kansas working papers in linguistics

Kansas Working Papers in Linguistics

Volume 5, Number 2

Edited by Patricia Hamel and Ronald Schaefer

Reprinted 1992

CONTENTS

MEANDERING THROUGH THE NAME MAZE

Mona Hargadine

Abstract: Does an individual's personal name affect
his self-perception or the way that others perceive
him? A survey of some literature and research studies
examining the psychodynamics of names and naming prac-
tices provides several interesting minor points on the
subject, but major generalizations will remain elusive
and indistinct so long as religious, economic, and
physical factors are essentially inseparable from the
naming process.

Personal names are but a small part of the larger classification
of lexical items popularly called nouns. The actual properties of
personal names (PNs)--phonological (sound), pragmatic (usage), and
semantic (meaning)--have fascinated and confounded poets, logicians,
and linguists alike since early times.

> According to Garnot's (1949) examination of the
> ancient TEXTS OF THE PYRAMIDS, even before 2000
> B.C. belief in the power of the proper name to
> determine the behavior and the destiny of its
> possessor was commonly held. (Brender 1963, p. 1)

Some version of this belief can be identified in most social
groups. In fact, there are few societies, mostly "primitive communities
where everyone knows everyone else" whose members "do not need sur-
names. There are only personal names." (Hughes 1959, p. 7)

> Very few tribes have been discovered that exist
> without some sort of personal appellation, al-
> though certain aborigines in Australia have been
> found to be without personal names; Herodotus
> and Pliny record that the Astantes in Africa did
> not have proper names. (Smith 1950, p. 178)

The Ashanti of Ghana name their children according to the day of
their birth. "Kwaku" is a child born on Wednesday. He is said to be
quick-tempered and aggressive. On the other hand, "Kwado," a Monday
child, is said to be quiet, peaceful, and retiring. In 1954, Gustav
Jahoda, a psychiatrist, checked juvenile court records to confirm or
disprove the rumor that a majority of crimes were committed by "Kwaku"
children. The results supported the rumor, a fact which Jahoda attri-
buted to expectations and upbringing or environment. (Marcus 1976,
p. 108) However, before making any definite correlation between the
ambiguity/clarity of the name and the strength of its effect upon per-
sonality development, more investigation should be conducted to

determine if names with a more "ambiguous" literal meaning are charac-
teristic of larger heterogenous societies and if names with definite
literal meanings are characteristic of smaller homogenous societies.

Therefore, PN-giving may not be a "universal" practice, but it
seems to occur with enough regularity of form and incidence to make
some "semi-universal" observations about the phenomenon. Such obser-
vations, in conjunction with the findings of psychologists and other
interested social scientists, might thereby shed light on the modern-
day magic exerted by personal names, the linguistic item many most
closely associate with the individual. Does the name one is given
affect one's self-perception? If so, to what extent? Does the begin-
ning of a person's instruction about himself begin even prior to the
onset of language, indeed with the bestowal of his personal name?

> A person's name was regarded as the sub-
> stance of his breath, even the word psyche,
> "soul," is derived from Ψῦχυ, "to blow."
> The ancient Semitic name for the gods is the
> same as that for "breath" or "spirit"; and
> in most languages name, breath, and soul are
> so closely allied that they undoubtedly meant
> "anima" or "nomen" originally. (Brown 1954,
> p. 21)

This close association between self and name may account, to a
large extent, for the relatively recent efforts of feminists to sym-
bolize their personal and social liberations by retaining their maiden
names following marriage. Similarly, the adoption of a "stage-name" by
a would-be actor or actress, or the taking of a "holy-name" by a reli-
gious novice, may be an external action representing some sort of
internal change--a statement by the individual to signify a modification
of his own spiritual being. This is done in the belief that people may
perceive him differently or he may act differently if he bears a dif-
ferent name. Perhaps it is also this close name/self proximity in the
minds of many people which prompts them to write their names on walls as
a perpetuation of their existence in that spot. (Smith 1950, p. 242)

Both a possessiveness of and a curiosity about PNs have been
documented in other cultures. It is taboo to ask a Kayopo Indian of
central Brazil his name, nor do individuals speak their own names.
(Bamberger 1974) To mention a Yanömani's name publically is a grave
insult, and privately, he never whispers the names of his parents, those
who may provide him with a wife, or the dead, for "a desired thing will
disappear...the name of a feared thing will literally invoke its pre-
sence." (Lizot 1973) Even among the Sesotho speakers of southern
Africa, a proverb states: Bitso lebe ke seromo. (Literally: A bad name
is ominous.) (Mohome 1972, p. 171) Beyond its narrow cultural context,
this concept might be generalized to curses and insults, arguments and
duels, even wars, which have been initiated to blacken another's name
or to defend one's own name, for attacking a person's name is synonymous
to attacking the person himself.

Is this belief, however, more characteristic of primitive societies and only peripherally descriptive of highly-developed societies? No evidence was found in researching this paper that the average American attributes any magical properties to PNs. Psychologists, on the other hand, have established enough data on the subject to indicate that certain psychodynamic forces operate with regard to PNs. Therefore, by simply redefining the term "magic" to mean "any mysterious, seemingly inexplicable, or extraordinary power or influence," (Guralnik 1972, pp. 850-1) names can be said to be magical even in modern social situations.

It is this "magical" quality of names which in turn affects one's self-perception. Wilbur G. Gaffney (1971, p. 34) extended himself far beyond any point supportable by this paper when he wrote his First Law of Nomenclature: "Your career is determined by your character; and your character, in turn, is determined, perhaps unalterably by the name under which you grew to adulthood." His observation, however extreme, bears investigation in light of available research data.

Generally, those experiments examined fall into the categories of PN preference, PN stereotyping, and PN expectancy. Lawson (1973 and 1974), in two separate studies of the semantic differential of men and women's first names, found that PNs are subject to value connotations and stereotyping and that men and women tend to agree in their evaluations of names. Using Osgood's three basic dimensions of meaning (evaluation, potency, and activity), Lawson concluded that short names (e.g., Dan, Dave, Jim, etc.) are preferred by both men and women over first names (e.g., Daniel, David, James, etc.) and nicknames (e.g., Danny, Davey, Jimmy, etc.)-- forms of the same PNs. In fact, nicknames were consistently ranked closer to Bad, Weak, and Passive in the value judgments, indicating that there are consistent stereotypes associated with nicknames. The study of women's names was less conclusive regarding stereotypes and preferences; however, Lawson (1974) attributed these results to the fact that women's names shift more in popularity, causing a greater variety of women's names.

Lawson's subjects were college students, but studies with grade school children show that they too possess stereotype feelings about names and that these stereotypes can affect school success and achievement. Psychologists John McDavid and Herbert Harari (Marcus 1976) found "best liked" names defined by four youth groups turned up time after time among the children cited as being "most popular" a month later. Similarly, the "least liked" names correlated with the "least popular" students. Their conclusion was that a person's name alone has a powerful influence on his/her popularity. In another study, S. Gary Garwood (1977, p. 23), an educational psychologist at Tulane University, determined that boys with names previously identified as "undesirable" had lower levels of adjustment, lower expectations, lower self-concepts, and lower achievement in school. None of these studies proves that names guarantee fame or insure neurosis. In fact, psychologist Richard Zweigenschaft (Horn 1978, p. 37) offered evidence that under certain circumstances an uncommon or less desirable name might be advantageous. His study, correlating over 200 uncommon names culled from the Social register, along with their frequency of occurrence in Who's Who, indicates that an uncommon name is a "boost" if one is also male and upper-class.

Sex and social class aside, the influence of names as a positive or negative effect upon how one sees one's self should not be overlooked.

The literal meaning of a PN and the expectancy its sound creates in the hearer's mind are virtually beyond the bearer's control. The literal meanings of most English PNs have been buried deeply in time and linguistic change. Background readings on the various hypothetical meanings and/or definitions of PNs by logicians and linguists were wholly uninformative, if not confusing. It was determined, for the sake of this paper, to accept none of the specific PN definitions, but to look at the total environment within which the PN is used and understood. Farhang Zabeeh (1968, p. 74), in defining this environment, stated:

> one must always distinguish (A) the meaning of
> proper name, i.e., the constant and salient
> feature which may be described as a property
> of being used to make a unique reference to the
> same entity and thereby to individuate the bearer
> so that it could be amenable to description, eval-
> uation, registration, nomination etc., (B) the
> bearer of the name, which could exist in various
> onotological domains, (C) the unique properties of
> the bearer, and (D) the connotation of a name,
> i.e., the accidental feature of association of
> a name with its bearer which the hearer may make
> upon hearing that name.

This pragmatic approach includes the importance of listener expectancy, factor (D), in the semantic formation of PNs, a factor also cited in psychological studies as being significant in the development of positive or negative self-perception.

The characteristics attached to name stereotypes define the way bearers of the name are expected by others to behave. Since people often behave as they are expected to behave, these expectations may become self-fulfilling prophecies--Harvard psychologist Robert Rosenthal calls this phenomenon the Pygmalion effect (Marcus 1976, p. 76). In his now classic study, Rosenthal randomly selected 20 of a given group of students and labeled them "intellectual bloomers." Based solely on this variable, the "bloomers" did in fact show significant gains which could only be attributed to teacher expectancy. Success became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In a similar manner, Herbert Hatari experimented with a group of 80 elementary teachers who were asked to grade eight essays of identical quality. The only difference in the essays was the name each bore--either a positive name (Michael, David, Karen, or Lisa) or a negative name (Elmer, Hubert, Bertha, or Adelle). "Michael" and "David" essays scored a full letter above "Elmer" and "Hubert" essays. "Karen" and "Lisa" essays were a letter and a half better than "Bertha" essays. "Adelle" was not far behind. The results were definite enough for Hatari to postulate that teachers expect less from certain names, causing failure to become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Aron 1976).

Therefore, PNs bear an expectancy factor independent of the bearer himself, and depending on the PN in question, essentially beyond the bearer's control. Studies generally show that common short names will elicit positive expectations and uncommon longer names will elicit negative expectations. Whether or not these expectations actually fulfill themselves is a complex process which may never be unravelled, but to get a clearer picture of the process, the expectancy initiated by the name-giver should also be considered.

Although there are ad hoc conventions for giving PNs to various individuals, there are (in American society, at least) no general rules governing the activity. These name-giving classes often transcend cultural boundaries; therefore, it is impossible to label them uniquely "American." Names are given:

1. To honor another person, such as from given name of parent, grandparent, or more distant ancestor.
2. In admiration of a famous personage, such as a political figure, sovereign, military personage, religious character, poet, writer, musical celebrity, radio-television-screen star, fictitious character.
3. Because it is "pretty" or seems to be harmonious with the surname, such as /ganes/ from a Marathi surname to accompany another surname /ganokar/ (Junghare, 1975, p. 35), or even a "pleasant" nickname like Jack or Betty.
4. From some event or circumstance of birth, such as place (Arizona, Utah, Kent), time (Noel, June, Tuesday), number (Enough, Finis, Omega, Wenonah meaning "first"), being twins (Avery and Ivory) or triplets (Faith, Hope, Charity), or an event happening on or near the day of birth (Pearl Harbor).
5. From some hope or aspiration on the part of the parents, such as Grace.
6. Descriptive of the child, such as Blanche (white) and Maureen (dark) referring to complexion, Flavia (yellow) and Rufus (red-haired) referring to the color of hair, or Vaughn and Paul (small) referring to size or stature.
7. From an object, flower or plant, jewel or gem, animal or insect, weapon, emblem, or modern term, such as /ćindhya/ meaning "rags" and /punja/ meaning "heap of dirt (Junghare 1975, p. 32).
8. Because of association or relation with a surname, showing humor (Ima Hogg), repetition of the family name (Bruce Bruce), alliteration (Charley Chadwick), and sound or rhyme (Peter Streeter and Percy Nursey).
9. From error or ignorance, such as medical terms (Vagina, Stirrup), misspelled words, and odd pronunciations (Libertine for Liberty).
10. As oddities, such as giving a name associated with the opposite sex (a boy named Sue or Mary), a pet name (Fritter), a name

          composed of single letters (LB or OP), or an unusually long
          or short name (Ex).
11.   As the result of chance or random selection.
12.   From invention, such as changing the spelling of an ordinary
          name (Ethyle for Ethel) or spelling a sound without meaning
          (Cona or Iala).

These general name-giving classes (Smith 1950, pp. 20-22) may not only
be considered singly, but may also be combined, resulting in multiply-
determined name choices. Obviously, the resulting expectations may be
as infinite and varied as the reasons behind the choice. However, the
choice, whatever it is, will be reflective of the general environment
in which the child will be raised. Brender (1963, p. 9) adds:

> the same motives or attitudes, or configurations
> of motives and attitudes, will persist in time
> and will be found to underlie the choice of the
> names of all children in a given family unit.
> Where the motives or attitudes behind the selec-
> tion of a name are found to vary from time to
> time and, hence, from child to child in a parti-
> cular family, it is hypothesized that this will
> be a manifestation of the occurrence of some
> personality change in one or both parents, or an
> expression of a significant change in the rela-
> tions between the parents.

Thus, names start out to do something--express a hope, commemorate a
likeness, etc.--yet the extent to which the name-giver's expectation(s)
may affect the development of the bearer's self-image will largely
depend upon the importance the giver attaches to the reasons behind the
choice.

Withycombe (1949) reports that "Foundlings were obvious subjects
for the ingenuity of Puritan ministers, and they were freely given such
names as 'Helpless,' 'Lament,' 'Misericordia,' 'Adulterina'..." It
would seem the more "obvious" the name is to the giver and the bearer--
that is, the more apparent the literal meaning is or the more conscious
the reasons for the selection are--the greater the personality of the
bearer will be affected.

With regard to the relative "consciousness" of the name-giving act,
giving the child his father's name, the "Hamlet hypothesis," represents
a fairly straight-forward motive. Robert Plank (1971) found possible
negative ramifications to the practice, however. He found that "juniors"
were twice as frequent among a list of neuro-psychiatric patients at a
Veterans hospital as among a list of general medical patients. And in
a second study of applicants for outpatient psychiatric care, "juniors"
comprised 28 of 285 total names, 10 per cent or three times as high as
the number of "juniors" estimated in the general population. This is
not to say that this very common practice creates a higher percentage of

neurotic, ineffectual sons. The fact that the first three men to set foot on the moon are all "juniors" should show that the result can be either case. Psychologists do postulate, however, that a parent who is strongly motivated enough to bestow his son with his own name may exhibit other overbearing tendencies as he raises the child. And the child, in attempting to establish his own identity, separate from his father's, may react by becoming a super-achiever or by completely giving up. (One name encountered recently, Molesta Galloway, Jr., makes me wonder if there is any hope for this individual!)

After reviewing some of the available research on the psychodynamics of names and naming, few new conclusions can be reached. Certain studies can be advantageous to both students and teachers by making them aware of the stereotypes associated with certain names and the tendency to fulfill expectations of failure or success depending on one's positive or negative perception of a name. Prospective parents may also be advised of the possible pitfalls their child may suffer because of his parents' decision to be creative or innovative or somehow distinctive in their naming choices. Also, studies such as those examining the "junior" phenomenon may sensitize parents to their conscious or subconscious desire to fulfill personal expectations via their children. The practical applications are, therefore, varied and far-reaching but, as more research is completed, the practical applications will become more obvious and definitive.

Yet universal or semi-universal statements are still difficult to formulate and support, in light of the present stage of research. Religious, economic, and physical factors are densely intermingled in the naming process, to the extent that it is still very difficult, if not impossible, to separate the individual and his motivations from closely related cultural and environmental ones. Until the closed doors of individual cognition are opened and exposed spaces explored, the effects of names and naming processes will remain an undefined maze, clouded by expectations and value judgments hidden in the minds of the bearers and givers, and regulated by ambiguous meanings and cultural traditions lost in the depths of history.

This argument is decidedly obtuse and essentially esoteric; however, the present level of research does not allow one to be more succinct. Several relevant questions have been raised, for example, to what extent is the name-giving process a social structuring tool of a given culture? And from this same idea, can language then be said to structure culture, or vice versa? Indeed, are PNs really linguistic items in the same sense as other parts of speech, considering their lack of adherance to general grammatical and syntactical rules? And finally, if cognition is hierarchically ordered, is it also cyclically organized? That is, does the freedom or arbitrariness of naming practices accepted within the society correlate with the amount of freedom the individual experiences in the society? Does the highly structured society, which depends on the full participation of each member, thereby sacrifice his individual identity for the sake of a less unique social identity? If so, one could hypothesize that the naming processes of such a society

would be a definite tool used to keep its members in their "proper" places. Probably the meanings of names (literal) would be much more apparent, to both bearer and giver; perhaps the rules governing name-giving would also be more conventional--requirements rather than options. Any associated expectations would probably have a greater effect on the individual's self-perception, a very effective socializing mechanism.

In more complex social groups (in the sense that the individual's constant participation is not required for the success of the social structure, e.g., America), the name-giving process may achieve or closely approximate the creative quality naming had initially when it was totally arbitrary, subject only to the name-giver's whim. In giving PNs, at least, the giver is affected by other outside forces no more or no less than he himself is affected by these forces in his own life. The choice the giver makes will essentially reflect the giver's own creativity (individuality) or conformity within the social structure.

Names and naming processes are still a complicated, misunderstood maze; but gradually, as more research is done, we shall learn whether names are primarily a cognitive, individual process or a social, group process. But at this time, a person will probably find less of himself and more of others as he meanders through the name maze.

References

Adamic, Louis. 1942. What's in Your Name? New York: Harper and
Brothers.

Aron, Michael (ed.) 1976. What's in a name? Harpers 252. pp. 3-10.

Bamberger, Joan. 1974. Naming and the transmission of status in a
central Brazilian society. Ethnology 13. pp. 363-378.

Brender, Myron. 1963. Some hypotheses about the psychodynamic signi-
ficance of infant name selection. Names 11. pp. 1-9.

Brown, P.W.F. 1954. Names Magic. Names 2. pp. 21-27.

Collard, Chantal. 1973. Les nom-numeros chez les Guidar. L'Homme 13.
pp. 45-59.

Gaffney, Wilbur G. 1971. Tell me your name and your business; or some
considerations upon the purposeful naming of children. Names 19.
pp. 34-42.

Garwood. S. Gary. 1977. Name game: handle or handicap? Science News
111. p. 23.

Horn, Jack. 1978. The unimportance of being Earnest. Psychology Today
11. p. 37 .

Hughes, James Pennethorne. 1959. How You Got Your Name. London:
Phoenix House.

Junghare, Indira Y. 1975. Socio-psychological aspects and linguistic
analysis of Marathi names. Names 23. pp. 31-43.

Kang, Tai S. 1971. Names change and acculturation: Chinese students
on an American campus. Pacific Sociological Review 14. pp. 403-
412.

Lane, Lucia. 1974. Equal names for equal sexes: a proposal for male and
female surnames: matrilineal and patrilineal equality. Carmel,
California: Lucia Lane & Associates.

Lawson, E.D. 1973. Men's first names, nicknames, and short names: a
semantic differential analysis. Names 21. pp. 22-27.

_____. 1974. Women's first names: a semantic differential
analysis. Names 22. pp. 54-58.

Lizot, Jacques. 1973. Onomastique Yanomani. L'Homme 13. pp. 60-71.

Marcus, Mary G. 1976. The power of a name. <u>Psychology Today</u> 10. pp. 75-6+.

Mohome, Paulus M. 1972. Naming in Sesotho: its socio-cultural and linguistic basis. <u>Names</u> 20. pp. 171-185.

Plank, Robert. 1964. Names of twins. <u>Names</u> 12. pp. 1-5.

_____. 1971. The use of 'junior' in relation to psychiatric treatment. <u>Names</u> 19. pp. 132-136.

Price, Richard, and Price, Sally. 1972. Saramaka onomastics: an Afro-American naming system. <u>Ethnology</u> 11. pp. 314-367.

Pyles, Thomas. 1959. Bible belt onomastics or some curiosities of pedobaptist nomenclature. <u>Names</u> 7. pp. 84-100.

Smith, Elsdon C. 1950. <u>The Story of Our Names</u>. New York: Harper and Brothers.

_____. 1967. <u>Treasury of Name Lore</u>. New York: Harper and Row.

Sørensen, Holger Stein. 1963. <u>The Meaning of Proper Names</u>. Copenhagen: GED Gad Publications.

Taylor, Rex. 1974. John Doe, Jr.: a study of his distribution in space, time and the social structure. <u>Social Forces</u> 53. pp. 11-21.

Weeks, Thelma. 1971. Child-naming practices among the Yakima Indians. <u>Names</u> 19. pp. 252-256.

Woolf, Henry Bosley. 1939. <u>The Old Germanic Principles of Name-Giving</u>. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.

Yassin, M. Aziz F. 1978. Personal names of address of Kuwaiti Arabic. <u>Anthropological Linguistics</u> 20. pp. 53-63.

Zabeeh, Farhang. 1968. <u>What Is in a Name?</u> An inquiry into the semantics and pragmatics of proper names. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.