

First names and globalization

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Abstract

Changes in society are reflected in the names that parents choose for their children. An important aspect of today's social transition concerns the effect of increasing globalization. A study of naming trends in the Western world made clear that in many countries international names are dominant. Since the media play a crucial role here special attention is paid to this factor, focusing especially on television and the internet.

Introduction

As we all know, a culture is mirrored in naming practices. Changes in society are reflected in the names that parents choose for their children. Research has shown that predominantly motives of an esthetic and traditional kind determine the choice for particular names. However, it is still worthwhile to study changes in naming patterns within a context of social transition. An important aspect concerns the effect of increasing globalization. More so than ever, films and soap series have a world-wide impact. Besides television, the Internet is now rapidly advancing as an important medium for spreading global trends. As a result of these developments, children are more and more becoming citizens of the world and parents increasingly choose international names for their offspring. Of course, a contrary movement may also be detected, in the sense that some parents express a national or regional identity in the names of their children, but its impact is totally outweighed by common favourites, as popular names chosen in various countries demonstrate.

Names in a changing society

Do parents wish to convey a message when they pick a name for their child?

If one were to ask parents this question, they would probably reply that they just wanted to have a nice name for their child. Alternatively, they might come up with some other reason, like naming the child after its grandparents. This however, is no reason to stop investigating the relation between first names and changes in society. There is reason enough to believe that first names express the identity of a community. Such a community could be a social or ethnic group, but it could also be a region or a country. Parents may not be aware of any messages incorporated in the names they choose, but when we look at first names on the level of groups, it becomes clear that they are an expression of the identity of a group.

Many people are influenced by the same sources: American movies and television series, the same pop music and pop musicians, the same sports heroes, etc. People all over the world buy their food at McDonald's, wear similar clothes, and adore the same celebrity idols. So one might say that we are influenced by the same sources and develop a similar taste. Considering the fact that this is a relatively young trend that cannot be stopped, we can only expect it to grow in importance.

No doubt this global trend has its influence on people's name preferences. A study by Enzo Caffarelli and me has shown that names chosen in different countries show increasing similarities (Caffarelli & Gerritzen 2002: 663-664, o. c. in note 2). This means that more and more parents prefer names that are used in many other countries as well. We could call such names international: they are used and known in many countries. Of course the pronunciation of names differs from country to country: there are various

international names which for example the French pronounce differently from the English and the Germans, like Sarah and Benjamin.

For some of the similarities, we will have to be aware of the fact that the names belong to the traditional stock of Christian names. We do not know in detail which names belong to the traditional name stock in which countries.

A large variety in form, like with Andrew (Andreas, André, Anders), John (Johannes, Jan, Jens), Katherine (Katrine, Caitlin, Karen) and Michael (Mikkel, Miguel, Michiel), is an indication that the name has been in use for a long time. Conversely, a stable form is related to a recent spread.

Examples of this are Jessica and Kevin, and to some extent also Emma, Julia, Laura and Sara(h). Exceptions to the rule that a stable form indicates recent spread are Anna, Daniel, Maria and Martin. These names may have a long history in many countries, but nevertheless, there is little variation (only Marie is a widespread alternative form). Names like these are classical: they fit into many languages and it is hard to tell whether they are modern or traditional. Other names that take a strong international position are Alexander, Christian and Christina, David, Lucas and Thomas. Most of the international names belong to the general Western name stock, although there are exceptions, like the two English names already mentioned Kevin and Jessica. They can be considered as recent export products, whereas many other names were spread under the influence of Christianity, a long time ago.

The popularity of international names weakens the position of national and regional names. These national and regional names can also be found among the popular names, but in many countries the international names account for the majority of names. Popular names in the Western world – and to

some extent also in Eastern Europe – are beginning to show more and more similarities.

In general the girls' names are more international than the boys' names. A possible explanation for this could be that people tend to be more conservative when choosing a name for a son than for a daughter, in which case parents are more inclined to choose something new (Gerritzen 1999). And since international names are apparently the latest fashion, the girls' names present a more international picture than the boys' names.

The influence of media: television

Various studies in the Netherlands and Germany analysing the rationale behind naming practices show that most parents are driven by motives of an esthetic nature, partly in combination with the desire to call their child after a member of the family. Factors such as 'naming after celebrity idols', 'found in a reference book of names' and 'the meaning of the name' are of secondary importance in the search process. This has been a recognizable pattern for decades, leading to the conclusion that television has not significantly altered the motives for choosing names (Gerritzen 1998: 146). Research performed by Rast, mentioned in an article by Friedhelm Debus published in 1974, has yielded remarkable results. This investigation measured the effect of the television series 'Ein Sommer mit Nicole', very popular in Germany at the time, as regards the popularity of the name Nicole. No causal connection proved valid here; in the three months after the series' final episode the name was even chosen less frequently. Soon after, its popularity increased, but the television series may only be attributed a boosting effect, at the most (Debus 1974: 461-462). The American sociologist Stanley Lieberson gives various examples of the complicated

relation between the naming of children and the effect of the media in his book 'A matter of taste'. Mass entertainment is not responsible for the existence of naming fashions, he states, although it does influence some specific naming practices (Liebersohn 2000: 222).

The influence of various media usually does not simply concern direct naming after celebrity idols. Vandebosch correctly states "that the influence of mass media on given names is more complicated than it might at first appear and it encompasses considerably more than a straightforward 'naming after media personalities' would suggest" (Vandebosch 1998: 244). Of course, the indirect influence of media is definitely strong, as famous name bearers – either real or fictional– determine a name's reputation. This process proves most intense whenever films and television series are involved. Also, we get to know many names through the media. For a start, you may just think of the names that become part of our system as they feature in the credits of a film or television series. Research by Vandebosch shows that television influenced 18% of parents in choosing a name. By adding the influence of novels, newspapers, magazines, films, music, sport and radio – the Internet was not as yet so popular in the nineties - , she establishes a percentage of 34% (alongside 'personal contacts' 48% and 'books of names' 34% (from these figures you can of course conclude that multiple responses were possible); Vandebosch 1998: 248). Therefore, the media do not so much influence naming practices through the direct naming after celebrities, but are first and foremost important sources of inspiration: we are acquainted with many first names by engaging with modern media.

4. The influence of media: Internet

The increase of our individual stock of names is also relevant as regards the

Internet, though it has to be said that research into the motives and sources of inspiration for naming has not been sufficiently updated to incorporate ‘found on the Internet’. In future, this category will have to be included. An important advantage of the Internet concerns the flexible way in which information can be searched and provided. Names are not only accessible in alphabetical order, but may in principle also be traced on account of a range of characteristics, such as length, meaning and frequency. Also, Internet allows for an interactive approach: parents may consult one another on the subject of naming.

As stated above, internationalisation is an important trend in recent naming practices. More and more often parents choose names which are used internationally and are familiar to people in large parts of the world. This makes clear that an increasing number of parents – consciously or unconsciously – seem to anticipate their childrens’ future international contacts.

The Internet is an aspect of our society’s growing international outlook. As regards first names, there are two significant stimuli at work here. On the one hand, the Internet strengthens our self-perception of being citizens of the world; on the other hand, names from other parts of the globe have come within reach. The first development causes a growing awareness among parents that their children will not only be active in their home area, but will also participate in more wide-ranging networks. For many people, international contacts have become part and parcel of daily life.

The Internet not only provides for our participation in global networks, but also supplies a huge potential of information. Data banks of first names may be found via search engines and websites that are relevant to expecting parents. The increasing number of parents that makes use of Internet search

options when looking for names, may cause exotic and unfamiliar names to become more popular. Such future development, readily anticipated, will further strengthen recent tendencies towards differentiation in naming practices. More and more, parents look out for names that are special, preferably unique. In this way, the Internet will contribute to the current trend towards individualization in society.

However, the internationalization of naming practices, is of greater importance than individualizing tendencies. In this respect also, current developments in society are relevant as globalization plays an ever more important role. As to the close interaction between alterations in naming practices and changes in society, Internet is the perfect medium. As concerns the Internet's effect on naming practices, expectations are high – quite rightly so.

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