

The Symbolic Function of Personal Given Names in Mass Culture

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Abstract: This paper discusses personal given names that are either famous or very common in the context of the modern mass culture in the United States of America. Unlike most names, the names of heroes, characters and idols do not vanish without leaving a trace. Such names function as symbolic signs of culture and time and are preserved in the collective memory of different generations of the society. That is to say, widely recognized names from different fields in the life of the society and different spheres of modern mass culture pass into the level of symbols and become the elements of ordinary consciousness and perception of people. We can see their symbolism most clearly when they take on materialized forms as toys or as characters of comics, films and songs, which thereby perpetuate a social life of such names.

Key words: Given name • Mass culture • Nickname • Perception of names • Personal name • Symbolic name • Symbolic meaning.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the present paper is to study given names of those people who have gained fame or notoriety. Such names illustrate the symbolic function; they can also attain and reflect important cultural values [1].

A modern industrial society is characterized by the production of cultural values intended for mass consumption and disseminated by mass media. It is also characterized by the focus on an average mass taste, the standardization of a form and content and an interest in a commercial success [2]. The modern mass culture has created symbolic values in names deemed typically common and famous ones that are preserved in the collective memory. Many special reference books and dictionaries, containing such names-symbols and names-signs of their time are readily available [3, 4, 5, 6, 8]. In view of the above, the linguistic material under study is some given names of the mass culture in the United States of America.

The topicality of the study conducted is to show here how some names become a part of the collective memory as the values they reflect and emulated by common people and how they are perpetuated by commercial

products and other material forms. Thus, concrete reality helps to shape language, but language also helps to shape reality.

Methodology: For gathering a representative sample, I have relied on one book in particular, "Panati's Parade of Fads, Follies and Manias. Origin of Our Most Cherished Obsessions" by Charles Panati [3]. It draws special attention to the formation of idols and symbolic characters coming to the foreground in the context of the American mass culture. The advantage of this book lies in the fact that it makes a record of these idols and symbolic characters every ten years and, accordingly, reflects the changes, substitutions and persistence in the symbolic values of some famous American names. My research methods embrace etymological, semantic, structural, ethnolinguistic, linguocultural, linguopragmatic and psycholinguistic types of analysis.

Given Names in Different Spheres of the American Modern Mass Culture: The main events in social development leave their marks in the language of the society. Names closely associated with major cultural events will retain their associative value in much the same way as place names may retain local history in individual

communities. Many names acquired symbolic value by the importance of both World War I and World War II. Military words of the period of World War I came to the United States of America, mainly, from Great Britain through newspapers and magazines. Some of them have been already forgotten and some continue to be used to the present time, sometimes with other meanings. For instance, the expression *Big Bertha* was very popular during the World War I period. It is the name of a large caliber German cannon. It was named after the wife of Krupp von Bolen, the largest gun manufacturer. In Modern English, *Big Bertha* is related to slang and it means “a plump or fat woman” [4].

During World War II the name *GI Joe* (GI is an acronym for *Government Issue*) became current for a common American soldier. This name is used metaphorically, having become symbolic shorthand for an American of that period of time. The British refer to an English soldier as *Tommy Atkins* (Tommy is, of course, a pet form of Thomas and soldiers were conventionally called as *Thomas Atkins* in service regulations) [5]. In his book, Charles Panati points out that the name *GI Joe* emerged like the phrase *Uncle Sam*, which is a nickname of the US government, sometimes of the whole country. *Uncle Sam* is a humorous deciphering of the letters *US*. This form came into use during the Anglo-American War of 1812 – 1814 as the name of Sam Wilson, a packer of meat products, who put a stamp on packages and boxes. The acronym *GI* was also put as a stamp on any government manufactured item ranging from underclothes to machines. Then a given name *Joe*, being phonetically simple, frequent and already in wide use in different set expressions by that time, was added to it [3]. Previous idiomatic use of the name *Joe* can be seen in *Holy Joe* (“a saint’s nickname; a hypocrite, a sanctimonious person”); *Joe Bloggs/Joe Doakes/Joe Blow* (“an ordinary and common person, an average American”); *nor for Joe* (“by no means, not for anything in the world, on no account; not for the world; not for all tea in China”) [6]. Thus, the name already had symbolic value suggesting a common person and it brought that meaning to the new term, *GI Joe*, metaphorically. It is interesting to note that the name for a female soldier follows a similar pattern- *GI Jane*- from antecedent phrases such as *plain Jane* [7].

Another symbolic name from World War II is *Rosie the Riveter*. This term was generalized to refer to many women who assumed jobs normally done by men during the war. There exist two versions of the origin of this name: according to one, a front-rank worker Rosie Bonavita with her workmate hammered a record number of

rivets into a plane wing; according to the other, it became widespread simply because of the famous patriotic song “Rosie the Riveter” [3]. Thus, a symbolic name for a participant in military hostilities, i.e. *GI Joe*, is chosen and at the same time a symbolic name for a worker of the home front- a record-setter in work productivity, i.e. *Rosie the Riveter*, is also chosen. These names can be considered as a pair in respect to each other because they express broad generalities in a time of cultural stress. They are symbolic of experience that is both common and complementary. Later, in the 1960s, *GI Joe* “does not die” and is not forgotten. The name is retained as a linguistic symbol and *GI Joe* is given a materialized form as a toy; i.e. the symbolic status of the name is demonstrated by concrete materialization. It has meaning in reference to a specific toy as well as to the idea of the common soldier.

A less well-known name arose from association with the so-called *pin-up girl*, an answer to the interests of so many lonely soldiers and meaning “a pretty, sexually attractive girl whose picture is displayed on magazine covers or centerfolds” [3].

From the many pin-up girls, the name *dumb Dora* meaning “a pretty but silly girl, a stupid girl” emerged [3]. The name cannot be traced to an individual and so probably arose as a prosodic coinage, i.e. based on phonetic simplicity and alliteration. *Dumb Dora* came into use as early as the prewar time in the 1930s, when the first beauty contests were arranged and participants were generally so referred to, emphasizing the fact that they were only attractive in outward appearance without having many intellectual faculties.

Another trend in mass culture is the emergence of names and images associated with famous people, especially with political leaders. The name of the 26th US President Theodore (Teddy) Roosevelt (1858- 1919) can serve as an example of how a name, a particular incident and a material object (especially a commercial object) can interact. In this particular case, a diminutive form of his name (Theodore > Teddy) is used for the name of a plush-covered stuffed toy bear- *Teddy bear*.

“The Teddy bear mania” overwhelmed America at the beginning of the 20th century. In November 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt was visiting the state of Missouri to conduct the talks on the settlement of the boundary conflict with the neighbouring state of Louisiana. After finishing official business, he took part in bear hunting, during which he refused to shoot at a helpless bear cub. It was noticed by the famous American cartoon maker Clifford Berryman, who depicted this event as a cartoon and published in the “Washington Star”.

Later, it was reprinted by New York newspapers. Nobody paid special attention to this fact, except for a toy shop owner from Brooklyn Morris Michton. He and his wife made a plush-covered toy bear and displayed it in their shop window with a copy of Barryman's cartoon and a signboard "Teddy Bear" [3]. The name thereby symbolized affection or sympathy that was to be attached to the object. The effectiveness of this symbolism can be seen in the fact that this toy bear was sold very fast and soon it became one of the most favoured children's toys in America. Thus, the name of the real man, *Teddy*, is correlated with a popular toy. The name had been transferred to the artifact and then this name and its meaning became widely disseminated. It is easily seen by this example how the name of the real person continues its life with the help of a material object, in this particular case, with the help of a children's toy. In the case of Roosevelt, the object determined the symbolic value of the name.

In another political example the individual gave meaning to the name and objective memorabilia that followed. The citizens of the United States of America eventually took a great liking to the 16th US President Abraham Lincoln (1809- 1865) because, in withstanding intense criticism, he seemed to embody honesty and personal integrity. Thus, his name became registered in a set phrase of *Honest* (or *Old*) *Abe*, using, of course, the diminutive form (Abraham > Abe) [8].

Thus, in different ways, the given names of Roosevelt and Lincoln have acquired symbolic meaning beyond simple designation, have become stored in collective memory and have become, in a real sense, a part of the American lexicon.

Sometimes the name of a real person is preserved in collective memory and in a part of the lexicon through a style, a way of behaving, dressing, etc. In this way, a name becomes a sign of social behaviour. The example of Jacqueline (Jackie) Kennedy Onassis (1929-1994) is significant. She was a rather influential spouse of the 35th US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1917-1963). All the manners and ways, which were imitated by Jacqueline Kennedy's admirers, are stored in collective memory and, accordingly, the following expressions emerged with her name- *Jackie smile*, *Jackie hair style*, *Jackie hat*, etc [3].

Similarly, in the sphere of pop music, if we use only the given name *Elvis*, a complex image with a rich semantic domain is immediately evoked. That semantic domain includes all those things associated with "the king" of rock'n'roll and the idol of the youth of the 1950s.

It includes his manner of singing, the content of his songs, his voice quality, his tight, glittery clothing and many more things that stuck in the minds of individual fans. Thus, we can see that within the popular culture a name can elicit a vast range of meanings from the images associated with the person. Interestingly, in this case, the names either *Elvis* or *Presley* may evoke for almost everyone in the culture a set of specific features and a concept associated with the person. Even more than with the example of *Jackie Kennedy*, the names and images are closely correlated and widely understood.

The symbolism acquired by famous names in mass culture is abundantly evident in many forms of storytelling- e.g. fiction literature, films, theaters and TV shows. Certain psychological stereotypes are created in these media of mass culture.

Long ago, when debating about a literary theory, the great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky spoke much about beauty and singled out two aspects in it- a "dark" side and a "light" one. The characters of his novels often correlated with these two types of beauty. Beauty can be ruinous and destructive; at the same time it can be calm, serene and pacifying. In his novel, "Idiot", Aglaya Yepanchina is a bearer of quiet, clear and light beauty, but Nastasya Philippovna is an exponent of destructive, dark and fascinating beauty, like Leo Tolstoy's passionate Anna Karenina.

A similar idea of two polar types of beauty may also be observed in mass culture. On the one hand, there is Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962), one of the most romantic and attractive legends of Hollywood. Being an embodiment of a splendid woman, she was the most popular actress in the 1950s. Her outward physical qualities were exploited skillfully, as a result of which she turned into a sex symbol of her time and a living embodiment of the American dream. This is one type of beauty- a blonde with symmetrical as well as voluptuous forms, but archetypal doll-type features. On the other hand, there is a vamp woman, having extravagant manners, an uncontrollable character, a defiant behaviour and a corresponding personal life. A modern pop singer and film actress Madonna (Madonna Louise Ciccone) became a similar sex symbol of America later, in the 1980s. The symbolic status of her name became clear when a set phrase *Madonna mimics* emerged [3]. They had bright lipstick on their lips and penciled eyelashes, stuck up locks and tight clothes.

The names of such idols of mass culture- "dolls" and "vamps" are stored in mass consciousness and,

accordingly, preserve the features of a person and image, which are evoked by the name. In this way, the name *Madonna* has become associated with a specific type of behaviour and outward appearance. This is in spite of the fact that there exists another Madonna- the “Sistine Madonna”, a painting by the Italian painter of the High Renaissance, Raphael Santi (1483 – 1520), portraying the Virgin Mary with an infant, Saint Barbara and Saint Sixtus. This *Madonna* is a much different and older idea; it has a religious context and refers to the Mother of God, the Virgin Mary; but the modern *Madonna* is a name symbolizing secular and material values and the play on meaning invites a veneration of those different contrasting values. The new *Madonna* is an example of the simultaneous borrowing and substitution of one image by the other, i.e. one concept overlays (and plays off from) the other in mass consciousness and collective memory. This is very characteristic of symbols and their function in mass culture.

The characters of popular films may also become symbolic names, such as *Indiana Jones* and *Rocky Balboa*. Indiana Jones (Indy) is the main character of film serials produced by Steven Spielberg and George Lucas. He is a modest lecturer at a girls’ college, who becomes a tireless explorer and participant in unbelievable adventures. His name- both the geographical centrality of *Indiana* and the commonality of *Jones*- began functioning symbolically to refer to the ordinary person caught up in extreme events. Similarly, *Rocky Balboa* is a film serial character, an ordinary boy from the Italian district of Philadelphia trying to achieve his American Dream. The name *Rocky* is a nickname of those who do bodybuilding, has obvious metaphorical suggestions and functions symbolically to denote a super- courageous man. Americans took a liking to the image of this film character so much that tours were arranged on the route of his training runs through Philadelphia and a monument to *Rocky Balboa* was put up in front of the Museum of Arts [9].

It is, of course, the goal of the entertainment industry to promote the symbolic status of names and sometimes, as with *Indiana Jones*, a given name must function with a surname. Another such example is the singer and actress Liza Minnelli. Her given and family names function as a unit to elicit the intended meaning. That is to say, the given name Liza cannot be separated from the family name Minnelli; the meaning comes only from Liza Minnelli. In the same way, if we say Eliza, the family name Doolittle springs up in memory immediately. Similarly, *the Michael*

Jackson glove is related to another very popular singer whose given name functions only with his surname. His name is linked symbolically to a glittering white glove on his right hand, a distinctive trademark that became imitated by thousands of teenagers in many countries of the world [3].

Finally, there is also a subculture of childhood occupying one of the leading places in mass culture. Children are clearly a part of mass culture and mass consciousness. For the formation of the children’s picture of the world and outlook mass culture creates and maintains a familiar set of icons, at least, for girls- a pleasant, attractive, pretty and well-dressed doll-girl. As social life focuses on children’s qualities, the corresponding forms of maintaining this myth and image through a name are also found.

A little beautiful girl named Shirley Temple came to represent virtually all desirable qualities associated with little girls in the American society of the 1930s. She began acting in films at the age of three and immediately won the hearts of most Americans during the period of the Great Depression. From 1934 to 1939 she was one of the most successful stars of Hollywood in box-office terms; she acted in a large number of melodramas, comedies and musicals. At that time “Shirley Temple mania” ran through the United States of America. A great variety of goods bearing her name came to the market: *Shirley Temple polka dot dresses, hair ribbons, hats, underwear, shoes, boots, soap, tableware* and mostly *dolls* [3]. The name of the real person becomes the name of a doll- a *Shirley Temple doll* and the name *Shirley*, until then a man’s name, became a woman’s name because of its symbolic value [10].

Later, at the end of the 1950s, this doll was renewed and received a new support in mass consciousness: a *Barbie doll* named after the daughter of its maker Ruth Handler entered the market. This is almost the same doll, the same dissemination of a similar image, style and behaviour. At the beginning of the 1960s, Stanley Weston in turn made a soldier doll called *GI Joe*, a sort of substitute of a popular Barbie doll for boys. A *GI Joe doll* is already a materialization of *GI Joe*, who was so famous in the years of World War II. A cultivated image characteristic for boys, youths and men, i.e. an image of force, manliness, courage and firmness, is maintained and used with good effect in this particular doll. Thus, the symbolism of the names becomes more fixed in the language and culture as they are attached to objects and disseminated.

CONCLUSIONS

Summing up the study of the above material, it should be noted that mass culture creates such symbolic names that are preserved in memory of different generations of the society, i.e. a sort of a social life of a name in collective memory. In the course of time, it can be noticed that those who were the idols for the youth already becomes a nostalgic recollection for a middle-aged generation. One way or another, the names of heroes, characters and idols do not vanish without leaving a trace. They are preserved as symbols of culture, generations and time. Names enter collective memory and mass consciousness through various fields of the life of the society and various spheres of the modern mass culture, namely: the names of the military sphere, political leaders, counterculture, children's subculture and the entertainment industry. Such names are not mere labels, but obviously carry symbolic meaning, existing irrespective of the real life, becoming the elements of our consciousness, the perception of time, sometimes acquiring a materialized form as a toy or other material things or being characters of comics, films, songs, clothes, etc.

The names of mass culture idols get the opportunity to continue their life. When a famous given name transits to the level of mass culture, it no longer belongs to a specific individual or author; it is a collective perception. A famous or typical name in mass culture is quite different from the names of individuals, which may be used as simple designations or to indicate intimacy or distance in the relationship. In mass culture, famous and typical names are created, disseminated, introduced into mass consciousness as symbols and passed on from one generation to another as images of behaviour to follow, as specific styles and as measures of social status.

In coming future, it will be interesting to study the use and coinage of names in youth subculture as a separate aspect of language and culture, religious culture and in the context of anthroponymic transformations.

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