

“It’s no longer enough to be fluent in English, French and Italian. Fashion is a veritable United Nations.”



## How Do You Say Fashion?

*It's time to stop sweating the pronunciation of designer names, says our fashion writer in this style-speak manifesto.*

By Michele Meyer Illustration by Patrick Leger

**C**ONSIDER ME MORTIFIED. Despite college degrees in French, English and Spanish, and a black belt in fashion, I just learned I’ve been butchering the pronunciation of Spanish label Loewe—for years.

It’s not “loh,” but “loh-WEH-vay.” Or should I say *oy vey*? I’m just relieved I found out online, and not from a snooty sales clerk.

I’ll let you in on another secret: Even after decades in the business, and even though I’ve interviewed the designer in person, I still feel unsure when I pronounce Ungaro (OON-gar-oh, as I frequently coach myself).

The pressure! When it comes to fashion brand-name pronunciation, I carry a lot of weight on my small shoulders: a German father fluent in six languages, a mother who was in the business (and a contributor to the Oxford dictionary to boot) and a sister who’s

a French professor. Add years of living in France, England and Mexico, and working in fashion retail to pay for my education, and I have no excuse for name-mangling.

Still, In-the-Know Style Lover, don’t rush to condemn me (as I do). Clearly I’m not alone in getting tangled in fashion’s sharp tongue. A quick online search reveals many guides to “fashion designers pronunciation.” An app called Speak Chic was created to help, but “thanks to Google, everything’s at our fingertips,” notes Ken Downing, Neiman Marcus senior vice president and fashion director. And when there’s no time to Google? “In person,” Downing says, “everyone’s just ‘darling’ to me.”

Even so, the most Web-savvy, multilingual, globe-travelling fashionista sometimes meets his or her phonetic foil. “I’ve heard Versace [vur-SAH-chay] and Proenza Schouler [proh-EN-zuh SKOOL-er] mispronounced,”

Downing says. “People tend to make names more exotic than they are: Thus, Donna Karan [CARE-en] becomes kar-AAAHN and Ralph Lauren [LORE-en, as in *foreign*] becomes lau-REN.” Yet forgiveness is divine.

So what if *The Sopranos* called Hermès “her-MEEZ” (actually air-MEHZ) or a stripper in the movie *Showgirls* referred to Versace as “ver-SAYCE”? Off-screen in Hollywood, should we blame starlets who skip the gowns of Louis Vuitton’s Nicolas Ghesquière (LOO-wee wwee-TOHN’s NEE-koh-lah guess-KYAIR) when they risk being asked on the red carpet who dressed them? The universe won’t fold if someone mispronounces haute couture (oat coo-TURE, by the way).

At least for native English speakers, names such as Tom Ford, Michael Kors, Jason Wu and Phillip Lim are a welcome relief from the likes of Mary Katrantzou (cat-TRANT-zoo). Can you

blame me that I silently curse the charming and talented duo of Costello Tagliapietra (TAH-lyah-pee-AY-trah)? If only the latter would retire, just to spare me the tongue-twister. I've been known to wish that Ann Demeulemeester (deh-MUHL-uh-may-stir) would marry someone—anyone—named Smith. I also wouldn't mind if a certain menswear label with the last name Zegna (ZANE-yah) broke up with its founder's given name, Ermenegildo (air-men-eh-JIL-doh). It wouldn't be the first time someone scaled things back: In June, Roksanda Ilinčić (rock-SAND-uh ill-IN-chik) mercifully rebranded her line as Roksanda. Not that short is always sweet: Rochas (row-SHAH), Lanvin (lawhn-VEHN), Thakoon (tah-KOON), Andrew Gn (jen) and Anna Sui (swee) have tripped up many.

Tricky names underscore just how global the trade has become—a really good thing when it comes to ensuring fresh creativity and appeal to international audiences. But the situation also means that it's no longer enough to be fluent in English, French and Italian. Fashion is a veritable United Nations, thanks to Gn, born in Singapore, Prabal Gurung (PRAH-bul GOO-rung) of Nepal, Hussein Chalayan (WHO-say-in chah-LIE-un) of Cyprus, Yigal Azrouël (YEE-goll az-ROO-el) of Israel and Junya Watanabe (JOON-yah wah-tah-NAH-bay) of Japan.

As we become more open to seeing the upper echelons of fashion filled with designers of all lifestyles, training and nationalities, we should also try to be more accepting of those who stumble over fashion terms. Phonetic pratfalls don't make someone less worthy of enjoying fashion. "As long as you're not being malicious" in your mispronunciation, Downing says, "I'm just thrilled you're interested in the designer!"

The truth is, few of us were born in the stockroom of Bergdorf Goodman or privileged to spend our youth gliding through Chanel on rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré. Indeed, many à la mode maidens and gents grew up not in Manhattan or Paris, but in tiny towns outside

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fashion's traditional centres. For someone who each year reviews hundreds of catwalks from New York, Milan, London and Paris, that's an easy lesson to forget. In fashion—and in life—we're often a bit too accustomed to firing off catty tweets or ridiculing people behind their backs.

But the fleeting joy of judgment dims our ability to fully appreciate the exceptional in the art of design—or to realize how we might dampen others' appreciation with our burning remarks. Ultimately, our eternal multisyllabic struggle should remind us: We don't rise by putting down others, or ourselves. Fashion is about self-expression and learning new things. It's not a contest to see who can own the most—or pronounce the most.

"If you say something wrong, don't worry," says Kelly Cutrone, long-time fashion publicist and CEO of People's Revolution. "It's only fashion. Nobody's going to get hurt. Do your best; then laugh it off. All that matters is that you can pay." ■

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## A CONVERSATIONAL CHEAT SHEET

Here's help for 25 more names likely to be mangled.

**Alber Elbaz for Lanvin:**

al-BEAR el-BAHZ for lawhn-VEHN

**Alexandre Herchcovitch:**

al-eh-ZAHN-dre hair-ch-KOH-vitch

**Azzedine Alaïa:**

AZZ-eh-deen ah-LIE-ah

**Balenciaga:** bah-lohn-see-AH-gah

**Balmain:** BAHl-mahn

**Bottega Veneta:**

boh-TAY-guh VEH-net-ah

**Christian Louboutin:**

christian loo-boo-TEHN

**Comme des Garçons:**

comb deh gahr-SOHN

**Dolce & Gabbana:**

DOL-chay and gah-BAH-nah

**Dries Van Noten:**

drees van NOH-ten

**Givenchy:** zhee-vawhn-SHEE

**Hervé Léger:** air-VAY lay-JAY

**Issey Miyake:** ISS-ee mee-YAH-kee

**Maison Martin Margiela:**

may-SOHN mar-TEHN mar-JEL-ah

**Marchesa:** mar-KAY-zah

**Miu Miu:** mew-mew

**Monique Lhuillier:**

moh-NEEK LOO-lee-yay

**Moschino:** moss-KEE-noh

**Olivier Theyskens:**

oh-LIV-ee-ay TAY-skins

**Rei Kawakubo:**

ray kah-wah-KOO-boh

**Rodarte:** roh-dar-TAY

**Saint Laurent by Hedi Slimane:**

sahn law-RAWHN by ED-dee slih-MAHN (previously known by its founder's name, Yves Saint Laurent: eve sahn law-RAWHN)

**Salvatore Ferragamo:**

sal-vah-TOR-ray fer-rah-GAH-moh

**Thierry Mugler:** tee-AIR-ee MOO-gler

**Yohji Yamamoto:**

YOH-jee yah-mah-MOH-toh



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