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"Mr de Bussy" is More Employable than "Mr Bussy": The Impact of a Particle Associated with the Surname of an Applicant in a Job Application Evaluation Context

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Previous studies examining the effect of surnames on evaluations have shown that surnames are associated with connotations which influence how we evaluate people. In this experiment, conducted in France, we examined the effect of the nobiliary particle "de" associated with a surname in a job application evaluation situation. A male applicant's *résumé* was presented to participants, randomly divided into two independent groups, who were asked to evaluate him in relation to a job offer. The offer was for an assistant in human resources in a mid-size company, and the *résumé* was from a 23-year-old male applicant with a university education in human resources. Depending upon the experimental condition, the applicant's full name was "Julien Bussy" or "Julien de Bussy," but the *résumé* was identical in both conditions. Results indicated that the applicant whose surname included a particle was perceived to be more serious, competent, confident, and clever than the applicant without the particle. In the end, the participants in the particle condition believed that the applicant would have more chances of being selected for the job than the applicant without the particle. This effect was particularly noted with female participants. These results thus support the notion that the nobiliary particle attached to an individual's surname has implications for people's evaluation of that person.

KEYWORDS particle, surname, nobility connotation, judgment.

Allport (1937) believed that people's names could be considered as the most important component of their self-identity. First names and surnames can give information about

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people, such as their identity, status, ethnicity, origin, occupation, and so on. We know that a host of attributes are associated with the origin of surnames and the origin of the people who bear them. For example, we know that, in various cultures, surnames have a patronymic dimension referring to the father's name with the suffix "son," such as Jackson or Johnston in the US, Einarsson or Arnarsson in Iceland, or Bonfils or Beaufils in France, where "fils" means "son" in English. A toponymic dimension is sometimes associated with a surname, making it possible to identify where a person's ancestors came from (e.g. Hill or Lake in the US, or Lebreton or Lenormand in France). Sometimes, a surname is associated with a profession and refers to the vocation or the social role of its bearer (e.g. Baker or Smith in the US, or Le Boulanger or Le Maréchal in France). Physical or psychological attributes also may be associated with a surname (e.g. Small, Barber, or Savage in the US, or Legrand, Lefort, Lebon, or LeBras in France).

Previous research has shown that factors associated with surnames influence people's evaluation of those who bear them. Colman et al. (1981) and Hargreaves et al. (1983) observed that common and frequent surnames receive more positive evaluations than uncommon and infrequent surnames, thus suggesting a positive link between familiarity and liking. Several studies have indicated that surnames could activate stereotypes, which in turn affect judgment of their bearer; for instance, negative connotations can be attributed to bearers of surnames with connotations of minority ethnicity (Luscri and Mohr 1998; Mair 1986; Radelet and Pierce 1985). Attributes other than ethnicity or frequency are also associated with surnames. O'Sullivan et al. (1988) found that the attractiveness of the names of two imaginary political candidates exerted an effect on people's voting behavior. It also has been reported that the attractiveness of the consonance of names is associated with variation in the evaluation of the name bearers. Smith (1998) examined 42 US presidential elections from 1824 to 1992, devising a sound comfort score based on multiple phonetic and lexical factors of candidates' surname (e.g. number of syllables, initial or ending fricative consonant, and stressed vowel). The author observed that 35 of the surnames with the more positive comfort scores received the greatest number of popular votes.

All the studies reported above seem to show that various connotations are associated with surnames, which in turn could influence how we judge someone, particularly during the first meeting with an individual when the only information we have about that person is their patronym. The purpose of the present study was to test the effect of another element associated with a surname: the nobiliary particle. A particle is a preposition that precedes a surname and that is present in various cultures (e.g. "von" in German, "de" in French, and "del" in Italian). In France, the preposition "de" preceding a surname (e.g. de Kerviler) is often associated historically with nobility (Barthelemy 2000) and carries high status connotations that the same surname without the particle does not possess.

To our knowledge, the effect of a particle on people's judgment of the surname bearer has not been tested before. Based on the studies reported above, showing that various attributes associated with surnames have an influence on how their bearers are evaluated, we hypothesized that the presence of a particle associated with a surname could exert an effect on how we evaluate someone. Given the fact that the particle "de" in France is associated with nobility and high status, we assumed that a particle could positively influence traits associated with status such as intelligence or competence. To increase the ecological validity of this assumption, we showed a job offer to participants, and

we asked them to evaluate a male applicant presented in a standard *résumé*. According to the experimental condition, the applicant was presented with the same surname with or without the particle "de" preceding the surname. Participants were asked to evaluate the applicant and to estimate to what extent he matched the job description. We hypothesized that the applicant with the particle associated with his surname would receive more positive evaluations and be more likely to obtain the job.

Method

Participants

The participants were 50 males and 50 females who agreed to respond to a questionnaire about a job applicant.

Materials

A one-page *résumé* was used to present the applicant. To increase the ecological validity and the realism of the study, except for the surname, this *résumé* was strictly the same as that of a student who had just obtained his master's degree in human resources from the university of Bretagne-Sud. This individual had been recruited by a mid-size company in Brittany that had published a job offer for a human resources assistant position. Only the surname was changed in one experimental condition, but the first name remained the same in both conditions. The applicant, who was called "Julien Bussy" in real life, was called "Julien de Bussy" in the particle condition, but the *résumé* was strictly the same in both experimental conditions. The company's original job offer was also used, and no change was introduced. These measures enabled us to use authentic material that had been used in a real-life situation.

Procedure

Participants were solicited in various indoor places (e.g. while waiting for a train in a train station) or outdoor locations (e.g. seated on a public bench) to participate in a short survey whereby they would have to examine a job offer and an applicant's *résumé*. All the participants were alone when solicited by one of the two 21-year-old female interviewers used in this experiment. The interviewers introduced themselves as undergraduate students in human resources management at the University of Bretagne-Sud in Vannes, who had been asked to conduct a survey on how people evaluated a male applicant based on a *résumé* for a job position. The interviewers added that this solicitation was a course requirement. A training pre-test with four participants (two men and two women not included in the final sample) was conducted with the two interviewers in order to help them better understand and rehearse how to approach participants. We instructed each interviewer to act in the same way, to say strictly the same sentences, and to behave in the same way when interacting with the participants. If the participants agreed to take part, each interviewer gave them a folder with the description of the job on one page and the applicant's *résumé* on another. The participants were instructed to read the description of the job offer and the *résumé* carefully and then to respond to the questionnaire. During this phase, the interviewer stood 2 m away pretending to

consult various documents in a folder. The participants were asked to evaluate how serious and competent the applicant was on a five-point scale ranging from "1" (not very serious/competent) to "5" (extremely serious/competent). Then, we used a dichotomous dependent variable and asked the participants to answer "Yes" or "No" if they perceived the applicant as intelligent, if they perceived him as confident, and if they thought he would be selected for the job. When participants had finished, the interviewer returned to them and thanked them for their participation. The participants were randomly allocated to one of the two experimental conditions: random allocation software was used to place participants in one condition or the other (i.e. particle/no particle), and each interviewer was instructed to take care to respect the order.

Results

The mean scores of the scales examining how the participants rated the applicant as serious and competent are shown in Table 1, and the percentages of participants who perceived the applicant as intelligent and confident, and who thought he would be selected for the job are shown in Table 2.

Using the data shown in Table 1, a 2 (experimental condition) × 2 (participant gender) between groups analysis of variance was performed for each of the two

TABLE 1
MEAN SCORE (SD IN BRACKETS) OF THE APPLICANT'S EVALUATED SERIOUSNESS AND COMPETENCE ACCORDING TO THE EXPERIMENTAL CONDITION AND THE PARTICIPANTS' GENDER

	Bussy	de Bussy	Total
Serious			
Male participant	2.32 (0.85)	3.12 (1.17)	2.72 (1.09)
Female participant	2.72 (1.06)	3.96 (0.79)	3.34 (1.12)
Total	2.52 (0.97)	3.54 (1.07)	
Competent			
Male participant	2.92 (1.08)	3.12 (1.13)	3.02 (1.10)
Female participant	2.76 (1.16)	3.96 (0.61)	3.36 (1.10)
Total	2.84 (1.11)	3.54 (0.99)	

TABLE 2
PERCENTAGES OF PARTICIPANTS WHO PERCEIVED THE APPLICANT AS INTELLIGENT AND CONFIDENT, AND WHO THOUGHT HE WOULD BE SELECTED FOR THE JOB

	Bussy	de Bussy	Total
Intelligence			
Male participant	52%	80%	66%
Female participant	52%	100%	76%
Total	52%	90%	
Confidence			
Male participant	56%	56%	56%
Female participant	28%	100%	64%
Total	42%	78%	
Likely to be selected			
Male participant	48%	52%	50%
Female participant	28%	92%	60%
Total	38%	72%	

scales. For the seriousness measure, a main effect of the experimental condition was observed ($F(1, 96) = 27.12$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .22$), revealing that, overall, the participants rated the applicant with the particle as more serious than the applicant in the no particle condition. An effect of the participants' gender was observed ($F(1, 96) = 10.02$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$), showing that female participants rated the applicant to be more serious than the male participants did. However, the interaction effect was not significant ($F(1, 96) = 1.26$, $p = .264$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$). For the competence measure, we observed a main effect of the experimental condition ($F(1, 96) = 11.76$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$), revealing that, overall, the participants rated the applicant with the particle to be more competent than the applicant in the no particle condition. No main effect of the participants' gender was observed ($F(1, 96) = 2.77$, $p = .099$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$), but the interaction effect between participants' gender and experimental condition appeared statistically significant ($F(1, 96) = 6.00$, $p = .016$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$). Pairwise comparison revealed that female participants attributed more competence to the applicant in the particle condition than in the no particle condition ($t(48) = 4.58$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.32$), whereas no significant difference was found with male participants ($t(48) = 0.64$, $p = .52$, $d = 0.18$).

When considering the measures of intelligence, confidence, and possible selection for the job, a 2 (experimental condition) × 2 (participant gender) log-linear analysis was performed. For the measure of intelligence, the analysis indicated a significant main effect of the experimental condition ($\chi^2(1) = 18.69$, $p < .001$, $r = .43$), revealing that the participants selected the response "Yes" more often in the particle condition than in the no particle condition. The main effect of gender did not appear significant ($\chi^2(1) = 1.21$, $p = .270$, $r = .11$), but the interaction effect between experimental condition and participants' gender was significant ($\chi^2(1) = 6.01$, $p = .014$, $r = .25$). Pairwise comparison revealed that female participants evaluated the applicant to be more intelligent in the particle condition than in the no particle condition ($\chi^2(1) = 15.79$, $p < .001$, $r = .56$) more often than male participants did ($\chi^2(1) = 4.36$, $p = .037$, $r = .29$). For the measure of confidence, a significant main effect of the experimental condition was observed ($\chi^2(1) = 13.88$, $p < .001$, $r = .37$), which revealed that the applicant was perceived to be more confident in the particle condition than in the no particle condition. The main effect of gender did not appear significant ($\chi^2(1) = 0.67$, $p = .414$, $r = .06$), but the interaction effect between experimental condition and participant gender appeared significant ($\chi^2(1) = 21.71$, $p < .001$, $r = .47$). Pairwise comparison revealed that the applicant was considered to be more confident in the particle condition than in the no particle condition when evaluated by the female participants ($\chi^2(1) = 28.13$, $p < .001$, $r = .75$), whereas strictly no difference was observed with the male participants ($\chi^2(1) = 0$, $p = 1.00$, $r = .00$).

Finally, the most important measure in this study was people's assessment of the applicant's chances to be recruited. A significant main effect of the experimental condition was found ($\chi^2(1) = 11.93$, $p = .001$, $r = .35$), revealing that the applicant was believed to have more chances to be recruited in the particle condition than in the no particle condition. Again, the main effect of gender did not appear significant ($\chi^2(1) = 1.01$, $p = .314$, $r = .10$), but the interaction effect between experimental condition and participant gender appeared significant ($\chi^2(1) = 11.74$, $p < .001$, $r = .34$). Pairwise comparison revealed that the applicant's chances of being recruited were thought to be higher by the female participants in the particle condition than in the no particle condition

($\chi^2(1) = 21.33$, $p < .001$, $r = .65$), while no difference between the two conditions was observed with male participants ($\chi^2(1) = 0.08$, $p = .777$, $r = .04$).

Discussion

The findings reported in this study confirm our hypothesis. The applicant with a particle received more positive evaluations than when no particle was present. The applicant was perceived to be more serious, competent, confident, and clever than the applicant without the particle. It was also found that the probability of him obtaining the job increased when the particle was present. To our knowledge, this is the first time that the effect of a particle associated with a surname has been examined, and the findings suggest that this surname attribute exerts a strong effect on evaluation, given the high effect sizes reported in this study.

Such results are in accordance with previous research on the evaluation of attributes associated with surnames. It has been found that the frequency and familiarity of surnames is associated with a more positive evaluation of their bearers (Colman et al. 1981; Hargreaves et al. 1983). Studies have also indicated that surnames with connotations of minority ethnicity are associated with a more negative evaluation of their bearers (Luscri and Mohr 1998; Mair 1986; Radelet and Pierce 1985). The attractiveness of the consonance or sound comfort of names has also been found to be associated with more positive evaluation of the name bearers (O'Sullivan et al. 1988; Smith 1998). Laham et al. (2012) have reported that individuals form more positive impressions of the bearers of easy-to-pronounce names than of bearers of difficult-to-pronounce names. Thus, in terms of previous findings, our own study seems to show that an additional attribute associated with a surname, namely the particle, also has the potential to change people's perception of the name bearer.

This positive effect of the particle probably can be explained by the association in France of the particle "de" with nobility (Barthelemy 2000). In this study, a higher status connotation was associated with the applicant with the particle, which in turn explains why the applicant was perceived to be more competent, intelligent, and more likely to succeed. Finding that the effect of the particle was higher for female participants than for male participants seems to confirm this higher status explanation. Several studies have shown that women are influenced by men's apparent status. Driggers and Helms (2000) instructed female college students to view pictures of the opposite sex and rate the target's attractiveness and their own willingness to date the target. The target's salary level varied among three conditions. It was found that, as the target's salary increased, the participants' willingness to date the target also increased. In the same way, Shuler and McCord (2010) manipulated the resources of a male target by placing him next to three cars of different monetary values. The authors reported that the "hotness" rating of the target increased in a linear manner with his apparent car value. Dunn and Searle (2010) observed the same pattern of the car ownership effect on women judging men but not on men judging women. The same car ownership effect has been found when examining women's behavior. Guéguen and Lamy (2012) reported that a young man getting out of a high-value car and asking a young woman for her phone number received positive responses more frequently than when he left a medium or low-value car. These studies suggest that women react positively to information associated with high status in men.

Thus, in our study, the same effect could have occurred, particularly when considering the high effect sizes of the difference between the two experimental conditions with the female participants. Given the fact that, in France, high status and surname particle are associated, this association could have created a vision of the applicant (with the particle) as someone with higher competence and ability, which in turn explains why the same applicant was thought to have greater chances of obtaining the job. This positive effect of the particle associated with a surname should be explored more widely in the future, for example, by evaluating other attributes such as physical attractiveness or education level associated with someone with a surname including a particle or not. It would also be worth investigating whether the particle associated with a surname could influence women's perception of the bearer's status. To evaluate the relation between a surname with the nobiliary particle and attractiveness for mating or dating, it would be useful to test the presence versus absence of a particle, for example, by manipulating the surname on online dating websites and advertisements.

Of course, these findings also have a practical interest. In this study, we have shown that the particle influenced how the participants perceived an applicant in relation to a job offer. Past research has indicated that a person's surname is an important factor in the labor market. Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) manipulated *résumés* to help-wanted advertisements and observed that White-sounding names received 50 % more callbacks for interviews than African-American-sounding names. Our research seems to show that the effect of names in the labor market is not solely related to racial discrimination activated by the ethnic origin of the surnames. Other attributes of names also have an influence, which suggests that further studies are required in order to identify factors associated with the evaluation of an applicant to a job offer.

This study has some limitations. The target evaluated in this study was male, and replication should also investigate reactions to a female target. The job examined in this study required a high level of education, and it would be worth examining the effect of the particle on job offers associated with a lower education level. Only one surname was used in this study, and generalization to other surnames with or without any particle should be carried out. Female students served as interviewers in this study, and male interviewers should also be used. Finally, the participants in our experiment were passersby, but it would be well worth investigating the effect of the nobiliary particle on managers and with real job offers (e.g. on job websites) in order to increase the ecological validity of the study.

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