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# Names

Proper names are often viewed as arbitrary labels to refer to individuals or locations. From an anthropological perspective, however, proper names and their meanings are inseparable from social and historical context. Linguistic anthropologists look at the context-bound nature of language in general and, when it comes to names, investigate questions about their function in different societies. From an anthropological perspective, names are not simply arbitrary labels. How we get them, who says them, how they are used, and in what context they are spoken are inseparable from a human being's social identity.

One reason that proper names can be powerful markers of social identity is that names depend on a social history for their legitimacy. The most typical way names can be connected to a particular social history is through the event of naming. Philosophers of language have discussed such "baptismal events" as the links that attach a label arbitrarily to an individual. At one level, this is a simple pragmatic phenomenon of reference fixing. At another level, however, there are the institutional and social conditions that legitimate such an event. The baptismal event, the act of naming, is only valid within certain contexts. Like marriage vows, which may be honored only by those who respect the ceremony, certain names may only be legitimate to those who respect the particular naming, or "baptismal" event. These baptisms come in all forms, not just the familiar religious sprinkling or dunking event. Youth gang members in Los Angeles, for example, earn their nicknames through a "jumping in" ceremony, in which they are severely beaten by their new "family." The name is not considered legitimate until one takes part in this ceremony, and any attempt to use this name without such a ceremony would be ineffectual or even worthy of punishment, at least in the context of the gang. Having been through the jumping in confirms a gang member's tenacity, ability to stand up to physical pain—his or her worthiness of the new gang name. Thus the baptismal

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event not only fixes the referent of a name, it also reflects certain beliefs and values.

Names also come with a social history earned prior to any baptismal event. This prior association may highlight, among other things, connections to family members or, in the case of Muslim names, God or his qualities. Like a baptismal ceremony, the name's history highlights values of the community. Traditionally, African Muslim names like Abdallah (Servant of God) are constructed so that they always mention some aspect of or signify devotion to God. This prevalence of God in the names of Muslims reflects their beliefs about the importance of God in everyday interaction. In the United States, African Muslim names take on another role in the creation of social identity when people take these names to draw attention to their African roots. Malcolm Little became Malcolm X, then Malcolm X Shabazz, and finally, after a pilgrimage to Africa, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. All these name changes would seem unnecessary were names merely pragmatic signifying labels, but to the named such changes carry important messages about religious and cultural identity. Far from being arbitrary labels, the meaning behind these names depends on the community (including that community's shared knowledge and beliefs) that does the naming.

Despite the reference-fixing function of a baptismal event, a name does not indelibly affix an identity to an individual. Like Malcolm X, people usually have several names throughout a lifetime. People also may use different names for different situations. The proliferation of proper names for one person reflects the multiplicity of selves within an "individual," and each of these facets might be highlighted in certain contexts. Name changes facilitate and even create different identities through time and across contexts. Clifford Geertz describes the use of contextually variable *nisbas*, names used in Moroccan society. These names identify the country, town, or family (among other things) of the named individual, but change according to which trait is most useful or relevant in a particular situation. If an individual is in one's hometown, for example, one might not use the name that identifies this, but instead one more specific. The ethnicity-identifying nisba, then, changes according to context and makes relevant a certain generic aspect of a Moroccan's identity. In turn, individuals can control which facet of their identity shines by referring to themselves by a certain name. Choosing a certain nisba can also function to create context by narrowing or broadening the relevant frame of reference.

Because names can create both identity and context, using someone's proper name is a potentially powerful act. Americans recognize the stereotype of the pushy salesman who inserts a customer's first name after each sentence of his pitch. This salesman is aware of the power of names to create a context of familiarity; however, he attempts to use the power of naming not to establish genuine closeness, but to accomplish his own, individual ends (make a sale). The Apache's portrayal of "the white man" is marked by, among other things, the frequent use of proper names, reminiscent of the pushy salesman. For the Apache, this portrayal communicates the irreverence of the white man for the personal power behind names and the connections name use invokes. The Malagasy of Madagascar also

recognize the power of individuals' names and use them scrupulously, preferring to avoid using birth names at all. The Malagasy re-name infants immediately after giving them their birth name, for they believe that ancestral spirits of ill will could otherwise easily overhear an individual's name and use it to take the child's life. Their beliefs regarding the use of names by ancestral forces led the Malagasy to change their names so many times that names' pragmatic referential purpose was being subverted and a national law (limiting the number of name changes to seven) was put into effect to curb the confusion.

Beliefs about the power of names clearly vary across communities, and the power of names to define individuals and context changes over time and is negotiated in each instance of naming. The power of a name to hurt or harm someone also arises from pre-existing power structures. To return to the example of gang nicknames, a student's gang nickname, when used in place of his birth name and penned on a piece of paper, can have varying effects on the individual, depending on where and with whom he uses that name. It can be seen by a teacher as an act of defiance and used to expel a student from school. That same writing can be seen by a police officer as grounds for arrest. But peers may see this name as an act of loyalty, a link between his peers, and even between generations who have shared that name. Between gang members, use of a certain name can either deter or incite violence. Which meaning for a name is legitimate? Who can legitimately use that name? What are the results of the naming? The answers to these questions are partially determined by power relations. The meaning powerful others give to an individual's name can determine, for example, whether a gangster in Los Angeles is viewed as a loyal peer, expelled from school, or sent to jail.

Names, then, while associated with an individual, are laden with social history and power, and they are easily manipulated in the hands of others. Across societies, people carefully control the way names are used, who uses them, and in what context. A proper name, then, is not simply a useful label, but a repository of accumulated meanings, practices, and beliefs, a powerful linguistic means of asserting identity (or defining someone else) and inhabiting a social world.

(See also *identity, individual, narrative, power, prayer, relativity, space*)

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