

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME WOULD SMELL JUST AS SWEET

By <What's in a name?>

"It is a strange and thrilling thought that every time you refer to Aristotle, you are connected through a very long chain of speakers to the man himself. And every time you use a word to refer to a thing, you fasten yourself to the end of a sinuous thread in space-time which connects you to the first people who looked on that star, or that creature, or that substance, and decided it needed a name"^[1]

The seemingly innocent act of naming has repercussions which ring throughout philosophy, logic and language. It enmeshes our mind, the reality and society in imperceptible, yet powerful ways.

There are four major themes in the philosophy of language, and naming manages to make a dent in each of these:

Meaning: What do names really mean? Where does the meaning of names reside - is it in the head (what people understand from a term), or is the actual world its real habitat (where we find the actual referent)?

Communication: How do people use names in communication? What role do they play in shaping our society?

Cognition: How do names relate to people's mind? How are our worldview and perceptions affected by naming?

Language and Reality: How do words connect to the real world and vice versa?

Socrates, who was "the first who brought philosophy down from the heavens, placed it in cities, introduced it into families, and obliged it to examine into life and morals, and good and evil" and hence, initiated a discourse on the questions including but not limited to language, and Plato, without whom all of this conversation would have been lost, unaccounted, were always deeply intrigued by the questions of naming and whether it was governed by nature or convention. In *Cratylus*, Plato talks about how a word would relate to its subject. While Socrates compares the original creation of a word to the work of an artist, a theory of relations between name and object

named is posited by Cratylus, who believes that names arrive from divine origins, making them necessarily correct.

Frege, in tackling these issues, draws a distinction between two different 'meanings' of meaning. One is the 'sense', which is more like a description, or a definition in a dictionary. It is like a characterization of the concept behind a word, and might not necessarily reside in anyone's head. The second part is what Frege calls the 'reference', the real world object the name refers to. This laid the basis of what Kripke later calls descriptivist theories, i.e. proper names either are synonymous with descriptions, or have their reference determined by virtue of the name's being associated with a description or cluster of descriptions that an object uniquely satisfies. This position on naming informs the general flavour of the philosophy of Russell, Wittgenstein and Searle. Saul Kripke, in *Naming and Necessity*, attacks this position, and concludes through his analysis, that names are not abbreviated descriptions at all, but a rigid designator - something that designates the same individual in every possible world.

Sapir Whorf spoke about linguistic relativism, that is, how language shapes our definition of the real world and hence, how intrinsic differences in different communities manifest themselves through differences in language. "No people whose word for 'yesterday' is the same as their word for 'tomorrow' can be said to have a firm grip on the time", wrote Salman Rushdie in his acclaimed novel *Shame*. "To unlock a society, look at its untranslatable words." The Italian word *Dietrologia* gives the idea that the official explanation can rarely be the real one, there's always a real one behind the surface. The English language too has, on several occasions, borrowed exquisite German words (*Schadenfreude*, *Sehnsucht* et cetera) to portray feelings its own vocabulary isn't comprehensive enough to cover.

"It is bracing enough to realize that just by firing some neurons or moving my lips, I can stand in a relation to a long-dead philosopher or a distant heavenly body. But at least in those cases we can glimpse a connection between the meaner and the meant in a chain of word-learning stretching back to a primeval dubber with firsthand acquaintance. The mind starts to reel, though, when we ponder what connects us to some of the other referents of our words: to whatever it maybe found in the cosmos, to an infinity of abstract entities, to a specific person who does not yet exist (but not to any of the other billion people who do not yet exist), or to a parallel universe that has no reality but obeys certain laws. These entities spray no energy our

way, and our bodies have no sense organs for them, yet somehow a diaphanous strand of semantics connects them to us."^[1]

First Principles

Would a rose having another name smell as sweet? Our intuitions will quickly lend us an answer: of course yes. How bizarre is it to even think that the physical, sensory smell associated with an object might have anything to do with the name it is assigned!? This intuition lays the rhetorical foundations of Shakespeare's question. Objects exist out there in the real world, we assign names to them, and then they become referents. First Objects, then Names. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet, and *any other flower by the name of rose would smell different*.

Following this line of reasoning, it would seem that naming is independent of the way we perceive the world, it's just a convention that helps us navigate through it. But my practical experiences and beliefs disapprove of this logic.

On Names and Nicknames: A Personal Journey

Ever since childhood, in addition to my official name, i.e. Piyush, several people have, for reasons I could never understand, felt the need to bestow on me an additional nickname. So when I was a little, all my relatives on the dad's side would call me 'Gagan', a name which, expectedly, disappeared gradually. Around age 10, my sister started affectionately calling me 'Gattu', which was usually a sign that my cheeks are about to be pulled. My friends especially have seemingly taken particular delight in distorting my name. At varying stages of my life, I have been called:

- 1 'Pussy Cat' (Elementary school playground friends, Piyush -> Push -> Pushy -> Pussy Cat!)
- 2 'Juice' (High school friends. My class teacher in high school seemed to always be on a lookout to catch me breaking some school discipline or the other. She took particular delight in springing up on me from behind, and hitting me on the head. Later, she revealed to the class that her husband also bore the same name, and whenever she punishes me she can announce at home "Today I punished Piyush". On one particular day, no different from any other day, one of my friends from a different section, Ajachi, who was a Bengali, came to ask her permission to relieve me from the class for

an inter school competition we were supposed to attend. And for some reason, she deemed the occasion perfect to go on a digression and narrate to the *whole* class (to my utmost chagrin) the fact that her husband was also named Piyush, how Ajachi is actually the Hindi word Ayachi, but its pronounced with the 'j' sound because in bengali you do that (pronounce the 'y' with a 'j' sound), and that she discovered this amusing peculiarity on a particular Bengali trip, where her husband was repeatedly addressed to as 'Peejoosh', and so on. That fateful day marked the end of my social high school life as Piyush, and I was rechristened as 'Pjuice', or 'Drink Juice' or more commonly, just 'Juice.')

- 3 'Puppy' (College friends. When I was a freshman, my hostel seniors started calling me Puppy 2.0, because of my resemblance to a particular graduating senior, who bore the same nickname. Around the same time, on a particular playful occasion, my playful wingmates gave everyone animal monikers and symbolism, and they started calling me puppy, apparently because of a particular disarming expression I supposedly assume when I want something from them, which they called 'puppyface')

I often wonder what name could my parents have chosen which would have survived any attempt at its mutilation. There is hardly anyone I know who hasn't has had his name distorted - for comic relief, if not for anything else. I myself have often found amusement in playing around with my friends' names (My friend Kshitij Tulsyan, who is very interested in all things associated with computers but is not particularly good at any of them, is now referred to as 'A Stylish IT Junk' - an anagram I stumbled upon). But I take offence when my friends use the puppy nickname for me.

Why is it that I strongly disapprove of the term? Aren't names arbitrary, and not meant to affect any sensory perceptions? Wouldn't a rose, by any other name, smell as sweet? Wouldn't Piyush, called by any other name, be as smart, strong, and awesome?

The issue here is the different nature of these names, or how they are used. When my parents named me Piyush, they used it as what Saul Kripke would call, a rigid designator. The fact that 'Piyush' literally means 'Elixir of life' (or is the name of a particular elixir of life in Hindu mythology) had little to do with what they meant or what people would mean when they use my

name. To people who call me Piyush, it refers to me in the real world, and it means exactly what I represent to them. Part of the reason lies in the fact that people don't need or use the term for elixir of life in common usage, and the word *piyush* is somewhat sophisticated to mean that, even for a native hindi speaker. Thus there are no conflicts or unwanted associations when people use that word, because the alternative use has gone into obscurity, and its use as a rigid designator is safe. This is the reason that the use of sophisticated hindi words, which we don't use in everyday language, make for good baby names. (An alternative to this is new coinage, like the name Shuvi, which is not a word commonly used in the hindi language, and thus free from conflicts).



Nicknames like 'puppy' or 'pjuice', on the other hand, are meant to capture a particular attribute or backstory. The word puppy, for instance, means something entirely different in common everyday usage, and if Wittgenstein's picture theory is to go by, that image is evoked when people use the word. Where a word means several different things at once, there is always a burden of division of meanings, which is why we would find it a little amusing if we come across a person named *Gadha*, or *Apple* (son of Coldplay lead Chris Martin and actress Gwyneth Paltrow) or *India* (a name used for daughters of aristocratic families in England that had ties to Colonial India, such as India Hicks, the third daughter of Lady Mountbatten).

The use of Piyush as a rigid designator is free from these burdens, but the use of Puppy as a rigid designator (for me) is not. Whenever people use my nickname, they automatically build an association between me and the attributes associated with its alternative meaning. And in this instance, even though it is meant to capture a particular cuteness associated with puppies (and everyone might not draw the same association), I don't find it particularly flattering. I'd much rather be called 'Lion' or 'Tiger' or something.

"Kripke's argument is an attempt to clarify what we are logically committing ourselves to when we use proper names and names for natural kinds,. We are, suprisingly, committing ourselves to a certain class of logically necessary truths (though we can't know what they are a priori)."^[1]

The naming forces the investigation, especially for people who are not my wingmates, of the truth values of the following statement: Piyush = Puppy (in the same spirit as Morning Star= Evening Star, Jocasta = Mom (for Oedipus) and so on). I hold that such a statement is necessarily false, my friends hold that it is an empirical truth. What we agree on, is that it is not what Kripke calls an a posteriori necessity, a necessarily true contingent statement.

In the end, I think the problem lies in the fact that meaning of terms cannot be extricated from people's mind to depend on the objective world alone. The meaning of names, and nicknames, are inevitably drawn into a web of psychological associations. A rose might smell as sweet if called by any other name, but our psychological processing of that sensory input might be different. And I sure don't want any unwanted associations with puppy-kind.

Shruti? Stuti? Sushi?

My initiation into life as a pseudo-intellectual began with the first words my parents taught me, 'Shuvi', whispered the makeshift priest into my ears. 'Your name is Shuvi..', he said, "...and it's a portmanteau" completed my aunt (interestingly nick-named 'Renu', after a character from an old children's magazine Champak - called Renu the Rabbit) trying to not frown upon the frivolities bestowed upon us courtesy the Indian Culture. My name derives itself from the first names of both my parents - Shubha and Vinay. I asked my parents once why my mother's name was used first and if it was an indication of the power equations between her and Dad to which she replied I would have been called Vishu had I been born a boy, a revelation after which I thanked the forces that be that the Y chromosome had failed to damn my existence. Did it translate into the way I think or behave? Three parts mother and two parts father? Did it mean my parents transferred their characteristics into me, immiscible and absolute? Do people who have known my family think about my parents every time they use my name? Perhaps this is what the paparazzi would have called the pair had they been in Hollywood, a la Brangelina. What if their names had been Garima and Dheeraj, would I have been called Gadhi? Would a Shuvi by any other name sound just as pseudo- intellectual?

Shuvi isn't a common name, which definitely has its downsides - it's gender ambiguous, and I have various certificates from my childhood where the first prize in a poem writing competition has been awarded to 'Master Shuvi Shrivastava'. Worse still, others who hadn't come across the name before chose to rechristen me to other more commonly accepted names probably assuming I had misspelled my own name (despite having verses like 'the gonorrhea afflicted pterodactyl, said he's going to take a while') and I have newspaper clippings of an emaciated buck-toothed pre-pubescent holding a trophy as somewhere in another part of the city, a Shruti or Surbhi Shrivastava basked in reflected glory. And then of course, the faintest traces of cyber slander, on the lines of 'Shuvi is a cow' would probably mostly refer to me. But then there were the good parts too, most people pause when they hear my name and say, 'I'm sorry, what?', 'What does it mean?' and I always have a story which makes me register a moderately stronger impact in their memory which is more often than not, a good thing. It also saves me from preconceived ideas

people might have in their head from overt use and abuse in popular culture and life experiences alike - the docile Pooja, the flighty temptress Sonia, the ebullient eccentric Rukmini.

Advertising commercials play on this connotative image of names in a community. Matrimonial website posters have your neighbourhood Aarti (fair, homely, Convent educated) whose pursuit for her Rahul (IIT-IIM, 7 figure salary) leads her to matchmadeinheaven.com. Then there are the promotional texts my telephone service provider keeps sending me about ravishing Riya or tantalising Tanya being lonely in the city and wanting a friend. There have been countless instances of people naming their kids after movie stars or popular sports-persons. The Times of India covered families with kids born on the 26th January, 2001 in Gujarat who were named 'Kampan' or 'Bhoomi' after the earthquake. An unfortunate old classmate of mine was called 'Machhli' since she had been a water birth and apparently her mother saw her swimming towards her as she was born. Perhaps less out of intrinsic aptitude, and more out of her mother's - borderline delirious - exaggerated sense of destiny and purpose, she'd been taking swimming lessons since she was a kid and was an ace swimmer at least in her immediate neighbourhood.

"You're my Pumpkin-Pumpkin.."

Terms of endearment is yet another manifestation of this very intriguing concept of naming. Most embarrassing, intimate nick-names involve a defaced version of either the first couple of syllables of a person's actual name, or refer to a pre-existing image of something aesthetically or gustatorily pleasing. Nishika becomes Nishkoo, Arjun becomes Abu, Satyendra becomes Sattu while other less fortunate beings are reduced to 'cheeku', 'dolly', 'honey', 'bunny' or the ridiculously pedophilic 'baby'. If in a grossly packed Bryan Adams concert, we were to listen in to every conversation and count the number of 'babies' in the crowd would easily exceed the number of times Mr. Adams would scream out 'I can't hear you, Delhi!' by a couple of orders of magnitude. However, if Piyush was to stand there and yell 'baby', only his own 'baby' would turn back and make puppy-eyes at Mr.puppy-face. Another 'baby', by the very same name would definitely not smell just as sweet to Mr. Ahuja, whose rigid designatee for him, even though might not be a constant across space and time, at a given intersection, only refers to a specific person identified by both a mental and corresponding physical particular. For our 'baby' in question, her cognitive processes allow her (and thankfully, so) to only respond when called

out by a familiar voice. Again, the same term serves several illocutionary and perlocutionary acts depending on the manner, voice modulation (and time of the day?) et cetera. It could be an apology, a flirtation, or Justin Bieber crooning, which could evoke reactions such as more tantrums, an insult or turning off the radio respectively.

Mr. and Mrs. Iyer

An instance of naming gone awry is when a song called ‘Sheila ki jawani’ got really popular, it begins with a refrain of ‘What’s your name, what’s your name, what’s your name?’ and is followed by ‘My name is Sheila..’. Now a cousin sister aged a year and a half, growing up on unhealthy doses of MTV and Maggi, when asked the traditional ‘What’s your name?’ started responding with ‘Sheila’. Now she obviously didn’t process information and language the way we do, but relied on associations and memory to communicate. Simple words like ‘mumum’ would fetch her water by a doting group of butlers she calls her Mom and Dad. She’d been taught to say ‘Welcome’ at any mention of ‘Thank You’ and similarly, our Jenkins invention taught her, rather over-wrote, what her parents had taught her should be the standard response to a standard question. Somewhere as she grows up, she will start to perceive language differently, it won’t be sets of words and/or actions that go together, but will instead change to words and their references, and she will start to identify herself with the tag her parents have given her. Perhaps she will marry into a community where the bride’s name is changed after marriage to match the initials of her husband and her journey from Sheila to Kavya to VictimOfMisogyny will all be stored with the same identity within her tiny central processing unit of limited computational power. Will her name affect her actions? Does changing your name (or surname, as is a more common practice) subconsciously influence your sense of self? Does it tell the woman that her identity is now linked with her husband’s and that she’s no longer a part of her previous family? Does it imply dependence and a stripping of individuality that she had commanded till now?

“My name is Khan..”

It has been seen that in the event of a religious riot, a number of people in the minority community change their names so as to appear aligned with the interests of the dominant community and protect themselves from potential harm. Salim Akhtar becomes Ravi Mehta and

suddenly the angry mob banging on his door threatening to torch down his house starts pledging solidarity and brotherhood. We are all aware of the extra security checks a Khan or a Hussain will need to go through at an airport or the discomfort that a bigoted co-passenger will be very vocal about once he catches sight of the name on the boarding pass of our unfortunate traveler. A Deshmukh or a Kirloskar in Maharashtra would definitely not suffer the same fate at the hands of the Shiv Sena as a Pandey or a Yadav. Certainly, a rose by another name could sometimes protect it from being trampled upon.

References

- 1 Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought*
- 2 Class Readings