

# When in Rome, you're in Roma

**A**LLAN MURPHY from Tokyo (aka Tokio) asks if we could explain "why some European cities have two names; their original names (Firenze) and their altered names (Florence)".

Allan's example is interesting, since the English name is arguably closer to the original than the Italian. The city in question was named "Florentia" (flourishing) when established by Julius Caesar as a settlement for veteran soldiers more than two millennia ago. The English name derives from this Latin name, via French.

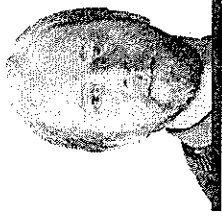
The different form in Italian results in part from a change in the pronunciation of Italian, which we can see in other similar English-Italian pairs such as "blank"/"bianco" or "plaza"/"piazza". The change of "i" to a vowel (known as l-vocalisation) is a widespread phenomenon in languages, often bemoaned in New Zealand by people who dislike younger speakers' pronunciations of "milk" as "miwk", for example. It also lies behind the English name "Belgrade" alongside "Beograd" — the English form derives from an earlier version which still had the "i".

Other examples that Allan asks about have similar histories — Munich was in medieval times called "bei den Münichen" (place of the monks). A later change in the pronunciation of German resulted in the form "München". English adopted the place name before the sound change, so "München" is reflected in the modern German but not in the English version. Subsequent Anglicisation of how the English form is pronounced has made it sound even more different from the current German form.

Mumbai used to be known in English as "Bombay", a name that derives from the Portuguese "Bombaim". More recently, there has been debate surrounding the change from "Bangalore" to "Bengaluru". Some locals claim that the English name should be preserved because it is now widely known internationally and has a high-profile associated with the call centres and hi-tech industries based there. Complaints have been heard that jobs are being "Bengalored" when they are lost in the West because of companies moving their operations to India.

Allan also asks why English names were imposed and how they have lingered. Often the English name was not imposed, but is rather a reflection of how the name sounded when it started its journey into English.

Of course, there are many cases



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where the pronunciation of a place name has been adapted to suit the pronunciation patterns and the spelling-pronunciation correspondences that are common in English. We need look no further than Māori place names to see this. While it is true that an English-speaker could learn to pronounce "Ōngai" with an initial "ng" sound, this is not a sound found at the beginning of English words, so seems quite difficult for English monolinguals to produce in this position (though not at the end of "sing").

The old and new spellings of the Chinese capital are both only approximations of the Chinese pronunciation, which is something like "pay-cheeng". Peking was first replaced by Beijing when the Chinese government adopted the pinyin system of representing Chinese using the Latin alphabet, but the new spelling only became widespread internationally when the Chinese insisted on its use in air routes and public documents.

**T**HE English names linger for several reasons, including some of the factors that influenced the introduction of the names (notably ease of pronunciation, often misdescribed as "laziness"), along with the fact that English continues to have a growing influence as a dominant world language. On the other hand, many changes in how we refer to places reflect increasing cultural sensitivity. But adopting the current place name, such as "Firenze", is no guarantee that Anglophones will get the pronunciation right — many will pronounce it "furn-zay" or "fur-ends" instead of "fear-ehnshe", which may sound more atrocious to Italian ears than "Florence".

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■ *Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz*