

In Defense of the Light-Hearted

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Several years ago one of us had an article rejected by *Names* on the grounds that it was “too light-hearted.” It was the kind of piece that “might appear in a newspaper.” Ever since this rejection we have been pondering on what’s wrong with “light-heartedness.” We gained more empathy for this resistance to the pop culture when we saw the recent showing on PBS’s *Point of View* of a program about personal names that was put together by a film producer whose primary goal was apparently to make us remember his name. Probably out of subconscious spite, we have already forgotten it, but anyway it was not the light-heartedness of the program but his egocentricity which turned us off.

We are active in the International Society of Humor Studies where we see a similar kind of resistance to light-heartedness. The idea is that since studying humor is already suspect we should be deadly serious at our conferences and in our journal. A point that someone inevitably makes each year is that at a conference on human sexuality we wouldn’t expect the speakers to stand up and perform sex acts, so we shouldn’t expect our speakers to stand up and be funny. Everyone within hearing distance nods solemnly, but then when we begin our meetings it is the very people who have been promoting this idea who garner the biggest laughs through giving clever and witty presentations. How this reminds us of the American Name Society is that the same people who are critical of the way the popular culture treats names are happy to be interviewed and quoted in either print or broadcast media.

We are not criticizing these people for their actions; in fact, we are pleased when the general public learns something about the “science” of names, and we think this “science” will be advanced by a closer relationship with the popular culture. Just because something is light-hearted and contemporary doesn’t mean that it is trivial. If we are going to recruit young scholars to our field we need to look at new kinds of naming.

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In the 1960s when Buddy Holly thought of the happy sound of crickets and decided to name his band *The Crickets*, John Lennon enviously wished he had thought of it because the popularity in Britain of the game of cricket would have made a clever tie-in for a group from London. Then Lennon thought of beetles as being similar to crickets and of spelling the word *Beatles* as a playful reminder of *beat* music. The success of this uniquely spelled name inspired the altered spelling in such later groups as *The Monkees*, *The Byrds*, *The Black Crowes*, *Led Zeppelin*, and *Def Leppard*. Winners at the September 6, 2001 MTV Video Music Awards included *Fatboy Slim*, *OutKast*, *Limp Bizkit*, *'N Sync*, *Mudvayna*, *Lady Marmalade*, *Moby*, and *Eve*.

The generation that grew up with names that were not only creatively spelled but also filled with surprising contradictions and other kinds of word play became today's computer whizzes. Because of this we shouldn't be surprised at how computer programmers changed the spellings of standard words (*byte*, *nybble*, *luser*, and *turist*), invented bicapitalization (*MicroSoft*, *SiliconGraphics*, *DreamWorks*, *WordPerfect*, etc.), and made use of metaphors (*Lotus* for software that makes spread sheets, *Trojan Horse* for programs that bring in unwanted material disguised as a gift, and *viruses* for programs that damage a whole system).

The young people of today's generation are having their own unique experiences with names. Part of the secret to the success of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books is the way she uses clever names for characterization and for memory aids. Remembering who is who among her characters is no small task as shown by the fact that Jim Dale, the actor who taped the stories, says that he had to create 125 different voices when he read Book Four. Characters with especially memorable names include Professor *Severus Snape*, who gets more and more severe as the books progress, and the ghost *Nearly Headless Nick*, who was beheaded with a dull axe so that his head is still attached and will dangle precariously if he moves too quickly or doesn't wear a high collar to keep it in place. Harry's nemesis, *Draco Malfoy* grows more draconian and malfeasant, just as his father, *Lucius*, becomes more like Lucifer. *Madame Maxime* (cf. *maximum*) *Olympe* (cf. *Mount Olympus*, home of

256 Names 49.4 (December 2001)

the gods) is part giant, but she claims to be just “big boned,” while *Professor Gilderoy Lockhart* is shown to be a fraud whose royalty is *gilded on* and whose heart is *locked* to any real human emotion. *Professor Lupin*’s name is close enough to the Latin word for wolf, *lupinus*, that readers are prepared for the fact that his absences are related to his condition of being a werewolf.

Another experience with names that many of today’s children have is with the game of Pokémon. Although interest peaked in the year 2000, millions of children still know the names of the first 150 characters. When we heard one of our nephews proudly brag to his father that he knew the names of 53 Pokémon characters, the father asked, “Well, how many presidents can you name.” We smiled at the question because president’s names are not nearly as much fun to memorize as are the Pokémon names, which are cleverly designed to give clues to their meanings, plus they come in sets. For example, *Caterpie* evolves into *Metapod* and then into *Butterfree*; *Tentacool* evolves into *Tentacruel*; *Magnemite* into *Magneton*; *Grimer* into *Muk*, the two-headed *Doduo* into the three-headed *Dodrio*, and *Ekans* (snake spelled backwards) into *Arbok* (*kobra* spelled backwards). Even those characters which do not evolve have memorable names based on their characteristics. *Snorlax* looks like a snoring and relaxed teddy bear; *Lickitung* has a very long tongue, *Tangela*’s hair resembles Medusa’s, and *Pinsir* has powerful looking pinchers. *Exeggcute* and *Exeggutor* are egg shaped; *Shellder* and *Cloyster* are sea creatures, while *Hitmonlee* and *Hitmonchan* look like tae kwon do champions.

This kind of playful naming is not just child’s play. In today’s commercialized world where companies must have unique names if they wish to copyright a trademark, creative spelling is more the rule than the exception. *JELL-O*, *Kool-Aid*, *Cheerios*, and *Twinkies* are old examples, and so are *Holsum* bread, *Krispy* crackers, and *Sun-Maid* raisins. More recent inventions include *Jif* peanut butter, *Quik* chocolate drink mix, *Trix* cereal, *Slim-Rite* diet drink, *Eggo* waffles, and *Egg-beaters* artificial eggs.

The fierce competition in the marketing of drugs has encouraged pharmaceutical companies not only to look for names that will be memorable (*Aspercreme*, *Ex-Lax*, *Allerest*, *Aleve*, *Interplak*, and *Nyquil*)

but also to create names that will hint at what the drug does without making the company responsible for printing the kinds of disclaimers required by the FDA when formal claims are included in advertisements. For example, the Schering Corporation wants people to connect both *Nasonex* and *Claritin* with the idea of relief from nasal and other allergy symptoms. Merck & Co. wants people to remember *Singulair* as being good for asthma control. Bristol-Myers Squibb wants diabetics to think of *Glucovance* as a way to control glucose levels, while the Roche company wants them to think of *Accu-Check* for checking their blood. Wyeth-Ayerst wants arthritis sufferers to connect *Synvisc* with relief from joint pain, while Searle Pfizer wants the same people to think of *Celebrex*.

It seems to us that these kinds of names could be fertile territory for research by names scholars. Certainly *Viagra* with its similarity to *vigor* and *vitality* has proved to be a successful name, but what about other names? What makes some names succeed while others fail? What associations do particular names trigger? Are they consistent or idiosyncratic? When names trigger unwanted associations, what do companies and advertising agents do?

We learned a lot about commercial naming when we happened to hear a PBS radio interview with Ira Bachrach, president of Name Lab, a San Francisco company that helps create commercial names. He explained that when the Honda company of Japan came to him for help in naming the car that later became known worldwide as the *Acura*, their primary goal had been to find a name that would counteract the image of shoddy workmanship connected in consumer's minds to cheaply made and easily-broken toys that in the days after World War II were identified only as "made in Japan." To come up with what proved to be an unusually successful name, Bachrach's company worked with the French *acutesse*, the Italian *acutezza*, and the English *accurate* and *acumen*, all with meanings related to intelligence, sharpness, and acuteness.

As names scholars we might do well to expand our definition of research so that we would be the ones interviewing people who create names professionally. We could conduct focus groups of our own to see

if names trigger the associations that manufacturers are hoping for. If we are really going to do cutting edge research, we should be willing to go out on a limb and make predictions and judgments on names.

Most of us also identify with the American Dialect Society, yet we aren't as brave as they are. Their listings of "new words" especially those "honored" at their annual conferences are of interest to the general public and often find their way into the popular press. We could make some similar kinds of observations about new names, whether commercial, literary, or personal. A step toward becoming a little more media-friendly would be for members to share name-related news items through our names discussion list. Surely these would be of as much interest as those numerous requests we get from individuals wanting us to tell them about the origins of their names.

We are saying that rather than being afraid of sounding like the popular press, we should work to make the popular press sound more like us. If we are going to attract young scholars to our field, we need to let them know about us and to welcome the head start that many of them have in working (or playing) with the new kinds of creative naming that for the most part we ignore.