Some Semantics of Onomancy

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> Consult the Mirror of Names: its hidden meanings are keys to many doors.
>
> Philo Judaeus.

ELSEWHERE I HAVE SUGGESTED there were elements of magic and superstition in name formation.[1] One is Animism. "Because of the young child's limited experience," says Elizabeth Hinlock,[2] "he does not distinguish between living and inanimate objects. On the contrary, he believes, as do many primitive peoples, that all objects have the same life qualities that one finds in human beings" —they are animate. "As a child," wrote a correspondent to the press, "I believed umbrellas came to life at night and roamed about the house."[3] A frightening experience—a shock of any kind—when the eyes gaze on any particular object will associate fright with what holds the eye. Here is the principle of cause and effect—a natural quality of the human mind. The phrases "cause and effect" and "association of ideas" seem to mean much the same, but they do not properly express the instantaneous linking of sudden, frantic emotion with an object on which all attention is concentrated. The pattern for the linking is, as it were, prearranged: there is no time lag. The result has in some measure the quality of 'action'—of Plank's constant *h*.

This instantaneous quality seems to be the chief ingredient of the primitive animism that gives rise to names with special significance. A significance associated with an emotion of explosive character. When such names are translated into another language,

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[1] "Names Magic," *Names* Vol. 2, pp. 21–27.

[2] Eliz. B. Hinlock, *Child Development*, 1950, p. 394.

[3] Mrs. L. O., *Reveille*, 31. 4. 55.

or they are corrupted with time and overlaid by later events, they often convey an entirely different meaning to the original animism. Not only is this true of names as such, but of stories too.

An interesting investigation made some time ago into the origin of the "Pied Piper of Hamlin" story shows the phases through which an original animism can go to produce a myth.[4] Though the story has been linked with the Children's Crusade of 1212, the earliest version being 1259, in essentials it is very much older than that. There are many tales all over the world of music charming pests away or of presaging death. Orpheus charms the warriors and animals of Thrace, and David the demons of Saul. The idea underlies Dr. F. W. Faber's hymn (*No. 221 A & M*), "Hark, hark my soul. Angelic songs are swelling." The myths of the Elfenreigen and the Odyssian Sirens are parallel. The roots of these myths are the noises of the wind in the trees and on the sea, held by some to be the souls of the dead—especially unbaptized children – passing by. The wind in the willows coming from all directions as a chequer board, through animism becomes Apollo Smintheus – the musical ratcatcher of Phrygia. Even the traditional name of the piper – Bunting supports the idea: for it is from the German *bunt*, 'variegated, pied or chequered.'

But this natural change from instant animism through myths steeped in history and change, is sometimes stifled in the modern world. Political equality in its exuberance, has arrived coincidently with a more complicated life, and the detritus of this, a sometimes soulless bureaucracy. It has produced a kind of snob name. The late King George VI, when visiting Cornwall in 1950, expressed his amusement when introduced to the local rat-catcher as "our Rodent Officer." At once sly smiles were reflected in the National Press, which called the new name pompous. Immediately hundreds of letters poured into editors in protest. One lady wrote, "Far from being a rat-catcher, Ours is a Rodent Officer and a Gentleman."[5]

But postmen too no longer have this as an official description. Now they are called "Delivery Officers" and "Collecting Officers",[6]

[4] S. Baring-Gould, *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages*, 1888, p. 417ff.

[5] Mrs. S. T., *The Star*, 24. 5. 50.

[6] "Cassandra," *The Daily Mirror*, 6. 8. 53.

and men who pass a course in the use of tools to maintain the London busses are called "Unit Adjusters" instead of mechanics.[7] But such gobbledegook is not perpetrated only by officialdom. One day the plumber came to mend the tap and brought his mate; next day the electrician came to mend the telephone and brought his colleague. Yet I do not despair that our language will be ruined by such absurdities. In 1864 *Chambers Every Day Book* was a popular work. Talking of May Day customs the author wrote of the "enthronization of the May Queen." This did not prevent the enthroning of Queen Elizabeth II.

But the snob name seems to have invaded Africa. This seems to be an extension of the idea of changing ones name on baptism already mentioned elsewhere. Among some native African girls who recently sat for an examination were: Victoria Beauty Ntom Ntom; Pepita Jority Junky Joyce Nonkonyana; Zenobia Toylet Delila Toys, Virginia Violin Viola Viedge Mlotywa; and Aximony Abyssinia Girl Mkandwana.[8]

One of the studies that will give a clue, not only to the formation of names but also the original meaning, is the study of nicknames and petnames. As I have suggested, a nickname is often a special name to distinguish particular persons, the result perhaps of an urge to be unique. Sometimes this is urgently necessary. A woman writes: " I live with four Jimmies: my brother, Big Jimmy; his son, Middle Jimmy; my son, Little Jimmy; and my husband Jimmy Lynn. If I just call "Jimmy," they all shout "Which?"[9]

Another wrote: "Arthur, my husband, a friend and I, visited a country inn. When our friend called for a drink for Arthur it was very expensive: all of seven men standing at the bar were called Arthur."[10]

A similar necessity occurs in Wales. Here different surnames are few—so some means of telling one Jones, or one Thomas from very many others is urgent. The system adopted is to use a nickname as a sort of surname. These are often from occupations just as Palmer, Fletcher, Smith and Forrester originated. Until recently there were thousands of differently named occupations in the Welsh coal mines, and as most of the population in South

[7] *Sunday Despatch*, 3. 7. 55, p. 2.
[8] *The Daily Mirror*, 27. 1. 55.
[9] Mrs. J. Lynn, *Reveille*, 16. 3. 55.
[10] *Reveille*, 17. 5. 55.

Wales were miners there were plenty of occupational nicknames to choose from.

Some of the names are very interesting: "Shoni Merlin" means Johnny Ponies—John who looks after pit ponies; "Dai Small Coal" is David who works in small coal; while William working in a Stone-coal seam is "Billy Stone Coal." Will Machine is, of course, a check weigher; a haulier "Dic Cwm-up"; and "Jack Lampo" is a lampman. Idiosyncracies and habits too produce another set of nick-surnames. A man whose favourite expression is 'Fair Play' from "Cheviarae-teg" becomes "Willi Warateg." "Billo-by-the-Lamp" is William who habitually leans against a street lamp post. "Dai Ding Dong" is a bell ringer, and "Idris Red Hot" has red hair. "Morgan Double Power" is a powerful chap, "Twm Pregethwr" is Thomas the Lay Preacher, "Shoni Minty" sucks peppermints, and "Jack Sais" is an Englishman, Sais being the Welsh equivalent of the Scottish Sassenach.[11]

But it is not only in the Welsh mining districts that such nick-surnames occur. People who travel together daily on train or bus seldom speak to one another, partly because of the noise. Yet they often have private nick-surnames for their fellow travellers. The same happens in shops and restaurants. Correspondents to the press confirm this. "In our cafe, the old dear who likes a lot of gravy is 'Gran Gravy'; the grumbling woman, 'Mona Lott'; the talkative one 'Ever Jaw.' In a local confectioner the assistants call regular customers such names as 'Stomach Trouble,' 'Me Usban,' 'My Feller,' and so on. Sometimes a sort of reversed humour is used: 'A la mode' wears dreadful clothes, 'Comedian' never smiles, and 'The Clam' talks your head off.[12]"

In every case quoted above a unique name is invented either because there are too many of a kind, or because there is no known name.

There is, of course, a curious tradition in England, regarding certain common surnames. People who bear these always have the same nickname. These seem to have arisen almost exclusively in what might be termed "monastic communities"—the boys public school, universities, the fighting services, and mens' clubs. Until recent times all these social communities in England were pre-

[11] R. Simmonds, *Daily Telegraph*, 9. 3. 55, and private communication.

[12] *Reveille*, 12. 8. 55.

dominantly masculine. From them came such nicknames of the more common surnames: thus Dusty Miller, Chalky White, Timber Wood, Nobby Clark, Gunboat Smith, Topper Brown, and so on.

Here there does not seem to be any urge for uniqueness. All Millers are Dusty Millers, all the Woods Timber Woods. Most of these are obvious. Their uniqueness, if there is any, is a sort of family name: an idea underlying fraternity—"all pals together" perhaps. In the larger sphere "Limy" for Britons and "Yanks" for American citizens are rapidly losing their rebellion background. No longer are they terms of approbium, but rather of fraternal understanding. A symbol of the paradox – we are alike but not – reflecting very closely the family. Husband, wife, children, relatives—all alike but not.

Though Chalky White, Dusty Miller and Timber Wood are obvious enough, what are the origins and meanings of Topper Brown, and Nobby Clark? Though top hats did not appear in England till 1797, the nickname seems to go back at least to the sixteenth century *Comedy of Masks*. Here there is a character– an elderly fellow dressed in academic clothes called *Il Dottore*. He is full of pompous absurdities. The *Comedy of Masks* became translated to some extent and assimilated into the English Pantomime but also into the Morris and especially into the Christmas Mummers Dances and Plays. In the latter form, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was a character wearing a tail coat and top hat—the symbol of professional and academic attainments—called Doctor Brown. Doctor for professional standing, Brown for anonymity because of the commonness of the name. This, it seems, was the original Topper Brown.

And Nobby Clark? Here again the nickname seems to have once been dressed in academic clothes. Originally, of course, the clerk was a clerk in Holy Orders. He was much superior to his fellow men – much superior: he could read and write. And if he could not get a benefice, he did the next best thing and became estate manager and accountant to one of the great estates in the country. Though some of these were in possession of the Church, many were in the hands of noblemen, who properly enough were known to the crowd as the Nobs. So John, Clerk in Holy Orders, whose superior skill was used to run the great estates, becomes John Clark and to his friends – Nobby Clark.

In both these cases of Topper Brown and Nobby Clark, there is a curious sort of repetition. Brown was in many cases itself originally a nickname for men with dark skins or those who sunburned easily; Clark is an occupational nickname.

I am of the opinion that a study of the formation of nicknames, and particularly the thoughts underlying their formation, is of immense importance in not only tracking the origins of names, but also of giving some background of social history to their formation. As I hope I have shown there appear to be several basic urges to form nicknames. They are: 1. the urge to attain uniqueness 2. the necessity to differentiate between many of a kind 3. the necessity to give a particular identity—often merely a label to anonymous acquaintances—really a type of (2).

To be sure, there are other reasons for inventing nicknames, but they are not so fundamental. Nickname formation is, of course, a separate thing, but often confused with the necessity for it. I have mentioned two. Animism and Symbolic Fraternities. Animism, perhaps, clings more closely in the present context and is more common. As I have explained, it embraces not only the instantaneous "action" type, but also those which have a clear cause and effect process. Of these, idiosyncratic and occupational nicknames are typical.

These are of much interest for they lightly sketch the background of their genesis. "Billo-by-the-Lamp" might, perhaps, be dismissed as no occupational nickname; but it gives a social background all the same. There is little doubt that this originated in the 1930's when unemployment was rife in South Wales—when many had little else to do but to pass the time leaning against walls or lamp-posts—hopeless in waiting for a job.

Such cases of formation are easy to follow now, but it is of importance to trap and record them as they occur. If this is not done, the origin and therefore the sketch of social background which engendered their formation is lost.

Investigation of the origin of names must be painstakingly thorough. False scents are frequent, sometimes from incomplete knowledge. For example a common nickname for Brown is "Buster Brown". This appears to have arisen from the name of a character in an amusing series of children's books (of American origin) lavishly illustrated that became very popular in England about

1907–1912. To get at the very origins of the name, a further research is required into the American origin of the nickname Buster.

An illustration of how incomplete knowledge can lead to gross error is in the answers given to a question set in a General Knowledge paper. The paper was set in an examination of 100 African candidates for Police Constable in the Gold Coast. The question was, "Who is Marilyn Monroe?" No one candidate knew the correct answer. One said "The Commissioner of Police," others "The Prime Minister of China," "a Zulu," "a novelist," and "a heavy weight champion." One, who seems to have vague recollections of history, said "the President of the United States."[13]

That a study of nicknames gives an indication of the social background at the time of its formation, suggests an interesting field for study. A systematic study of the formation of surnames, nicknames, and even of the frequency of given names, should give a pretty clear indication of social history, if not on its own, at least in conjunction with known historical events.

[13] *The Star*, 20. 6. 55.