

Going to Barcelona, No Not Barthelona... The truth about the Spanish "lisp"

Ah, traveling. Is there anything better? Well, sure, but for it's purposes, getting out of your permanent place of residence is one of the best things I look forward to each year. This time around, I'm taking a long trip to the Mediterranean for a couple of months. It's the first time I'm doing this and as you're reading this, I'm somewhere up in the sky or already set down and enjoying a good garnatxa in Barcelona, which is my first stop for a couple of weeks. Yes, that's right, I said Barcelona, not Barthelona. There is a common misconception about this that I really want to clear up now, because like anyone from Catalonia, I've been corrected on it by many a well-meaning person here in the US and I'm gettin' sorta tired of it. But, let's get in to this a bit.

Okay, you're overhearing a conversation about someone going to Barcelona and as soon as they hear the name of the city, the other person says, "Ah, Barthelona." Obviously, because of what we call a lisp, this is how the Spaniards say the name of the city. This correction will inevitably then be followed by the sentence, "You know why they say that, right? It's because this king [or prince, or duke, or whatever] talked with a lisp and everyone just tried to copy him so he didn't feel stupid." Naturally when anyone saying this is pressed for the name of that king, they don't know it. What is even more interesting is that if you ask a Spaniard, they will tell you that this is news to them. This story is for all purposes just a myth. It's been retold and built upon so many times that it's a lot like the, "Coldest winter I ever spent anywhere, was a summer in San Francisco" bit that is usually attributed to Mark Twain, yet no one really knows for sure, albeit there is truth to this as San Francisco is really cold in the summer, unlike "The Barthelona".

Now, it is definitely true that a Castillian speaker will pronounce the name of the town as Barthelona just as Madrid becomes Madrith (didn't know that, did ya?) But this is irrelevant because the people living there are Catalans whose language is as different from Spanish as Italian is to Spanish and they all say Barcelona. But, my point is, to call Barcelona, Barthelona is as random as us calling Hrvatska, Croatia. If we really want to be correct and pronounce the city correctly, by what the people there say, then it is Barcelona. Sorry to be banging on this point so much, but it gets to be a goofy argument. Let put this another way. If we were so concerned about saying a town the way that the Spaniards who are speaking Castillian do, then we should also say things like Ibita and Valentia (Ibiza and Valencia respectively.) But we don't. We say those any old way that seems to work best which in this case is 'Eye-bee-za' and 'Valensha'. Bleah.

Okay, so where did this all start then? Why is Barcelona the victim of over zealous, misdirected linguistic correctness? Because oddly, I've found out that this th-edness is worldwide. Even Germans and others throughout Europe will make this correction. What is it about Barcelona that makes it so damned special other than the fact that yes, it is pretty damned special? I thought back and I remembered my world map that I had over my bed as a child. Growing up, I always remember Barcelona pronounced just that way. No one ever said another pronunciation when we studied Europe in Geography class. Then it hit me:

1992

The summer Olympics were held in Barcelona that year and with them always come all these stories about the region. At the time, the news media was rather daft about Catalan, even though Catalan was a big deal at the Olympics due to it getting national attention after Franco's attempts to wipe it out. And there it is. The news must have started saying this whole Barthelona thing because that's how the

overall Spanish population says it. Because, I gotta tell you, from 1992 onward, I can only remember Barthelona. I realize that this was 15 years ago, but still, I am certain that is the point at things took a turn for the 'th'.

So, what news network was broadcasting the Olympics that year? NBC. And who was NBC's main man when it came to the Olympics? Bob Costas. So, I think that it's only fitting that from this day forward whenever a Catalan person gets with the "Ah Barthelona..." thing, they should silently curse, "Bob Costas, s'està tocant els meus ous" (you bug the shit out of me, Bob Costas). And hopefully at some point, this will all be corrected.

Oh yeah, if you want to hear more than just my theories on this, you can read this article which gets in to the language specifics and then this article which is similar, but less technical.