

Our Names in the Computing Age

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A Survey of Names

United States: <first-name> <middle-name> <last-name>

Latin America/Spanish: <first-name> <middle-name>
<paternal-last-name> <maternal-last-name>

Japan: <family-name> <given-name>

Hungary: <family-name> <given-name>

China: <family-name> <first-character-given-name>
<last-character-given-name>

Iceland: <given-name> <fathers-first-name> <-son/dottir>

Pakistan: <given-name> <fathers-first-name>

Diversity and Social Function

- Names show diversity over time and place
- Names reveal ancestry, religious background, linguistic information
- An individual's primary identification *within* a linguistic system

- **Connecting Functions:** Personal names place you within a social, linguistic, ancestral context (We-Identity)
- **Individualizing Functions:** Parents choose a name to evoke some desired quality in a child; a name is what makes You You! (I-Identity)
- The forename-surname paradigm captures this contrast, although this may be modified, for example when a child's given name is the name of an ancestor

1. Modern states require organized data about its populations
2. Surnames narrow the chances of collisions and provide information about family and ancestry

An Example

The problem of naming and identification can be expressed generally. Let us imagine a police official (it could be a tax collector or a conscription officer) who is trying to locate a specific, unique individual. Assume further that he is faced with a situation not unlike that of a small English village in 1700, but with *no* surnames, let alone fixed, patronymic surnames. Take a comparatively simple case of a village with, say, 1,000 males bearing only one of eight names which are, for the sake of this initial case, perfectly evenly distributed across the (male) population. How likely, in this case, is our police official to collar the man he is after? If he knows he is looking for a “Henry,” there will be 125 “Henrys” in this village and 124 of them will be the wrong “Henry.” Without local assistance and under the assumption, for the sake of argument, that he actually knows the ‘true’ given names of all villagers, he will almost surely fail. What if we imagine that all males in this village have *two names*, which vary independently? In this case, the chances that the police official will grab the wrong “Henry” are much reduced, but still substantial, as there will be about 15 “Henry Thomass,” 15 “William Jamess,” etc. Once we move to *three names* (also varying independently), it is likely that the police official will get his man half the time on average. The opacity of the villagers to outside identification is reduced radically by the use of each additional identifying name.

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Solutions and Strategies

- Unicode
- Passports
- More