



Culture News

California's 30-Year Ban on Accents, Tildes & Umlauts on Official Documents May Be Coming to an End

By Yara Simón | Thursday, March 23, 2017

If you're like me and have an acute accent – or any other diacritical mark – in your name, you know that a little line can make the difference between a name that's your own and one that's not. For the last 30 years, the state of California – like many other places across the United States – has banned the use of accents and tildes in birth certificates and other official documents. But one bill could change that – thanks to parents Nancy Chaires Espinoza, a lobbyist, and Pablo Espinoza. When they filled out a birth certificate for their son, Nicolás, almost a year ago, they learned the state would officially recognize him as Nicolas.

"I should be able to name my child Nicolás, because that means a lot to me," Pablo told the California Report. "Because that's our choice. Because that represents a lot of cultural heritage, and because that's his name."

Sacramento Assemblyman José Medina, moved by their story, introduced Assembly Bill 82 in January. If it passes, it would make diacritical marks, when applicable, required on vital documents. AB 82 – which the Assembly Health Committee unanimously passed on Tuesday – will make it so that Californians

can “choose the names of their children and themselves without limits from the government,” according to the bill analysis. “Currently, the government prohibits the use of letters with diacritical marks. This is fundamentally problematic because a name is the most basic and arguably the most important part of a person’s paper identity.”

1986’s Proposition 63 made English the official language in California – and the government interpreted that as a ban on accents, tildes, and umlauts. However, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, opponents of Proposition 62 say the state doesn’t apply the rule equally. Names like O’Doyle include characters outside of the alphabet. Plus, other agencies, like the California Department of State and Parks, already embrace diacritical marks.

AB 82 isn’t the first time that politicians have tried to overturn California’s ban on accents. A bill that Assemblywoman Nancy Skinner introduced in 2014 failed to gain approval after state agencies estimated that it’d cost \$10 million to upgrade their IT systems and searchable indexes.

The inclusion of accents, tildes, and umlauts may seem like a trivial issue or a sign that someone doesn’t want to assimilate, but especially in a state that nearly 15 million Latinos call home, they are necessary. UC Davis law professor Carlton Larson also believes that banning accents on baby names is outside the scope of Proposition 63. “I think that’s a grossly broad interpretation of the [state] law,” he told *The Guardian*. “I feel bans on diacritical marks are unconstitutional. Naming a child is a right that traditionally and historically has fallen to parents, and it’s a very personal and meaningful decision that the government should not be able to restrict unfairly.”

Next, the Assembly Appropriations Committee will vote on whether or not to pass AB 82. If it eventually becomes law, there’s still more work to be done in order to get the entire nation on board with diacritical marks. While states like Maryland, Delaware, Alaska, and Illinois accept all names, Texas, Kansas,

and Massachusetts do not. But maybe this law can inspire other states to allow people to represent their heritage accurately on their documents.

“They are passing on the names of parents and grandparents, and they are written a certain way with accents,” said Council of Mexican Federations’s Omar Gómez. “The reality is that the names are wrong without the accents. They aren’t just there for decoration or style, they mean something. They tell the reader how to pronounce the name or word correctly.”

And if that’s not a compelling enough argument to persuade you that diacritical marks are necessary, remember there’s a world of a difference between the words ano and año.

**From: <http://remezcla.com/culture/california-accents-doc/>**