

## Personal Naming and Society: A comparative study of disparate communities

*Ellen S. Bramwell*

DOI: 10.2436/15.8040.01.74

### Abstract

There are multifarious connections between personal names and the societies in which they are bestowed and used. This paper reports on a project which investigated personal naming systems (both official and unofficial) in several present-day communities in Scotland with differing social and linguistic features.

The project investigated practices in five communities which range from: rural to urban, multilingual to monolingual, close-knit to loose-knit, indigenous to immigrant. The data were collected through extensive semi-structured interviews in each community alongside a degree of participant-observation. The project had a socio-onomastic focus: to examine links between personal names and society.

A comparative approach allows for conclusions broader than simply how official and unofficial names were used over generations within one community - it produces a spread of data spanning space and (micro-)culture. This permits tentative conclusions regarding the effect of social factors such as social structure and cultural and linguistic contact.

\*\*\*\*\*

### Introduction

Personal names are bestowed and used in every known society. However, despite the ubiquity of the practice of having individual names for people, the systems underlying the giving of these names vary according to culture (Alford, 1988). Because of these onomastic patterns, a person's name can give information about social background, culture, language and even religion, as well as identifying the bearer as an individual.

The project discussed in this article aimed to investigate links between personal naming and society by discovering how names are bestowed and used within several different types of community. As well as personal names which are officially documented, there was a focus on the oral transmission of unofficial names and naming traditions. This type of name is rarely recorded as part of a naming culture, but can form an integral part of the way people use names within a society.

### Aims of research

As mentioned above, this research project had a socio-onomastic focus, as names were considered within the wider context of the society in which people gave and used them. This led to several broad aims within the project, along with more focussed research questions.

The two most important of these aims were as follows:

- To produce a model of empirical anthroponymic research by investigating several personal naming systems in a comprehensive way and developing a cross-cultural study of personal naming.
- To investigate possible links between naming systems, social structure and cultural contact.

The first of these aims is clearly of a more practical nature, and its completion allowed the later, more discursive and theoretical, aim to be realised. In order to produce this model, and investigate several naming systems, more detailed questions were posed. These were:

- What types of personal names are used within these communities?
- Which features are common to all or to specific types of communities?
- What are people's motivations for giving these names?
- Does this differ between communities?

Once the model was established, and the investigation into naming practices in the separate communities was concluded, more general questions could be asked. These questioned naming practices in the context of societal links and cultural contact and were as follows:

- How does social structure affect the naming practices of a community?
- What happens when one set of naming traditions faces competition from another?
- How do people coming together from many naming traditions use names?
- Can naming systems give an indication of the level of assimilation of immigrant communities?

In order to carry out these aims and ask these questions, a specific methodology had to be produced, which was structured enough to allow comparison yet flexible and detailed enough to record naming practices within communities.

### Methodology

Personal names exist within the linguistic system but are also cultural markers. Lévi-Strauss (1966) separated what he thought of as the linguists' problem of finding the place of names in the system of language from his own as an anthropologist, which he believes was investigating the place of names as "a means of allotting positions in a system [in social groups]". There does not seem to be any specific reason why these goals must be entirely separated, into diverse academic disciplines as well as simply different areas of research. This study did not seek to separate the study of personal names in this way; the focus was on names within society, but without entirely disregarding their relationship to language.

Joseph (2004) states that "The study of names has long been marginalised within linguistics, to a subarea called 'onomastics' that is rarely taught and has little institutional recognition. Yet names are the primary text of personal identity, occupying a privileged place within the language...One of the long-term effects of inquiry into language and identity should be to integrate names more fully into the anthropological end of linguistics". Despite Joseph's disparagement of onomastics as a field, he does recognise names as important objects of study within the context of linguistic anthropology, and perhaps this is where the purpose and method of this study rests more comfortably: within the anthropological end of onomastics.

The methodological orientation of the project is influenced by the sociolinguist/linguistic anthropologist Dell Hymes and his interest both in the intricacies of language and in cross-cultural comparison. The central concern of Hymes's approach to studying language has always been to view it in its contextual and cultural framework. Hymes (1968) believes that using qualitative methods does not have to mean a rejection of comparative study, and that qualitative analysis even "insists on refining the empirical basis of comparative study, by providing more surely valid descriptions of the individual systems on which comparative study must depend."

A largely qualitative approach was adopted, with the aim of following Hymes's lead and combining detailed empirical description and analysis with a comparative study to tackle the larger questions raised. In order to have a reasonable basis for comparison it was necessary to

investigate personal names in different types of communities between which the social and linguistic contexts vary extensively. For practical reasons, these communities had to be based within Scotland, but this meant that different communities could be studied which were subject to the same wider political and cultural environment on a national scale (though with different, more localised, cultures of their own). The communities were based in the areas boxed in red in Fig. 1, below.



**Fig. 1** – Map of Scotland showing locations of communities studied.

Original map author: Eric Gaba, shared under GNU Free Documentation Licence

The community based on the group of islands to the north-west of the Scottish mainland is that of the Western Isles. The area studied exists on one of these islands, though the population of the Western Isles as a whole is so small that this island is not identified exactly so as not to identify informants. The community is sparsely populated, close-knit, rural and isolated. This area has a strong Celtic tradition, and many of the inhabitants still speak Scottish Gaelic as well as English. In sum, this is a rural, bilingual and indigenous community.

The smaller box towards the north-east coast of Scotland encircles the town of Buckie. This community is more densely populated than the Western Isles, close-knit and relatively rural, yet has links to cities in the region. It is a small town with a strong sense of local identity as a fishing centre. Local pride is also centred around the Scots language, and more particularly the Doric dialect, which is spoken by the vast majority of the population. This could be characterised as a small-town, monolingual and indigenous community.

The final three communities are all within Glasgow, Scotland's largest city located in the south-west of Scotland. The one indigenous community studied here lives in an area which is densely populated and urban, and has much looser social ties. A working-class area of Glasgow, this community is much more difficult to circumscribe as an isolated entity. A continuum from Broad Glaswegian to Standard Scottish English (Stuart-Smith, 2003) is spoken by the inhabitants, reflecting the less homogeneous society.

These three different types of indigenous communities were selected to enable a multifaceted view of the anthroponymic situation in Scotland, allowing for regional and social variation within a small country. The differences in social structure also permits comparisons to be made which may have wider implications for investigating the relations between society and personal naming.

Two immigrant communities in Glasgow were also chosen. These varied in structure, both from each other and from the indigenous communities. In addition, they varied in patterns of immigration and in the length of time they had been established.

The first immigrant community is a well-established and stable urban community, comprising of several generations, with close-knit ties and strong social cohesion. The Pakistani community in Glasgow are largely Muslim and speak a selection of English, Punjabi and Urdu, with English and Punjabi being dominant. This Pakistani Muslim community, then, are an urban, bi/trilingual, long-established immigrant community.

The second immigrant community is a recently established urban community of asylum seekers and refugees with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and loose-knit social ties. This asylum seeker community is centred round a group of tower blocks in Glasgow and has been created as a result of government agencies dispersing asylum seekers outwith London. This makes it newer, more diverse and highly changeable, when compared with the Pakistani Muslim community in the same city. It could be characterised as being an urban, multilingual, highly changeable and immigrant community.

Through studying the naming systems present in these two immigrant communities, insight can be provided into the effect of social structure and of the dominant culture on personal names in a transplanted community.

## **Data**

The data collected for this study were largely from in-depth interviews with informants drawn from a wide age range. Over sixty informants were interviewed in a detailed way during the study. More typically anthropological research was also carried out, with some use of participant-observation. These methods were supported by the use of existing resources and research into personal names.

The interviews were semi-structured, which meant that there were a range of topics discussed in every interview, allowing answers on naming practices to be compared, but that informants were not restricted to these topics. They could speak to the interviewer about any aspect of naming or society within their community that they wished. The reason for not limiting informants to a set of restrictive questions is to gain "insight into what the interviewee sees as relevant and important" (Bryman, 2004). The importance of this to the interviews carried out for this research is considerable, as the researcher was not a member of most of the communities under investigation hence she could not assume that she knew what was

important to these communities. Therefore, there had to be flexibility to allow the informants to talk about what mattered to them in relation to the topic.

The following extracts from several of the interviews carried out for this project indicate the type of data that was collected, as well as some of the concerns of the informants. In the extract below, taken from the Western Isles corpus of interviews, this teenage informant is describing a marked difference in the more traditional names of teenagers originally from the islands and young people who join the school having moved there.

**Interviewer:** Mm-hm. Ok, so (.) What about your kind of classmates as well, like. What kind of- (.) are they quite- getting quite traditional names as well or?

**Western Isles Teenage Male:** They're very traditional, yeah, most of them. It's just a cross-section and you know there's Johns, Douglas, eh, well lots of Johns (.) Eh, that sort of thing, your usual typical sort of names. An' I can't think of any that are like two good friends, especially- I'm not being like controversial here or anything but you know people that come in (..)

**Int:** Oh no, don't. You can say anything (.) honestly.

**WI-T-M:** O- o- obviously (..) they'll have sort of different names. There's a new boy called Dirk and you know, we just think that's such a strange name here cos we're all Iains and Seonaighs and that sort of thing [laughs]

In the next extract, an elderly man from the Buckie community, where fishing has been the traditional industry, discusses unofficial names within the community, and particularly the practice of using 'tee-names' (unofficial names attached to specific families) which has died out in the younger generations.

**Interviewer:** And how would they identify, that's why I-

**Buckie Elderly Male:** The older generation would say 'Oh that's Souter's loon' (.) Right. The younger generation would say Alec the Steadfast (.) the name of the boat

**Int:** Oh right

**B-E-M1:** and he'll be identified by that (.) Or Steadfast Alec, that depends

**Int:** Uh-huh

**B-E-M1:** on the way they put it (.) and he would be identified by that

**Int:** Right.

**B-E-M1:** See

**Int:** So-

**B-E-M1:** He's gi'en that

**Int:** does- does that mean the tee-names aren't used so much now?

**B-E-M1:** No they're not (.) no they're not. Em. And they get hella mixed up wi' them, some guys think they ken about them but they dinna

In the final illustrative extract, an Algerian asylum seeker in Glasgow discusses naming his children, who were born in Scotland. He has given them fairly international names which might be recognised as either British/Scottish or Arabic. This is because the names are used in both the Qur'an and the Bible. His reluctance to give his children names which mark them out specifically as Muslim is explained in the context of national and community tensions.

**Interviewer:** Yeah and people will remember these names and they won't-

**Algerian Asylum Seeker Male:** Yeah and b-

**Int:** Ah (.) ok



**A-AS-M1:** that's why give them these names because I don't want to give them names (.) example that relate to the (.) to the- any religions. Not-

**Int:** Right

**A-AS-M1:** especially Islam religion

**Int:** Mm-hm

**A-AS-M1:** Is just because I don't want- because we live in Scotland here and (.) I know ey you have bad and good people (.) and er just to (.) not put them on the situation when they have harassment er because their names and everything. I don't er want to give them example name relate to Mohammed or relate to example Abdullah or Abdul

**Int:** Mm-hm. Do you think they would get harassed because of that?

**A-AS-M1:** Sure

Hymes (1961) describes anthropological research as being a theoretical, rather than simply descriptive, task, in that it involves developing a theory that serves a particular case. A similar idea was later developed as grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This has evolved into the prevailing view in qualitative social science that a “theory is a description of a pattern that you find in the data” (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). These ideas, along with other approaches, were utilised in the qualitative analysis of the data. This allowed for a comprehensive, detailed and inductive analysis, without ignoring the inevitable complexity. The data were analysed in stages: first within each interview, then with others of the informants' age group in their community, then with their community as a whole, before comparing results with those of other communities. It is important to note that this involved hierarchical coding, reduction and categorisation of the interview data, but was not a linguistic analysis.

### Some tentative conclusions

Though firmer conclusions will be published on final completion of the project, it is possible to make some tentative conclusions here as to what this approach can reveal about personal naming and society. There are several main areas, the most important of which will be discussed below.

This type of detailed study is able to give a very good illustration of the anthroponymic systems of specific communities. This allows the researcher to understand how the naming practices of each of these small societies work together, with different types of names being used for different purposes and in different contexts. As this project interviewed informants across a wide age-range of communities, it was also possible to determine generational changes. This can help to show whether changes are taking place in the naming systems, and, if so, what these changes are.

The project also looked at how social structure and other social factors influenced naming practices. Whether a community is close-knit (with dense social ties) seem important for unofficial naming. Dense social networks seemed to be conducive to bynaming and nicknaming as there was less unofficial naming reported and noted in the communities with looser social ties. However, that was not the whole story, as other social factors such as isolation seemed to have an even more important role in the maintenance of community-specific practices over generations.

Perhaps most interesting were the results relating to cultural contact and competing naming traditions. In the Western Isles community, Scottish Gaelic and English names co-exist, with many people having both through processes of name ‘translations’ and traditional bynames.

However, these are often used in different social domains. In the Pakistani Muslim community, people generally use personal names from their own minority culture, but are aware that this is often changed by others outside the community because of difficulties in pronunciation and through the creation of nicknames. In the Asylum Seeker/Refugee community the situation is still in flux. Parents often use names from their homeland when naming children, but their teenage children settled in Scotland are aware that they will be making a choice between onomastic cultures. In almost every community studied, the older generations are often uncomfortable with (or incredulous about) what are seen as ‘different’ names, whether those older people are from the Glaswegian, Western Isles, Pakistani Muslim or Buckie communities.

In conclusion, the study of the five communities investigated as part of this project has revealed complex anthroponymic systems which are closely tied to the society in which they exist. Contextual and cultural information was seen as vitally important in order to first understand the systems, and then to use this knowledge to compare and ask more general and theoretical questions of the data. The emerging conclusions allow insights into the individual naming communities as well as contributing towards a greater understanding of the ways in which personal names and society entwine.

## References

- Alford, Richard D. 1988. *Naming and Identity*. Connecticut: HRAF Press.
- Auerbach, Carl, F.; Louise B. Silverstein. 2003. *Qualitative Data*. New York: New York University Press
- Bryman, Alan. 2004. *Social Research Methods 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Glaser, Barney G. & Anselm L. Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co.
- Hymes, Dell. 1968. ‘Linguistic problems in defining the concept of ‘tribe’’. In: June Helm (ed.) *Essays on the Problem of Tribe*, 23-48. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Joseph, John E. 2004. *Language and Identity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1966. *The Savage Mind* (Weidenfeld, G. & Nicolson Trans.) London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Stuart-Smith, Jane. 2003. ‘The Phonology of Modern Urban Scots’. In: John Corbett, J. Derrick McClure and Jane Stuart-Smith (eds) *Edinburgh Companion to Scots*, 110-137. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Ellen S. Bramwell  
University of Glasgow  
United Kingdom  
[ellen.bramwell@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:ellen.bramwell@glasgow.ac.uk)