) When Francisco "Pancho" Villa attacks Columbus the US Army to Mexico in the Villa Expedition, so when the American Army asked to the people for Francisco Villa, the people

answer "Green Go" ("Verde vete") because the green uniform that the American Army were wearing.

All these explanations place the origin of the word gringo in the 19th century, which is a serious problem because the word was documented 50 years earlier in the 1786 *Diccionario castellano con las voces de Ciencias y Artes y sus correspondientes en las 3 lenguas francesa, latina e italiana* by Esteban de Terreros y Pando, and in South American literature. However, a word known mainly by scholars is one thing, while one that enters the vernacular is another, so the theory is still viable, and awaits further documentation. If the word spread through the Mexican troops from hearing the song, the fact that they were mostly illiterate would make documentation on the Mexican side of the border hard to find.

## Brazil and Portugal

In Brazilian and Portuguese popular culture, someone unintelligible is traditionally said to speak Greek.<sup>[28]</sup>

In Brazil, the word means basically any foreigner, and there are also other popularly-used terms for fair-skinned and blond people, like "alemão" (i.e., German) or "russo" (Russian). *Gringo* is almost absent of pejorative connotation outside political nationalist circles.

In Portugal the word is very rarely used and so is "Ianque" (Portuguese spelling of Yank). It is never used in a formal context. It specifically describes someone from the USA (as does "Ianque"), and is not related to any particular physical or racial features.<sup>[29]</sup> The most common slang terms used throughout the country are "Camóne" (from the English "come on") and "Bife" ("steak" in English, probably due to their skin colour after sun burns, for which "lagosta" is specifically used). Probably the most used and correct expressions are "de fora" ("from abroad" in English) or simply "estrangeiro" ("foreigner" in English).

## Other uses

In Mexican cuisine, a *gringa* is a flour tortilla with al pastor pork meat with cheese, heated on the *comal* and then served (not necessarily) with a *salsa de chile* (chilli sauce). Most commonly, it's thought that the dish was born in a Mexico City *taquería* when the owner served it to two women from the United States (known as *gringas*) that asked for a Mexican dish but disliked corn tortillas. The name comes from the feminine of gringo.

In the 1950s, the blue fifty Mexican peso bill was called an *ojo de gringa* ("gringa's eye").<sup>[30]</sup>

## See also

- Anglo
- Bolillo
- Bule
- Canuck
- Cracker
- Farang
- Gabacho
- Gaijin
- Goy
- Gringo Trail
- Güero (disambiguation) (Huero)
- Guiri
- Gweilo
- Haole
- Honky
- Moskal
- Old Gringo
- Pakeha
- Pindos



A woman reads the *Gringo Gazette* in Cabo San Lucas, Baja California Sur, Mexico

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- Pocho
- Use of the word American
- Yankee
- Mat Salleh

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