



Sociolinguistic Tendencies of Baby Names in English Speaking Countries

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Introduction

The choice of the name for the baby is a special procedure for every family in every culture. Parents can choose the name for the baby considering significant events in their lives, popular names in culture, history and other factors. Linguists have investigated proper names given to people focusing on the peculiarities of anthroponomastics, ethnolinguistics, and linguistic motivation. British linguist David Crystal analysed variants of British and American first and last names (C r y s t a l 2003, 208–209). British linguists Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges investigated British names addressing British history and culture (H a n k s , H o d g e s 1996, 22–23). Another British linguist John M. Anderson analysed British proper names using ideas of notional grammar (A n d e r s o n 2007, 21–22). Lithuanian linguist A. Gudavičius examined the anthroponomastic aspects of people's names in Lithuania, various European, and Asian countries (G u d a v i č i u s 2000, 105–107), the use of precedent people's names in contrastive semantics (G u d a v i č i u s 2007, 193–194). Onomastic motivation of names was analysed by Lithuanian linguist Alvydas Butkus (B u t k u s 1995, 5–6). American economist Steven D. Levitt and journalist Stephen J. Dubner interpreted American proper names referring to the statistical prevalence of certain baby names related with parents' poverty or wealth/economic status (L e v i t t , D u b n e r 2006, 190–204).

The novelty of the research is an analysis of modern tendencies of baby naming reflected in the articles obtained from the online editions of American, Canadian and British media by using descriptive analysis and a sociolinguistic method.

Sociolinguistic aspects of motives related to baby names

It is obvious that baby names depend on culture and some specific factors. It could be seen from ratings of popular baby names compiled in the departments of statistics in Britain, Canada and the US.

General Register Office for England and Wales in 2007 reported that traditional names – *Grace, Jack, Olivia, Thomas, Emily, Daniel* – were in the top ten list (BN).

However, British parents also chose names because of the influence of the royal family (names such as *Elizabeth, Harry, William*), the impact of modern British musicians such as *Leona, Alfie* (Ibid.).

In 2007, Canadian statisticians noted that popular names in the Top 10 for girls were *Emma, Emily, Sarah, Olivia, Madison*, etc., for boys respectively: *Mathew, Jacob, Ethan, Alexander*, etc. (TP).

Social Security Administration in the USA reported in 2008, that the most popular baby names for girls were: *Emma, Isabella, Emily, Madison, Ava*, while the most popular names for boys were: *Jacob, Michael, Ethan, Joshua, Daniel* (PBN).

It could be seen from the ratings of baby names in the 3 countries that they are different and deal with specific factors. Thus, it is worth remembering the ideas of British linguists D. Crystal and Anne D. Mills about the choice of baby names. D. Crystal gives some reasons why the popularity of some proper names changes (Crystal 2003, 122–123):

1. Admiration of the British royal family was always of great importance as shown by the popularity of such names as *William* and *George*. But this influence seems to be decreasing: *Elizabeth, Philip, Charles* and *Diana* were not very popular in recent years.

2. Names with religious associations form a big group. Those names include Old Testament names (*Joseph, Ruth, Eve, David*), New Testament names (*Mark, John, Mary*), names of saints (*Teresa, Bernardette, Francis, Dominic*) and especially the names of patron saints (*George, David, Andrew, Patrick*).

3. Works of literature have a great influence, as seen in the history of use surrounding *Alice* (after Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice in Wonderland*), *Justine* (after Lawrence Durrell's novel *Justine*) and *Rhett* (after Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind*).

4. Films, television and popular music are also the dominant contemporary influences with people using the names of the music stars (*Elvis, Kylie, Marion, Marilyn, Cary*) or the characters they create.

5. Some names for babies attract disapproval in particular traditions (and approval in others), for example, protestant names such as *Luther* and *Calvin* would not usually be found in Roman Catholic households.

Linguist A. D. Mills notes that “conventional given names constitute quite a small set of items (compared, say, with surnames or vocabulary words). In each of the main European languages, only a few hundred male names, and even fewer female names, form the inventory from which children's names are ordinarily chosen. This set of common conventional names is supplemented in various ways, for example by the use of surnames and vocabulary words as given names. Some of these new coinages in turn achieve conventional status” (Mills 1998, 9).

The question arises if the ideas of the mentioned linguists could be applied while analysing the names of babies in Britain, the US, and Canada. The answer is troublesome, because we have different mentality in those countries. It is worth to use some sociolinguistic terms to provide more details about baby names. “Speech

community” is the concept which allows providing some observations common to the three countries under consideration. Thus, coming back to the concept of “speech community” it should be stated that speech community describes a more or less discrete group of people who use language in a unique and mutually accepted way among themselves (M i l r o y 2000, 49–50; S p o l s k y 1988, 24–25; P a t r i c k 2002, 13–14). In English speaking culture, the term “speech community” could be used for some sociolinguistic comments about common things of baby names. Thus, we would focus on discussion of baby names in British online newspaper “Times”, the American online magazine “People” and the Canadian online magazine “Edmonton Journal”. We are going to discuss unconventional baby names found in the media paying attention to the sociolinguistic context.

In the context of sociolinguistics, the reasons for the choice of the baby name could be related to the peculiarities of the speech community, as well as the influence of the media. The influence of the media is quite difficult to analyse, therefore much attention would be paid to linguistic phenomena related to the choice of baby names.

Firstly, it should be noted that associations dealing with the American, British or Canadian cultural phenomena, as well as interesting events from parents’ lives shape the appearance of unusual proper names. The abundance of unusual baby names could be noticed in the so-called life-style magazines and newspapers, which provide interesting facts related to unusual baby names. Thus, further we will review unusual baby names from “Times”, “People”, and “Edmonton Journal”.

While discussing weird baby names, the question arises if the term “precedent phenomena” or the term “intertextuality” could be used. The second term refers to the analysis of the texts taken from literature, thus it would not be used. The first term “precedent phenomena” coined by Russian linguist Jurij Karaulov and Lithuanian linguist Aloyzas Gudavičius is related to the following types of discourse: 1) discourse important for the speaker according to cognitive and emotional approach; 2) the well-known discourse for the speaker, as well as people who lived before him/her (G u d a v i č i u s 2007, 192). As well as the special link to the written texts, precedent phenomena deal with proper names, so they could be verbal phenomena related to special groups.

The first group is understood as the one, which consists of allusions and direct references to the well-known films, songs or literary works. It means that allusions are of great importance. Thus, the following example could be given from the section of lifestyle in the American magazine “People”, the Canadian magazine “Edmonton Journal”, the Canadian newspaper “Calgary Herald” and the British newspaper “Times”. The first example is provided below:

1. *What’s in a name? In the case of Ashlee Simpson’s baby – Bronx Mowgli – it’s just the latest demonstration of her Disney devotion* (S t r o u p 2008).

It could be understood that the parents of the baby chose the name for their baby having remembered the film made by American company “Disney” using the masterpiece of British writer Rudyard Kipling titled “The Jungle Book”.

Another example shows that Bill Clinton, the former US president, and his wife Hillary Clinton decided to call their daughter because of the famous American song by Joni Mitchell about a neighbourhood of New York City:

2. *Bill and Hillary Clinton have Chelsea, which the former President and First Lady have said comes from a line in a Joni Mitchell song about waking up to a “Chelsea morning”* (B u r l e i g h 2008).

The names of the heroes and heroines from the films “Star Wars”, “Indiana Jones” of American film-maker George Lucas are also selected by Canadian parents in the articles of the Canadian online newspaper “Edmonton Journal”:

3. *George Lucas’ fans also had children last year; what with the eight Leias, three Anakins, four Indianas and one Jedi joining Alberta’s ranks* (G e r e i n 2009).

In Britain, the Latinate name *Olivia* coined by William Shakespeare in the play “Twelfth Night” is very popular as well as its form “Oliver” for boys:

4. *Britain’s most popular baby names of 2008 were Olivia for a girl and, once again, Jack for a boy, according to the annual survey by the Bounty parenting club. The name Olivia, used by Shakespeare for one of his heroines in Twelfth Night, means olive tree, and comes from the same Latin root as Oliver, the boy’s equivalent* (B o o t h 2008).

The second group is related to the use of descriptive details, which are fixed in the mind of the individual. The descriptive details are linked with important events from important past times for baby’s parents. We have found some examples of names related with important details about family members belonging to this group. English singer Peter Andre and his wife glamour model Katie Price gave unusual name to their daughter using family names’ associations as it is explained in the example:

5. *Glamour model Jordan and her husband, former pop star Peter Andre, have named their baby daughter Princess Tiaamii. Tiaamii – pronounced tee-ah-me – is taken from the names of Andre’s mother Thea and Jordan’s mother Amy* (C r e r a r 2007).

American-born Australian actress, model Nicole Kidman and her husband also chose unusual names for their daughter:

6. *The beautiful baby girl, who was born on July 7 in Nashville to parents Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban, is named after early 20th-century artist’s muse Sunday Reed, PEOPLE has confirmed. Her middle name, Rose, is a nod to Urban’s late grandmother Rose* (T a u b e r 2008).

In the sources of the research we have traced personal names dealing with significant places in Britain, the United States of America and Canada. Kevin James, the actor from the American sitcom *The King of Queens* gave one name “Shea” to his daughter because he loved watching baseball in Shea Stadium in New York:

7. *King of Queens star Kevin James’s youngest daughter is Shea Joelle, after the home of the New York Mets* (B u r l e i g h 2008).

One Canadian father also gave name to his son because of the seen ice-hockey games of Canadian team “The Edmonton Oilers” in indoor arena “Rexall Place”:

8. *You'd have to be Gonzo to name your son Rexall, but that's exactly what one set of Alberta parents did last year. The moniker, fashioned after the Oilers home arena, was likely chosen by the same type of hockey fans who added 11 Sheldons, two Dwaynes, and a Smyth to the provincial population in 2008 (G e r e i n 2009).*

One more unusual association is the place where the child was conceived. For example, the British footballer David Beckham and his wife singer and model Victoria Adams, also American film director Ron Howard and his wife Cheryl as well as American real estate broker Richard Hilton and his wife gave their children special names of places where they had sex:

9. *The Beckhams have Brooklyn, named after the borough where their first child was conceived. Ron Howard and his wife, Cheryl, gave their three children middle names to indicate where they were conceived – Bryce Dallas Howard, and twins Paige Carlyle Howard and Jocelyn Carlyle Howard after the famous Manhattan hotel. And, of course, the Hiltons have a Paris (B u r l e i g h 2008).*

Another factor may be activities of famous politicians as seen in examples provided below:

10. *There was one Barack and one Obama born in Alberta in 2008, according to the baby-names list released Friday (I r w i n 2009).*

11. *One of Obama's biggest election rivals also got her due, as three couples picked Hillary and five picked Clinton (G e r e i n 2009).*

Names of famous singers or actors in Canada, America are also chosen by parents.

12. *Popular culture also proved to be a regular source of inspiration for couples. Rihanna was snagged by 15 new girls, who were joined by seven Diesels, six Beckhams, three Lennons, and three Denzels (C h i a n g 2009).*

Thus, it could be stated that unusual baby names are related to the popular culture in Britain, the USA and Canada. Why is that so? To find it, we have to look for more numbers in British, Canadian and American online newspapers or magazines. On the one hand, it could be stated that according to the analysed examples that parents considered as the specific speech community in Britain, Canada and the US have linguistic associations dealing with popular culture (films, music, some works of literature, sports), or interesting activities from their past, so they tend to choose unusual names for their children. On the other hand, there could be equation between shared linguistic knowledge and social membership while choosing the name for the baby. In this case, we would agree with the statement of the American economist S. D. Levitt and journalist S. J. Dubner who wrote: "There is a clear pattern at play: once a name catches on among high-income, highly educated parents, it starts working its way down the socioeconomic ladder. <...> So where do lower-end families go name-shopping? Many people assume that naming trends are driven by celebrities. But celebrities actually have a weak effect on baby names. <...> So it isn't famous people who drive the name game. It is the family just a few blocks over, the one with the bigger house and newer car. <...>

But as a high-end name is adopted en masse, high-end parents begin to abandon it. Eventually, it is considered so common that even lower-end parents may not want it, whereby it falls out of the rotation entirely. The lower-end parents, meanwhile, go looking for the next name that the upper-end parents have broken in” (Levit, Dubner 2006, 203–204).

Conclusions

1. The English speech community which is implied in the articles taken from the British, Canadian and American online press is diverse, but some similarities could be noticed.

2. In the process of baby naming, the verbalized phenomena of precedent texts could be noticed in the baby naming process, which is described in the analyzed articles. Parents refer not only to unusual events, but also to famous films, works of literature.

3. The common things for American, Canadian and British speakers are references to “precedent texts”, which signal that culture is important for native speaker, when they name their babies.

4. Famous people, celebrities are not the predominant factor while giving name for the baby.

5. A thorough analysis of baby names in the media has revealed a complicated naming and semantic motivation process, which is shaped by socio-cultural norms.

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Sociolingvistinės vaikų vardų tendencijos angliškai kalbančiose šalyse

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: *tikriniai vardai, sociolingvistinė analizė, kalbinė bendruomenė, precedentiniai reiškiniai, aliuzijos, vaikų vardai, laikraščiai, žurnalai.*

Straipsnyje aptariamos sociolingvistinės tendencijos, susijusios su vaikų vardais trijose angliškai kalbančiose šalyse: Didžiojoje Britanijoje, Kanadoje ir JAV.

Aprašomasis metodas ir sociolingvistinė analizė buvo panaudoti apibūdinant lingvistinius aspektus, sietinus su vaikų vardais mokslinėje literatūroje. Trumpai aptarti lingvistų tyrimai.

Vaikų populiarių vardų reitingai, pateikiami Britanijoje, Kanadoje ir JAV, atskleidžia didelę vardų įvairovę. Lingvistai D. Crystalas ir A. D. Mills pastebi, kad tradiciniai vaikų vardai nėra populiarūs Didžiojoje Britanijoje, Kanadoje ir JAV. Tėvai yra linkę, parinkdami vaikams vardus, daug dėmesio skirti kalbinės bendruomenės savitumams ir asociacijoms, atsirandančioms dėl kelių diskurso tipų: 1) žinomų filmų, dainų, literatūros kūrinių; 2) detalių, užfiksuotų individų mintyse. Pastebėta nauja sociolingvistinė tendencija – duoti vaikams vardus pagal vietą, kur tėvai turėjo lytinių santykių.

Pateiktuose pavyzdžiuose, išrinktuose iš žiniasklaidos, galima aiškiai matyti, kad vardo suteikimas vaikui susijęs su kultūriniais veiksniais.

Atliktas tyrimas gali padėti lingvistams analizuoti komplikotą įvardijimo ir semantinės motyvacijos procesą, veikiamą sociokultūrinių normų.

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S u m m a r y

Keywords: *proper names, sociolinguistic analysis, speech community, precedent phenomena, allusions, baby names, newspapers, magazines.*

The paper discusses sociolinguistic tendencies of baby names in three English speaking countries: Britain, Canada and the USA. The descriptive method and sociolinguistic analysis were used to describe linguistic aspects related to names of babies in theoretical literature.

The reviews of researchers covering proper names in linguistics have been briefly discussed. Ratings of popular boy names provided by state statisticians of Britain, Canada and the USA reveal prevalence of different baby names. This is also related to the comments of linguists David Crystal and Anne D. Mills that conventional names are not very popular in Britain, Canada and the US.

The terms “speech community”, “precedent phenomena” related to the use of unusual baby names in the American, Canadian and British newspapers and magazines help to reveal that parents tend to choose names for their babies paying attention to peculiarities of the speech community and associations coming from two types of discourse: 1) famous works of literature, films, songs; 2) descriptive details fixed on the mind of the individuals. Also the new sociolinguistic trend to name babies where their parents conceived baby was noted.

In the examples from the mentioned media it could be clearly seen that the process of baby naming is related to cultural influences.

The present research could help linguists to analyse complicated naming and semantic motivation process, which is shaped by socio-cultural norms.

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