

A Further Note on the “Title + First Name” Form of Address

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In the March, 2002 issue of this journal I published an essay in which I stated that the “title + first name” form of address (*Dr. Phil, Dr. Laura*) had only recently been created. But that is clearly untrue: the “title + first name” formula is at least as old as the mid-nineteenth century in American English (and very likely dates to colonial times), and is well-attested much earlier in British English. In fact, worldwide the phenomenon probably dates to the advent of first names. This brief essay provides examples of the “title + first name” form of address from throughout history, speculates on some of the functions it has probably served, and calls for additional research on many aspects of the phenomenon.

In the article “A New Look at Address in American English: The Rules Have Changed,” I stated that

... more and more titled professionals seem to prefer to be called by their first names, though sometimes in conjunction with their titles. *Thus has been created the “title plus first name” form of address*, as in “Dr. Laura” Schlesinger . . . and “Dr. Phil” McGraw . . . [2002, 45; emphasis added].

I might have more accurately noted, however, that the likes of Schlesinger and McGraw have *continued* the “title plus first name” (henceforth TFN) form of address, for it certainly is not new. Indeed, it has probably existed in American English since colonial times, and worldwide is very likely as ancient as the giving of first names. In this essay I would like to correct my misstatement of the facts and encourage other onomasts to further investigate this well-established and increasingly fashionable form of address.

As I pointed out (2002, 58, n. 2), TFN does not appear in the protocols of Brown and Ford (1961) or Ervin-Tripp (1969), the two major studies of address in American English antedating mine, and its use

seems not to have received any scholarly attention, at least with regard to the sociolinguistic properties of address systems used in the United States.¹ All of this may suggest that TFN was not widespread in American English until fairly recently, but there is ample evidence that it existed. For example, the patients and followers of Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935, often called him *Dr. Bob*. The earliest instance of *Dr. Bob* may be lost to history, but probably occurred between 1912, when Smith began practicing, and the late 1930s, when he was widely known by that name.

During approximately the same period, Sam Rayburn, a member of the House of Representatives from 1913 to 1961 and Speaker of the House intermittently from 1940 to 1961, was often called *Mr. Sam* by his closest associates and by journalists (one of whom, following the same TFN pattern, referred to him in 1952, in an article published in the *Wall Street Journal*, as *Speaker Sam*; see Gold 1993). And *Mr. Ed* was the name of a popular television show that aired on CBS from 1961 through 1966 (there is some question as to whether the eponymous character, a horse, even had a last name, but the fact remains that he was routinely called by the TFN form of address).

Consider, too, that the Beatles released their song *Dr. Robert* in 1966. And that Mac Rebennack, the New Orleans-style piano player, renamed himself *Dr. John* ("the Night Tripper") in 1968, at about the same time that basketball star Julius Erving was dubbed *Dr. J* by a high school teammate. And that Dr. Ruth Westheimer, the renowned sex therapist, has been dispensing her advice publicly as *Dr. Ruth* since 1980, when her call-in radio show "Sexually Speaking" debuted.

Indeed, it may be Dr. Ruth's enduring popularity that helped spawn so many other TFN usages. In addition to the *Dr. Phil* and *Dr. Laura* that I noted in my article, both of which date to the mid-1990s, in 1991 the television show *The Simpsons* introduced a physician-character named Nick Riviera, who is often *Dr. Nick*. The musician Andre Young began calling himself *Dr. Dre* in about 1992, and in 1993 Dr. Drew Pinsky began offering medical advice on sexual matters to adolescents as *Dr. Drew* on the call-in radio show "Loveline." (The TFN formula probably spread further in 1996, when Pinsky began appearing on the cable television channel MTV.) *Judge Judy*, a live-court television show featuring Justice Judy Scheindlin, premiered in 1996. And the television series *Frasier* introduced the physician-character *Dr. Mary* in 2000.

TFN also occurs in a great number and variety of literary works, not all of which are either American or modern (though some are—for example, Michael Paterniti's *Driving Mr. Albert* [2000]). Indeed, perhaps one of the earliest examples is from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, in which, in *The Prologue of the Nun's Priest's Tale* (1386), the priest is addressed as *Sir John*. The Scottish poet Robert Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice* (1475) features *Sir Orpheus*. In the many renditions of Robin Hood and his band of followers, *Maid Marian* appears as a stock character as early as 1500 ("Robin Hood: Legendary English Outlaw"). And Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1598) featured both *Sir Acteon* and *Sir Pandarus*.

Again, Swedish dramatist August Strindberg and British novelist Joseph Conrad both portray the lives of eponymous characters in their *Miss Julie* (1888) and *Lord Jim* (1900), respectively. The African American author Charles W. Chestnutt, in his novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), frequently has the character Polly addressed as *Miss Polly*. Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) features a *Mistress Mary*. Willa Cather's short story "Neighbour Rosicky" (1928) includes Doctor Edward Burleigh, who is occasionally addressed as *Dr. Ed*. And of course Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind* (1937) has the house servants routinely call Scarlett O'Hara *Miss Scarlett*.

This last example, from *Gone with the Wind*, is typical in postbellum American literature in its portrayal of slaves calling whites by TFN. Other instances occur in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), in which Jim addresses two other characters as *Marse* [= *Master*] *Tom* and *Marse Sid*, and in Charles W. Chestnutt's short story "The Passing of Grandison" (1899), in which Grandison calls his master, Dick Owens, *Marse Dick*. Moreover, there is evidence that Mitchell, Twain, Chestnutt, and the other authors who wrote about slavery were historically accurate in this detail of their work: in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), Douglass often refers to one of his former owners as *Master Hugh*.

Thus we can be sure that TFN existed in American English at least as early as the mid-nineteenth century (and not solely in the context of slavery: during the Civil War, southern patriots often referred to General Robert E. Lee as *Marse Robert*), and it is reasonable to assume that it actually dates to colonial times, for TFN was firmly established

in English by the 1600s, and would have come to the New World with the earliest colonists: not only had members of royal families always been referred to with TFN (*King Charles*, *Queen Elizabeth*), but so had knights (*Sir Gawain*, *Sir Galahad*), saints (*Saint Michael*, *Saint Mary*), and priests (*Sir John*, *Master William*).²

The reason for all of this TFN usage, of course, is that the stratification of people into classes, if only in terms of size, strength, intelligence—and, later in history, leadership ability, royal birthright, and education—is much older than surnames. In fact, because “[n]o society has ever been studied that is without some system of stratification” (including even “all higher animal societies”), many sociologists believe the phenomenon is genetic rather than cultural (Popenoe 1974, 249).

Surnames, on the other hand, are known to have existed only since the third millennium B.C., when they were first introduced in China. They did not become common in Europe until about 1400, gaining popularity first among the upper classes of Italy in the tenth century, spreading throughout the upper classes on the rest of the continent in the eleventh, and finally filtering down to the other classes over the next 300 years or so (Hook 1982, 8-10; Dunkling 1993, 103; and “A Brief History of Surnames” 2001). In short, there was no other way to refer (in the third person, at least, by title and name) to the earliest people who had achieved or been granted or been born into some high(er) position in the social pecking order—including royalty, priests, and saints—than by his or her title and first name.

More interesting is that TFN persisted after surnames became common. Even in the twenty-first century, members of England’s royal family are *Queen Elizabeth II*, *Prince Phillip*, and so on; British knights, when addressed informally, are *Sir/Lady [First Name]* (in Continental Europe, *Chevalier/Dame [First Name]* [Worley 1995, 17]); and all newly-canonized saints continue to be *Saint [First Name]* (the *OED* attests *Saint [First Name]* from circa 1175, and *S. [First Name]* from 1122; on both counts, see adj. *saint* A. 1).³ Indeed, the TFN protocol in modern Europe is taken quite seriously, so much so that publications dealing with the social conventions of titular address discuss it at some length (see Pine 1969; Armiger 1971; Newman 1980; and Montague-Smith 1992), and its misuse is widely considered a breach of etiquette.

In the United States, the same level of seriousness was (and to some extent still is) attached to TFN usage in the Deep South. Numerous informants have told me that it was relatively common as recently as the late 1970s for people of a lower social status to address their social superiors with TFN in contexts that were not so formal as to require a title and last name. These differences in status were consistently based on race, social class, and age: African Americans, members of the working classes, and younger speakers were routinely expected to use TFN with whites, members of the middle and upper classes, and older people. In fact, the 1989 film *Driving Miss Daisy*, which features a working-class, African American man and an older, wealthy, white woman, nicely highlights all three aspects of this status system, with the man routinely addressing the woman with TFN.

At least two questions arise at this point, however. First, what was the relative importance of these features when their co-occurrence in situations dictated opposing rules of TFN usage? What would the norms of address have been, say, in an interaction involving an older African American and a younger white person? Second, what were the allowable exceptions to these norms? Why, for example, in a particularly poignant scene near the end of *Driving Miss Daisy*, is the man justified in addressing the woman as merely "Daisy"?

As the beginning of an answer to the first question, I can report that my informants generally agree that race was the most important factor, and age the least. Thus, in the example just above, the older African American would ordinarily use TFN with the younger white person, but not the other way around. In fact, one white informant offered the story of his being corrected by his parents when, as a young boy, he addressed a black maid as "Miss Mary." She was "just Mary," they promptly instructed him, without the *Miss*.

The addition of social class to the mix of variables would seem to be fairly straightforward. Both Brown and Ford (1961) and I discussed the relative ranking of age and occupational status (widely considered to be one factor used in calculating a person's social class) in determining whether a speaker used an addressee's first name or title plus last name, with occupational status proving more important in both studies. This fits well with my informants' claims that race was the most significant

of the three variables, age the least: the overall ranking, then, in order of descending importance, should have been race, social class, and age.

The obvious problem, however, is that this sort of relative ranking, though useful, attaches no weight to the three variables in question. In other words, it does not tell us how *much* more important race was than social class, or social class than age; thus it cannot predict whether TFN would have been required in situations when one speaker “outranked” the other in only two of the three variables. And judging from the opinions and examples offered by my informants, I can conclude only that the weight assigned each variable changed from situation to situation, or even speaker to speaker—that is, that TFN usage in the American South had a strong pragmatic component.

One white informant, for example, who worked in a hardware store in Georgia during his early adolescence, routinely called the older African American who owned and operated the store “Mr. Ted” (my informant was careful to use TFN with the owner even when not working in the store). In this case, Mr. Ted was older and higher in the social pecking order, but ranked lower than my informant because of race, which suggests that social class and age, when paired together, outweighed race. The informant also remembers other whites, however, who, though in the same social class and of the same general age as he, would address the store owner as merely “Ted,” as would most (not all, however) of his friends’ parents. What accounts for this inconsistent usage?

Another white informant remembers very well that he would address one of his father’s African American employees as “Mr. Frank.” The informant was younger than the employee, and came from a family of higher social standing, yet used TFN in deference to the employee’s being some 45 years older than he. In this situation, age appears to outweigh race and social class. But the informant also remembers routinely addressing Mr. Frank’s wife as simply “Martha.” Does gender then play a role in determining TFN usage as well?

Still another informant, this one African American, recalls that his mother, who took in laundry, was always addressed as “T” (for *Thelma*) by her white patrons, regardless of whether they were 20 years older or younger than she, when they would come to the house to drop off or pick up their clothes. Why, in this situation, does age seem irrelevant? And why, when these same patrons saw her at church on Sundays, did

they often (but not consistently) greet her as "Mrs. T"? Furthermore, why was my informant's father, Mrs. T's husband, who did assorted odd jobs to earn a living, invariably addressed as simply "Joe"?

A compelling answer to the second question I raised above, concerning any exceptions to the general rules of usage, would probably shed light on many of these apparent incongruencies. Unfortunately, the only consistent exception I have discovered is that whatever rules of TFN usage existed could occasionally be reversed, with members of the superior classes using TFN with their social inferiors in a non-literal way to tease or taunt, be humorous or angry, or make some satirical, sarcastic, or ironic point. Such a mock-inversion of the stratification system is likely as old as TFN itself (recall the highly derisive *Sir John* formerly used with priests; see n. 2), but in any case usually had the pragmatic effect of consummate ridicule.

Other patterns in the exceptions that informants offered are less certain. One mentioned that African Americans could "earn" so much respect that they would (very occasionally) be addressed with *Aunt/Uncle + [First Name]* (though the informant hastened to add that he never understood the merit system that underlay this higher level of respect). Another remembers that younger African Americans occasionally called older, socially superior African Americans by TFN, but says the same phenomenon never occurred among whites. Two others recall (especially older) widows of either race being accorded TFN status, regardless of their social standing, and one says that all female teachers were *Miss [First Name]* regardless of their age, race, or marital status.

More than one of my informants admits that so much time has passed since their childhoods in the 1940s or 1950s as to render their memories less than completely reliable. Their stories, as one put it, "while correct in outline and basic substance, may be shoddy in detail." Perhaps. And if so, such shoddiness could explain the inconsistencies in the stories I have related. But it may also be true that the details of my informants' stories are substantially correct; that, in fact, the norms of TFN usage in the mid-twentieth century American South were shifting, the product of uncertain standards in the ways people of different races, social classes, and ages perceived one another. In any case, however, TFN usage in the South was, as one informant noted, "quite complex," and merits additional study.

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In the South of the twenty-first century, TFN seems to exist primarily among older speakers. Several of my informants opined that most younger people, especially those who are well-educated, have no desire to perpetuate a pecking order so overtly driven by money and racism. Indeed, many informants told me that TFN usage probably endures only as the product of respect for one's elders, with *Mr./Mrs./Miss [First Name]* usually occurring in encounters in which speakers are of different generations, the older being above the age of about 65.

I alluded to this honorific function of TFN usage in American English when I noted that

[t]hose who favor it . . . are almost certainly attempting to appear more affable and approachable without altogether abandoning their credentialed authority—or, in Brown and Ford's terminology, they are at once reducing the distance and formality, increasing the intimacy, and preserving the status between themselves and those with whom they interact [2002, 58, n. 2].

This analysis is correct as far as it goes, but clearly it does not account for all the historical occurrences of the phenomenon or modern TFN usage abroad. As I suggested above, it certainly would have been used initially—before the advent of surnames—to designate and/or honor those who possessed social position and power. It probably persisted in royal and noble circles largely as a “stabilizing link with tradition” (Worley 1995, 19), though may also have served the entirely practical function of allowing speakers to distinguish between two or more same-sexed superiors sharing the same surname (as with a father and son, for example, or two unmarried sisters). This dual practical/honorific vein probably continued in the New World South, and in fact may play some role in the enduring use of TFN there.

By and large, however, contemporary TFN appears to function as I described: it preserves a difference in status while simultaneously increasing the level of intimacy between speakers. A young female professor of education at my university who asks students to call her *Dr. Sue* typifies this usage:

The whole thing with *Dr.* is that it distances students, no question, which I don't want to do too much. I like the closeness that develops when everybody in the class feels free to use first names. But I feel like I have to use *Dr.*, partly because I look so young and partly because the male professors in my department do [there are no other female professors in

her department], but they require their students to call them by their last names, which I hate. If I didn't use *Dr.* at all, that might imply that the status of the male professors is somehow privileged, like I'm not their equal, and also might cause me to blend into the class too much. So I guess *Dr. Sue* is a reasonable compromise: it gets the *Dr.* in there, but also achieves some of the first name closeness that I'm looking for.

The phrase *too much* in the first sentence quoted here, and the *some* in the last sentence, are especially telling. In an effort to achieve a closer relationship with her students, Dr. Sue is willing to sacrifice a portion of the social status that she has attained by having a Ph.D., yet not so much that those students lose sight of her social position in the classroom.

All in all, TFN has had a long history, sports a promising future, and bears continued watching. A revised protocol of the kind produced by Brown and Ford (1961) and Ervin-Tripp (1969) is clearly in order, and numerous specific questions besides those already posed suggest themselves as potentially fruitful avenues for further research. Why, for example, does [*Service Title*] + [*First Name*] (as in *Major Bob*) not occur? Does TFN also occur in other languages? (In the 1986 film *Crocodile Dundee*, a hispanic maid delivering fresh towels to the protagonist's New York City hotel room addresses him as *Señor Mick*, but of course the film was written by English-speaking writers.) Did or do specific communities of speakers, such as African Americans, perhaps have their own rules of usage?

And so forth. The point here is not to be exhaustive, but just to suggest that, because of the conspicuous sociolinguistic position TFN occupies in so many dyadic interactions, it deserves greater attention than it has so far received.

Notes

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1. In all fairness both to Brown and Ford and to Ervin-Tripp, I must note here that the "kin title + first name" form of address (*Uncle John*, *Aunt Mary*) does indeed appear in their protocols. I am also compelled to point out, however, that the "kin title + surname" formula does not. It is true, as a colleague points out, that

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some kin titles and surnames, such as *Uncle Smith* and *Aunt Brown*, are not possible in English; others, however, such as *Grandpa Smith* and *Grandma Brown*, are. The question of why some combinations of titles and names occur whereas others appear to be proscribed needs additional research, as does the question of whether that proscription is social or grammatical.

2. Two points require further explanation here. First, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED 1933), *Sir* was common from the late 1300s through the mid-1600s as a title for a priest if he had not graduated from a university, *Master* if he had (see sv. *Sir* 4). Both titles typically occurred with the priest's first name. (Interestingly, the OED also notes that *Sir John* could designate any priest during the same period [see sv. *John* 3], especially one referred to either familiarly or contemptuously, as in the passage cited earlier from Chaucer's *The Prologue of the Nun's Priest's Tale*.) Presently in the Catholic Church, TFN usage between clergymen and their parishioners (*Father Mike*) is strictly honorific, and, because it has been neither condemned nor condoned by any Pope, occurs according to local custom and the preference of individual priests.

The second point concerns a question regarding the use of TFN with the President of the United States: In short, if TFN was really so firmly entrenched in the English language by the seventeenth century, particularly regarding royalty, then why do Americans not address their President as *President [First Name]*? Indeed, why does *[Political Title] + [First Name]* appear not to occur at all in American English, aside from the one instance of *Speaker Sam* mentioned earlier? (One does not hear *Senator John*, for example.)

Part of the answer to the first question may be that the colonists were attempting to create a form of government lacking as many royalist trappings as possible, and that *President [First Name]* was perceived as too reminiscent of the monarchy from which Americans had so recently gained independence. Moreover, using *President [First Name]* would have yielded *President George*, and of course *George* had also been, since 1714, the first name of the English Kings with whom the colonies had been feuding, George III being on the throne from 1760 through the Revolutionary War. And part of the answer to the second question may be merely that the proscription against *President [First Name]* transferred to other, lesser political offices.

But I am only speculating; both questions warrant additional research. Specifically, why does politics require more distance, formality, and status, and/or less intimacy, among its members, or between members and non-members, than is allowed in education, law, the healing arts, the ministry, and other fields in which TFN occurs?

3. The interesting question again arises as to whether some of these TFN usages have any "[Title] + [Surname]" alternatives, and if not, whether the prohibitions are social or grammatical. I have not heard *[Royal Title] + [Surname]* or *[Saint] + Surname*, for example, and knights are called by their titles and surnames only on very formal occasions.

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