Fiat Lingua

MetaNaming: A Guide to Deciding How Your Culture Will Name Things for Authors and Game Masters[1]

This is not meant to be a restrictive set of instructions. Rather, it is in inspirational guide, meant to show you as an author some examples of the wide variety of ways that people have named things. If, having read it, you can come up with something for your culture that is not described here—neat! That said, naming patterns come in two major parts:

1. A phonological (or graphological) structure.
2. A name construction template. (Or multiple such templates, if the language is to be used to name more than one category of thing–e.g., both people and places.)

Attention to the phonological structure is how you avoid ending up with characters named Zargrax, Aerith, and Bob—or, signal that Zargrax, Aerith, and Bob all come from different cultural backgrounds! Phonological structures are properties of the languages that names come from. Your implicit knowledge of English phonological structure is what lets you know that "Dave" and "John" are perfectly good English-sounding names, while "Dav" and "Jun" are *not*, despite consisting only of perfectly good English sounds. The phonology of any language is the set of sounds (or, for the purposes of written media, characters, in which case we could call it a "graphology") that can exist in the language, along with the rules for how those sounds (or written symbols) can be combined to form syllables and words. For a language that is only ever intended to be used in writing, thinking of this in terms of graphology rather than phonology is probably the better mindset, as you cannot easily control how readers will interpret any written name that you come up with[2]. It will save a lot of stress if you just give up control and say "all of these names are pronounced however you want to pronounce them". If you intend your names to be spoken aloud in a canonical capacity (say, by an audiobook narrator, or by actors in a film for which you are writing the screenplay), then you do in fact have to think about the phonology behind the graphology, but even in those cases, just expect that readers will come up with their own preferred pronunciations.

The name construction template, on the other hand, tells you what kinds of words get to be names or parts of names, and which parts you need to create a complete name. Different cultures use different patterns for names, and they're not limited to a single pattern; some cultures (such as modern America) use multiple naming patterns simultaneously, as a result of incorporating different naming patterns from multiple older cultures. Unless you have a good backstory reason for it, however, sticking to one pattern per culture per name-type will help to set different cultures apart.

Personal Names

Mononyms

Mononym simply means *a single name*—i.e., Cher, Prince, or Madonna. While in modern American and European cultures, mononyms are typically associated with celebrities, for many

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1 A version of this article was originally written for Drintera (www.drintera.com) by Shewstone Publishing.

2 You can, of course, provide a pronunciation guide. However, pronunciation guides should be treated as optional material that's nice to have for the readers or players who care, not required reading that every potential member of your audience will be tested on.

cultures, that's the standard—*everyone* just goes by a single name, with no surnames or any other complications involved. For example, mononyms were common in Turkey through World War 1, and are still standard in Javanese culture and in many North American Indigenous cultures.

Opaque Personal Names

The simplest possible name template is an *opaque mononym*. That is, a single word which has no meaning aside from being someone's (or something's) name. Most common modern English names are opaque–Liam, Olivia, James, Emma, etc. All of these names have historical origins that had meanings at some point, but the great majority of people neither know nor care what those etymological meanings might have been. And even if you do happen to know that "Liam" is a short form of "William" which comes from "Willehelm", which meant "desire-helmet", or that "Olivia" was invented by Shakespeare and probably comes from a Latin name that meant "Olive", that almost certainly does not come to mind whenever the name in question is used–the name just means the person that it belongs to.

Two common sources of opaque names are borrowing names from other languages (adapting them to the phonological structure of the borrowing language), and retaining old names that lose their meaning as the language changes over time.

Meaningful Personal Names

In contrast to opaque names, there are meaningful names; that is, names which happen to also be regular words or phrases in the bearer's language, or are obviously composed on meaningful components even if not being grammatical phrases. We have some of these in English, mostly as feminine names–Daisy, Summer, Willow, Rainy, Hope, Faith, etc. Sandawe, a Khoisan language spoken in Tanzania, has a similar pattern of using nature-words as personal names; they specifically use botanical names (i.e., names of plants), for both girls and boys. Whether a particular plant name is a masculine or feminine name for people depends on the grammatical gender of the word, which is ultimately arbitrary; however, masculine plant names tend to refer to large trees, while feminine plant names tend to refer to smaller trees, shrubs, and flowers.

Meaningful names can also be more complex. Germanic names, for example, tend to be formed from two name-forming words compounded together: Wille-helm (desire-helmet), Bryn-hildr (armor-battle), Sig-urdr (victory-guardian), Gud-run (god's secret). Note that these names tend towards martial, rather than nature-oriented, themes, even for women. So called *dithematic* names have been common not merely in Germanic languages, but throughout ancient Europe and the Mediterranean. See, for example, ancient Greek names like Aristo-phanes (best-appearing), So-crates (whole-power), and Phil-ippos (friend-horse). This is a useful way to get a larger number of distinct names that nevertheless are obviously related out of combinations of a small number of naming-words—and the sorts of words that get used as name components can be a distinguishing feature of a culture, even if they are only ever presented in English "translation". After all, a woman named Armorbattle and a man named Willowtree probably come from different backgrounds! On that note, meaningful names *can be* meaningfully translated. This provides an explanation for how all members of a diverse group with different native languages can accurately pronounce each other's names—they are simply translated for meaning into the party's common language, or the individual languages of each member. This also gives players and readers the ability to understand and pronounce (a version of) the characters' names without needing access to the in-world languages from which they come.

Names Incorporating Numerals

When picking the possible components of meaningful names, some cultures have even gone so

far as to include numbers in names, according to a variety of different schemes. Even English names sometimes include numbers, as in "Henry Ford II" (pronounced "the second").

Roman personal names could get more direct: Quintus, Sextus, Septimus, Octavius, Nonius, and Decimus are all Roman names derived from the number of the month in which a person was born. (Other month names include Marcus, for March, Maius, for May, and Iunius, for June.) Prima, Secunda, Tertia, and Quarta are also attested as feminine names (though exactly what significance they have is uncertain–possibly birth order).

Mayan names include a numeric prefix encoding the calendar day on which a boy was born, or the fixed number 9 for girls. Arkady Martine borrowed and modified this sort of system for the Teixcalaanli culture in the novel *A Memory Called Empire*—there, names must contain a numeral and a meaningful word, but rather than being dictated by the calendar, each component is chosen by the parents according to their hopes for the child and culturally-specific associations of each number. (Any integer between 1 and 100 will do, but choosing an extremely high number just because you can is *gauche*.) Martine also took advantage of translatability to present Teixcalaanli names in forms that would be understandable to the audience, leading to names like "3 Seagrass", "6 Direction", "Twelve Azalea", and "2 Cartograph".

This highlights another factor in the choice of whether to use opaque or meaningful names, and whether to translate meaningful names or not. With opaque names, you are relying entirely on the *form* of the name to create associations in your readers' minds, based on their pre-existing linguistic prejudices. If you do translate names, then you can access the associations that come with the meanings of the names, and control the audience's first impressions more directly.

Multipart Names

Roman and Mayan names also give us a good segue into talking about non-mononymic templates. Roman naming practices were unusual in their time and surrounding cultural context for *not* being mononymic, and in fact fairly similar to the common system of first name–last name that we use today. The essential elements of a Roman name were the *praenomen*, equivalent to an English first name, and the *nomen*, or *nomen gentilicium*, a hereditary surname identifying one's family. In various circumstances and times, these could be augmented by an intermediate *filliation*, specifically identifying one's father, mother, or other ancestors, the name of a citizen's tribe, and by the *cognomen*– additional elements after the nomen which were earned or bestowed by others, and could change throughout one's lifetime. Meanwhile, over the course of Roman history, women's names progressed from the same praenomen-nomen pattern as men to dropping the praenomen entirely, such that in certain eras most women would have no unique personal name, and be referred to only by the nomen, or by nomen and cognomen. A modern equivalent would be parents declining to give their daughters legal first names, and just allowing friends and family to assign them nicknames as convenient.

Slavic names use another pattern that is similar to but still different from what we are used to in the English-speaking world. The core components of a name in Slavic languages are the personal name and the patronymic. A hereditary surname can be used either before or after the personal name and patronymic, but is not used for formal address like it would be in English names. Thus, if your schoolteacher is Elizaveta Petrovna Sokholov, you would not address her as "Miss Sokholov", but as "Elizaveta Petrovna"—Elizabeth, daughter of Petr—and her friends would call her "Elizaveta". Another historically common pattern, still used in modern Iceland, dispenses with the hereditary surname entirely; everyone is identified using just personal name plus patronymic.

Meanwhile, **Chinese** names, and names from the broader cultural sinosphere, tend to follow a much more rigid pattern. Modern Chinese names consist of a nearly-always-monosyllabic family name followed by a usually-disyllabic personal name. The two syllabic components of the personal name are not always freely chosen, though–in some regions and lineages, every child in a given generation

would share a generation-name character (corresponding to a syllable), leaving only one syllable free to uniquely identify the child.

Some cultures go beyond merely "meaningful" names, and assign entire sentences as personal names. You might be familiar with this concept in some Native American cultures from films like *Dances with Wolves*, in which the title character is given the name "He Dances With Wolves", and ends up marrying "She Stands With a Fist". However, there was a period in history in which such names were used even in English. Real historical **Puritans** had personal names like:

- Fear-God.
- Praise-God.
- Job-raked-out-of-the-ashes.
- Fight-the-good-fight-of-faith.
- Jesus-Christ-came-into-the-world-to-save.
- If-Christ-had-not-died-for-thee-thou-hadst-been-damned.

In the more extreme cases, however, these would not be regular everyday use-names, and the bearers of these detailed labels would instead go by a contraction or a chosen nickname.

Semi-Opaque Names

A mixed strategy could employ references to gods or heroes whose names have become opaque over time. The Puritan names listed above, of course, reference God, but so do many old names derived from Greek and Hebrew sources, even though they are opaque to us now; e.g., "Tiffany", or "Michael". Dithematic names in Old Norse also frequently made use of gods' names in ways that remain more transparent to modern audiences: Thorkel, Thorfinn, Thorbjorn, etc. (Thor in particularwas a popular god!) A particularly devout culture might frequently reuse opaque-to-them old names of gods combined with more meaningful components in a similar way; or a culture that holds someone else's *contemporary* culture or language in high regard might borrow opaque-to-them name components to incorporate into their native naming system.

Surnames & Personal Disambiguation

We've now mentioned several cultures which have something like our modern Anglospheric idea of the "surname"—a hereditary component of a personal name which you share with a parent. Surnames serve two major purposes:

1. Disambiguating between multiple people with the same individual name.
2. Tracking long-term family connections for purposes of inheritance and political rights.

However, there are a lot of other ways to disambiguate people, many of which can eventually evolve into surnames. Thus, if you have surnames at all, not everyone in your culture will necessarily have a surname—they may be limited to the nobility because no one else cares, or because they are prohibited to non-nobles; but, conversely, they may also be *enforced* by the bureaucracy, because the population must be accurately accounted for!

Some of these other disambiguation methods include patronyms and matronyms ("Thorvald *Sigurdsson*, not Thorvald Hrafnsson!"); occupation names ("Tom (the) Baker, not Tom (the) Smith"), descriptive epithets ("Eric the Red", "Aethelraed the Unready", "Ragnar Lothbrok (Hairy-pants)", etc.; and various other nicknames ("Margaret who goes by *Meg*, not Margaret who goes by Peg!")

How & When Names Are Assigned & Used

A full description of cultural naming practices could of course be much more complicated than simply providing a standard template. For example, when are names assigned? Do names change throughout life, and if so, what events mark those changes? Are different names used in different social circumstances? Consider marriages, christenings, changes of residence, deaths in the family, births in the family, and other major life events that may have significance to your culture.

Practices Associated With Birth & Death

Many cultures have historically avoided formally naming children until they reach some predetermined age or rite of passage, because what's the point if they aren't going to survive? (Remember, the past was just *the worst*.) In some cultures, names become taboo when a person bearing them dies—anyone else with that name must take a new one, and if their name was meaningful, that means everyone who knew them has to come up with a way of talking around that word.

Practices Associated With Marriage and Children

Andronyms are names that women take in reference to their husbands—a common traditional pattern in European culture, where women's surnames change upon marriage. But *gynonyms* also exist —names taken by men in reference to their wives. And in addition to the well known phenomenon of *patronyms* mentioned above, *matronyms* are also possible, and are sometimes used in patriarchal cultures when the mother happens to have higher status. See, for instance, the mythological example of Loki Laufeysson, who goes by a matronym. Parents may also adopt new names, either in specific social circumstances or as a common name, in reference to their children. If your child has done something particularly noteworthy, you may wish to adopt a *teknonym* and become known as "Heraklesfather" or "Calypsosmother", if your culture allows for it—but don't overlook how often parents of small children in our own modern world get referred to as "Jimmy's dad" or "Evy's mom" by other children, and *even other parents*. Sometimes, referring to someone as their child's parent is a sign of respect regardless of notable or not the child is, as it provides a means of increasing social distance —the implication being that of course I do not know you well enough to *presume* to use your own *personal* name.

Ethnonyms

Ethnonyms are names for groups of people. Like personal names, these can be opaque, and can provide sources for components of other names. For example, "magnet" and "magnesium" both come from "Magnesia", a region in Greece named for its ancient inhabitants, the Magnetes, whose name comes from... nowhere that anybody knows. It's just their name.

Ethnonyms can be further divided into *endonyms*—what people call themselves—and *exonyms*, or what they are called by others. A frequent source of endonyms is simply the word for "people" or "humans" (or orcs, elves, aliens, or what-have-you) in their own language. However, endonyms may also derive from the name of a common ancestor or founder (mythological or otherwise, literal or otherwise; i.e., Israelites, Romans), from the region or a feature of the region in which they live (Southerners, People of the Rising Sun, Lake People, Mountain People), or a distinctive feature of their way of life (Fishers, Forest-clearers, Buffalo Hunters) or language (e.g., the Guugu Yimithirr, or "We Speak This Way") compared to other groups they are in contact with.

Exonyms do not have to be, but are often, less pleasant. Neutral exonyms may include geographic or cultural descriptors that merely happen to not be the chosen endonym (Other-bank People, Plains People, Sea People), or adaptations of endonyms into the local language (e.g., we call them Russians, they call themselves Россияне). Among the less pleasant varieties are words for communication disabilities (like the Russian word Germanic people, "Nemtsi", which originally meant

"the mutes"), or simply being incomprehensible, like the Greek-derived word"Barbarians" (in either case, this comes down to "people who don't speak the same language as us"); words for "the enemy" (Apache); corruptions of the endonym (Rooskies); or names mocking or exaggerating certain cultural features (Limeys, Frogs).

Toponyms

Toponyms are *names of places.* Geographical features in particular, but also very old cities and buildings, often have opaque names, or opaque name components, as they can be held over between multiple waves of successive cultures with different languages who retain an old name (or as close to an old name as they can pronounce) with no sense of its original meaning. A lot of European place names are old enough that we have no knowledge of their original meaning, and a lot of American place names come from adaptations of native words—and though the etymology is documented, who really thinks about what, for example, "Michigan" originally meant[3] when talking about the state?

A catalog of all the ways that places can be named in different cultures would be prohibitively long, but we can quickly survey some of the common ones. Toponyms can be divided into many subcategories with different naming conventions, including:

- **Metatoponyms**—i.e., place names that come from other place names. These cross all other categories for specific things to name: Green River Road, a road named for the Green River; Snake River Plain, a plain named for the Snake River. Stratford-upon-Avon, a city named for the river Avon; Salt Lake Valley, a valley named for the Great Salt Lake; Boston Harbor, a harbor named for a city. Hydrological features are common sources of these names, because waterways are extremely important to survival and civilization.
- **Names of geographical features** (fields, plains, forests, hills, mountains, rivers, lakes, oceans, etc.), which are likely to have old opaque names, but also likely to pair them with a descriptive component; e.g., not just "Olympus" but "Mount Olympus", not just "Mississippi" but "the Mississippi River", not just "Huron" but "Lake Huron", etc. However, they may also have descriptive names associated with mythological origins, significant historical events, or recent discoverers from the naming culture.[4]
- **Names of regions and countries**. Names of large regions and countries can derive from ethnonyms (e.g., France is where the Franks live, England is where the Angles live, etc.)—but, it can equally well go the other way around, with ethnonyms deriving from regions. They may also be named for major defining features; e.g., the Arctic is the Bear Place[5]; Australia is literally the South Place; Transylvania is the Place On The Other Side of the Forest; Yellowstone is the place with literal yellow stones; and the Great Plains are, well... a really big flat place!
- **Names of villages, towns, and cities**. These may be ancient and opaque, derive from a geographical location or significant local feature, copy a name of another settlement that people emmigrated from, or derive from an ethnonym or personal name of a founder or hero.
- **Names of roads, streets, and urban areas**. Roads and trade routes may be named for their builders (the Appian way), their destinations (the Mine Road), regions they pass through (the Trans-Sahara Highway), or things transported on them (the Silk Road). City streets may be named for the professions or civic functions associated with them; e.g., Bakers' Street, Palace Street, Market Street, or High Street (referring to the central location for shops and businesses).

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3   "Great Water" from the Ojibwe "michi gami".
4   Some old names are reanalyzed through folk etymology to become meaningful names in a new culture, but this is not meaningfully distinct from a writing perspective from simply giving them a meaningful name to begin with.
5   Because the constellations of the bears are in that direction. But conveniently, there are also real bears there!