

The Unconscious Meaning of Personal Names

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Abstract

Personal names serve many purposes, both for the namer and for the named. They are conferred, at least in part, in honour of someone who has gone before. Cultural traditions dictate the extent of commemorative name-giving. Names inform about genealogy and geography, and about the circumstances of birth. The etymological and linguistic associations of names are grasped intuitively without conscious knowledge of semantic roots. These unconscious associations frequently emerge in nicknaming and in dreams. Passage from one life stage to another may accompany a change of name, as may religious conversion or new ideological affiliation. Because so many inferences can be drawn from the choice of a given name, it is no wonder that, in some cultures, the personal name is kept secret, a protection against betrayal.

Le Sens Inavoué des Noms Personnels

Les noms de personnes servent des buts multiples, pour les nommeurs ainsi que pour les nommés. Ils sont choisis, à un certain point, pour faire honneur à ceux qui n'existent plus. Les traditions culturelles décident en quel degré les noms donnés sont commémoratifs. Les noms informent sur la généalogie, la géographie, et les circonstances de naissance. La compréhension de l'étymologie et de la linguistique des noms est inconsciente et se montre souvent en petits noms et en rêves. Les étapes progressives d'une vie, ainsi que les conversions religieuses ou les idéologies changées, peuvent transformer un nom. Un nom personnel est capable de révéler une identité à un tel point qu'il n'est pas surprenant, qu'en certaines cultures, on le cache pour se protéger vis à vis l'étranger.

Personal names serve many psychological purposes, both for the namer and for the named. The selection of a name, whether to bestow or to assume, is usually multi-determined — motivated by a number of wishes and associations which may not all be available to conscious recall.

COMMEMORATION

Most given names are conferred, in part, as an act of commemoration, an attempt to remember and keep alive a person who has died, an effort to ease bereavement by symbolic reincarnation, the creation of a namesake.

In the Inuit (Eskimo) culture of Northern Canada, individuals who are aged or ill request that the next child born into the family be given their name so that their soul may pass on to their namesake and defy death. The identification with the namesake is so powerful that boys, for instance, who are named after a female relative (Inuit names do not distinguish

gender) are frequently reared as girls until the time of puberty. They dress as girls and do female tasks in the household. A boy named after a maternal grandmother is addressed by his mother as "Mother," so much does the shared name confer shared identity (Guemple 1965; Dufour 1975;77).

Amongst Ashkenazi Jews, it is traditional to name children after dead ancestors (naming after someone still alive implies that one would wish him dead). Biblical symbolism and the multi-linguistic sequelae of the Jewish diaspora have introduced many subtleties into the custom of "naming after." For instance, in Genesis 49, the sons of Jacob are each compared to a variety of animals. Naphtali is referred to as a "hind let loose." Hind (hart), or Herschel in Yiddish, thus becomes the equivalent of Naphtali. Phonetic similarity (Herbert, Harvey, Herman) then allows for a large selection of names, all commemorating the original Naphtali. Currently, patronymic requirements are satisfied if the initial consonant of the two names is the same, so that Murray, Morty, Marvin, Manfred etc. can be commemorating Moses or Mordechai or Mendel. Other possibilities, given the many lands in which Jews have settled, is to translate the Hebrew meaning of the name (when known) into the local language. Thus Baruch (blessed one) can become Benedict and Solomon (peaceable) can become Frederick (peace + king). (Lauterbach 1970).

Commemoration can extend to objects or events. Margaux Hemingway's parents were drinking Margaux champagne on the night of her conception. North American natives traditionally commemorate the first object the mother sees upon giving birth (Minnehaha = laughing water; Tallulah = running water). Some African nations commemorate the weekday of birth (Kwadwo = Monday; Kwaku = Wednesday). North Americans may celebrate the hour of birth (Dawn), the season (Noel), the month (Julie), the astrological sign (Leona). The French, traditionally, honour the saint on whose nameday the birth takes place. (Lévi-Strauss 1962; Jahoda 1954; Zonnabend 1977).

CONNOTATION

A name frequently imparts information about genealogy and social standing (cf Eustace = good standing; Eugene = good genes). Among the Chinese, the second given name is a family name common to all family members of that generation. Among the Russians and Greeks, the second name is a patronymic — i.e. Nicolaevna, daughter of Nicolai. The use of Junior and III after the given name reflects genealogy in North America and the origin of some given names bears witness to this custom in bygone days: Barry from ap (son of) Harry; Bartholemew from bar (son

of) Talmai; Bratislav from brat (brother of) Slav; Ahab from ah (brother of) Ab.

Names may reflect place in the sibline (Una, Quinn, Nona) or right to property, i.e. Winston, Melville, Jocelyn, Lesley. These latter are frequently surnames borrowed from the maternal side of the family and used as given names. They have the connotation of lineage and status.

INDUCTION

Names come ready-made with etymological meaning usually unknown to the namer or they derive meaning by association with past and current-day heroes. These sound and meaning associations may be deliberately or unconsciously selected to induce wished-for qualities in the child to be named.

The Chinese do this consciously, prescribing such qualities as courage, generosity, or prosperity in boys' names and grace, poise, gaiety or attractiveness in names for girls. North American Blacks traditionally name after famous national figures. The following excerpt is from an autobiographical sketch by the Black American writer, Ralph Waldo Ellison:

For in the dim beginnings, before I ever thought consciously of writing, there was my own name, and there was, doubtless, a certain magic in it . . . neither could I understand what a poet was, nor why, exactly, my father had chosen to name me after one . . . he named me after someone called Ralph Waldo Emerson . . . Much later, after I began to write and work with words, I came to suspect that he was aware of the suggestive powers of names and of the magic involved in naming. (Anderson 1976)

The same thought is expressed by Tristram Shandy's father in the novel, *Tristram Shandy*: "There is a strange kind of magic bias which good or bad names irresistibly impress upon our character and conduct." (Sterne 1950)

The concept of "good" and "bad" is a complex one and has been studied, with respect to names, by semantic differential analysis (Lawson 1971, 1973, 1974, 1980). This technique evaluates the culturally determined stereotype a name evokes on dimensions of good and bad, strong and weak, active and passive. The sounds that a name is composed of echo unconscious associations that influence the "meaning" of a name. Dream analysis can sometimes reveal these hidden associations (Seeman 1979):

A patient reported the following dream: 'My husband and I were fighting over a fish bowl containing one goldfish. He wanted to set the fish free. I was trying to protect it by keeping it in the bowl.' In retrospect, it seemed to the dreamer, there was a connection between fishbowl and womb. The goldfish, then, would have to be their daughter whose name was

Felicia. The link between fish and Felicia, thought the patient, was the association with smallness. Fish was a one-syllable word articulated in a closed mouth, therefore small. The initial consonant, 'f,' brought to mind femininity, frailty, fragility. Smallness and Felicia reminded the patient of the word infant and, further, of the word Infanta, the Spanish title for Princess. She then wondered if her name choice for her daughter might not have been an unconscious echo of Infanta. The stress pattern of the three syllables was the same as in Felicia. The symbol of diminutiveness on one hand and monarchy on the other was well in keeping with her initial expectations of a daughter.

Interestingly, names beginning with labial consonants, i.e. formed in a small mouth often refer to small items in English: pee-wee, pigmy, mite, midget, mini, wisp, weak, bit, petite, puny, baby, whit. These same sounds are very frequently found in names for girls. Velar consonants are associated with "large" words (great, grand, colossal, gross, cosmic, heavy, husky, hefty, hulk, huge, king) and are frequently found in names for boys. These are correspondences that may, unconsciously, influence the choice of a name.

Not only sounds but even visual shapes of letters can trigger associations. The following is a quote from the Sunday *New York Times* Guest Column (Cole 1973):

Three years ago my wife and I were expecting a baby, and we'd been going through that delightful job of choosing a name, looking for something both unusual and pleasant sounding. One evening I said, 'If it's a girl, how about this?' handing her a piece of paper with CELADOR on it. 'Lovely,' she said . . . 'but if it's a boy?' I took the piece of paper and on the other side wrote SELADOR.

Why would these two spellings of identical sounds evoke femininity and masculinity differentially? My personal associations with Selador are Salvador, Senator, Sentinel, Saladin, Scimitar. Celador, on the other hand, suggests celibate, celery and celandine, the first flower of spring. One has connotations of war, traditionally male; the other of nature, traditionally female.

The prescriptive quality of names has not escaped the attention of writers, many of whom spend inordinate time and trouble choosing names for their characters. Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business* illustrates the magic of names. For instance, the protagonist's three girlfriends are named Libby Doe who is libidinous, Gloria Mundy who is materialistic and Agnes Day who is self-sacrificing.

NICKNAMES

Nicknames are derived from names in much the same way as dreams are derived from reality, by an unconscious transforming process that utilizes regression, duplication, displacement, condensation, reversal,

and symbolization. The way that dream analysts uncover latent dream content from the manifest content (the reported dream) is by staying attuned to how dreams are fashioned: out of childhood wishes and fears, out of childhood logic, by processes identical to those which transform names (Seeman 1979).

Regression as applied to nicknames is a return to childhood preoccupations (excretion, for instance), onomatopoeia (Biff, Boom), or place in the family of origin (Sonny, Baby, Sis). Many nicknames have the quality of nursery or "lall" names, the avoidance or mispronunciation of certain consonants, the loss of certain syllables, or repetition (duplication). The "th" sound, difficult for young children to enunciate, is replaced in nicknames: Teddy from Theodore; Matt from Matthew, Cindy from Cynthia. The "r" sound is also commonly replaced: Sally from Sarah; Dolly from Doris; Bobby from Robert; Dick from Richard. The vowel preceding an "r" is frequently distorted in nicknames as in children's speech: Larry from Laurence; Hank from Henry; Chuck from Charles; Molly from Mary.

Duplication is common in all languages: Gusse (Auguste); Titine (Ernestine); Bebert (Robert); Gigi (Luigi); Cici (Francisco); Pepe (Giuseppe); Kiki (Kyril), Lulu (Louise), Mimi (Miriam); John-John. This is analogous to the phenomenon of "doubles" in dreams.

Reversal of sounds or displacement of sounds from one part of the name to another also appears in the formation of names, sometimes via assonance, punning and rhyme. Isabel, for instance, comes from Bella Lisa; Roland from Orlando; Camilla from Michaela. Kayo can become the nickname of a Conrad; Snake, the nickname for a Jake; Woody for anyone with the surname of Hill. In the same way, free associations to figures in dreams proceed via rhymes, puns, and assonance.

Condensation and its opposite, amplification, occurs in the visual symbols of dreams and the sound symbols of names. Marlene is the condensation of Marie-Hélène; Marise, the contraction of Marie-Thérèse. Amplification is accomplished by suffixes, plentiful and varied in most languages. Suffixes are a form of endearment used in "lall" names and "pet" names. While lengthening the word, they connote diminutiveness, analogous to what psychiatrists call "reaction formation," the representation of something by its opposite.

Dreams derive their emotional impact from the power of personal symbols. Nicknames, too, are often symbols, arising from subjective associations to the characteristics of the person named. They often refer to physical attributes (Chubby, Red, Lefty), personality traits (Sunny, Prea-

chey, Groucho), nationality (Dutch, Swede, Finn), or animal-like characteristics (Mouse, Hawk, Buck, Bunny, Tiger). Dreaming of a tiger may have the same psychological meaning as adopting a Tiger nickname. The nicknames we choose for others or those we agree to respond to have the same potential for shorthand emotional truth as do dreams. Examples of nicknames that capture the essence of a person are: Tito — from the Slavic meaning “You, this; you, that,” the peremptory commandeering of Marshall Tito. Castor — the word means beaver in French and is Sartre’s nickname for Simone de Beauvoir, taken from her surname and her productivity. The Pelvis — the rhyming and visual symbol of rock star Elvis Presley.

NAME CHANGE

Given names are often changed by the bearer. Name changes include a permanent change of name reflecting a changed self-perception or group identification; an alias used for criminal or clandestine activity; a pseudonym used for promotional purposes; an alter-ego name used when under the influence of specific ego-states; a changed version of one’s own name as part of an effort at acculturation or glamorization; a nickname bestowed or adopted at a key stage of development; or a pet name for intimates only.

RITES OF PASSAGE

North American natives are given successive names, as many as nine, since each step in the child’s maturation is perceived as conferring a new personhood. For instance, the occasion of the first tooth, the circumcision, the onset of menstruation are seen as developmental steps requiring a new name. Except for new names chosen at the time of Communion for Roman Catholics, this custom is not a formal part of our culture but may be seen, nevertheless, in the progressive evolution of the names by which we introduce ourselves, viz. Bobby, Bob, Robert, Mr. Smith. A women’s magazine once chronicled the development and transformation of a woman’s affiliations by the successive names with which, over the years, she signed her letters: Judy, Judi; Judith; Jude; J.; Judy.

The profoundly deaf who communicate in sign language use one or the other of their initials as their sign but make their sign on different parts of their body as they mature. The growth of a mustache might precipitate the transfer of the name sign to the upper lip area. A promotion to a position of authority might prompt a transfer of the name sign to the forehead. The assumption of an occupation might again change the location of the sign. Nurses for instance might sign on the wrist, the place where the pulse is taken (Borys and Pyke in press).

Nuns, kings, and popes assume new names upon accession to their title. Their names are chosen from a pool of appropriate religious, kingly, or papal names. In Greece, the patronymic is changed to the husband's name when a woman marries. These new identifications are also prescriptive. Not only does one become a new person but one follows in the footsteps of those who have borne the name. The magic power of a rite of passage name is illustrated in the following cartoon: A middle-aged husband says to his wife: "I have found a cure for my mid-life crisis. From now on, call me Sparky!"

PSEUDONYMS

For promotional purposes, individuals in various occupations feel they need appropriate names. Ballerinas assume Russian names, restaurateurs, French names, barbers, Italian names, guitarists, Spanish names and film stars, glamorous names.

Individuals with double-lives or double personalities have a name for each of their selves. Interestingly, the names are usually variants of the original name. (Lola, Leila and Lilith; Violet, Viva and Violaine) (Seeman 1980).

Religious conversion (or political, attitudinal change) may bring about a temporary or sometimes permanent change of name and identity (Seeman 1976). The name advertises the new affiliation as, for instance, Cassius Clay's name change to Muhammed Ali. In Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business*, Paul Dempster renounces his former identity and transforms himself into the magician, Magnus Eisengrim, a growth from childhood (Paul = small) to maturity (Magnus = large) (Davies 1970).

Many inferences can be drawn from knowledge of a person's name, whether about parental traditions, mythologies, ideals, personalities and power struggles or about the person's own struggle toward the development of identity. Perhaps North American Indians are right to conceal from all but the intimate few their real given name (Seeman 1980).

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