The Power of Names

By Adam AlterMay 29, 2013

The German poet Christian Morgenstern once said that “all seagulls look as though their name were Emma.” Though Morgenstern was known for his nonsense poetry, there was truth in his suggestion that some linguistic labels are perfectly suited to the concepts they denote. “Dawdle” and “meander” sound as unhurried as the walking speeds they describe, and “awkward” and “gawky” sound as ungainly as the bodies they represent. When the Gestalt psychologist and fellow German Wolfgang Köhler read Morgenstern’s poem, in the nineteen-twenties, he was moved to suggest that words convey symbolic ideas beyond their meaning. To test the idea more carefully, he asked a group of respondents to decide which of the two shapes below was a maluma and which was a takete:



If you’re like the vast majority of Köhler’s respondents, you’re compelled by the idea that malumas are soft and rounded (like the shape on the left), whereas taketes are sharp and jagged (like that on the right). As Köhler showed, words carry hidden baggage that may play at least some role in shaping thought. What’s surprising, perhaps, is how profoundly a single word can shape material outcomes over time.

Take the case of the proper name, a particular type of word. Like maluma and takete, the names people choose for their children convey a wealth of sometimes unintended information. In one study, the economists Bentley Coffey and Patrick McLaughlin examined whether female lawyers in South Carolina were more likely to become judges if their names were more “masculine.” Some names—like James, John, and Michael—are almost exclusively male; others—like Hazel, Ashley, and Laurie—are almost exclusively female. But a third group is shared almost equally by men and women—like Kerry and Jody—and women with those names were notably more likely than their nominally feminine counterparts to become judges. The researchers labelled the phenomenon the Portia Hypothesis, after the female character in Shakespeare’s “The Merchant of Venice” who disguises herself as a man so she can appear before the all-male court. (Note that the experiment can’t rule out the possibility that the nominally masculine lawyers actually behaved differently from their nominally feminine counterparts.)

Similar linguistic associations influence how we think and behave in other ways. For example, if I told you that I was driving north across hilly terrain tomorrow, would you expect that drive to be mostly uphill or mostly downhill? If you’re like most people, you associate northerly movement with going uphill, and southerly movement with going downhill. According to research by the psychologists Leif Nelson and Joseph Simmons, this association produces some strange biases: people believe that a bird will take longer to migrate between the same two points if it flies north than if it flies south; they expect a moving company to charge eighty per cent more to move furniture north rather than south; and, as a different study concluded, they assume that property is more valuable when it sits in the northern part of town. Apparently these quirks stem from the decision of early Greek mapmakers to plot the northern hemisphere above the southern hemisphere—a decision that frustrated, among others, an Australian named Stuart McArthur, who proposed a corrective map that reversed the projection. This may not be the sort of effect that Köhler envisaged, but it does suggest that arbitrary linguistic traits have an outsized influence on our thoughts and actions.

What ancient mapmakers did unwittingly for north and south, lawyers do intentionally when they describe accident scenes. The defense might call a car accident “contact”; the plaintiff might say one car “smashed” the other. These labels really matter, as Elizabeth Loftus and John Palmer showed in a classic experiment. After a group of students watched the same series of traffic accidents, they were asked how fast the cars were going when the accident occurred. When the cars were described as having “contacted” one another, the students estimated their speed to be thirty-two miles an hour, whereas another group estimated that the cars were travelling at forty miles an hour when they were described as having “smashed” one another. In a second experiment, fourteen per cent of participants incorrectly remembered seeing shattered glass when told that the cars “hit” one another, whereas thirty-two per cent of participants in a second sample made the same error when told the cars “smashed” into one another. If a single word can change how people remember an event they witnessed only minutes earlier, there isn’t much hope for eyewitnesses who recall, often months or years later, events experienced under stressful, distracted conditions.

Beyond their meaning, words also differ according to how easy they are to pronounce. People generally prefer not to think more than necessary, and they tend to prefer objects, people, products, and words that are simple to pronounce and understand. In 2006, my colleague Daniel Oppenheimer and I investigated the performance of hundreds of stocks immediately after they were listed on the financial markets between 1990 and 2004. We discovered that companies with simpler names that were easier to pronounce received a greater post-release bump than did companies with complex names. (I also wrote about this phenomenon for the New York Post.) The effect was strongest during the first few days of trading, when investors had little information about the stock’s fundamentals and were more likely to be swayed by extraneous factors. (We also ran a series of additional analyses to rule out the possibility that the effect was driven by different naming trends across different industries, company sizes, or countries, and the possibility that successful stocks seem to have fluent names merely because they’re mentioned more often in the media.) Even stocks with pronounceable ticker codes (e.g., KAR)—the letter strings that investors use to refer to each stock—outperformed those with unpronounceable ticker codes (e.g., RDO) in the short run. An investor who placed a thousand dollars in the ten most fluently named stocks between 1990 and 2004 would have earned a fifteen-per-cent return after just one day of trading, whereas the same thousand dollars invested in the ten least fluently named stocks would have earned a return of only four per cent. (In the magazine last year, John Colapinto wrote about the virtues of simplicity in choosing brand names.

Even the names people choose for their children vary from simple to complex, and that decision determines some of their outcomes later in life. With the psychologists Simon Laham and Peter Koval, I found that people prefer politicians with simpler names—and lawyers in American firms with fluent names rise up the legal hierarchy to partnership more quickly than their non-fluently named colleagues. (The result persisted even when we focussed on Anglo-American names, so it doesn’t simply boil down to xenophobic prejudice.)

These studies suggest a sort of linguistic Heisenberg principle: as soon as you label a concept, you change how people perceive it. It’s difficult to imagine a truly neutral label, because words evoke images (as do maluma and takete), are associated with other concepts (as are “north” with up and “south” with down), and vary in complexity (from KAR to RDO). Still, you don’t need to worry too much about what you name your children. The effects are subtle, people with non-fluent names succeed all the time, and norms change. After three decades of fluently named Presidents—a Ronald, two Georges, and a Bill—Barack Obama ascended to the Presidency. Five years later, “Barack” has become one of the easiest-to-pronounce names in the country.

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*Illustration by Jordan Awan.*

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