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NAMES, EPITHETS, AND PSEUDONYMS IN LINGUISTIC CASE STUDIES:
A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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Abstract

This article explores the use of names, epithets, and pseudonyms as they have been employed since the late eighteenth century to label subjects in linguistic case studies. I focus on two kinds of case studies: those of normal language learning, and those of persons with unusual language profiles. Various naming practices attested in this literature imply a range of relationships holding among authors, readers, and the subjects of case studies. Moreover, it appears that, over time, authors have differently prioritized the factors that bear on the choice of a name, epithet, or pseudonym.

Keywords

naming practices in linguistics; linguistic case studies; history of linguistics; onomastics; names; epithets; pseudonyms

NAMES, EPITHETS, AND PSEUDONYMS IN LINGUISTIC CASE STUDIES: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Introduction

The language sciences have long valued case studies for the richness of information they provide about individual language learners and language users. At their best, case studies distill the results of detailed and sensitive observation, sometimes sustained over long intervals. Modern linguistic research typically privileges quantitative group studies over studies of individuals, on the grounds that group studies offer a more secure basis for generalization, and further that only group studies meet the crucial criterion of replicability. But before the natural-science model dominated research on language, language scholars often employed what we now identify as ethnographic or case study methods. And even in our time, case studies are still carried out where it is pertinent to investigate specific individuals' language use.

At the center of a linguistic case study is the person or persons whose language is investigated. Authors of case studies (unlike authors of group studies) can hardly avoid using some kind of name, epithet, pseudonym, or other identifying label to refer to the subject(s) of their inquiry. That label is usually introduced without fanfare, as if its selection entails little or no conscious attention, and carries no special weight. Only occasionally do authors of case studies acknowledge the decisions they make in selecting one means of reference over another. But on close inspection, how a researcher labels the

subject of a case study turns out to bear on the nature of the complex triangular relationship holding between a researcher, his or her readership, and the person whose language is investigated. In this sense, naming practices offer insight into case study data.

This article explores the labels that language scholars have used to identify the subjects of case studies, from the late eighteenth century to the present day. The data derive from research on language learning, and on people whose language is (for various reasons) unusual and worth special study. My goals are to analyze the apparently trivial, but actually revealing, conventions for naming the subjects of case studies; to consider how naming practices in this context have changed over time; and to speculate about the consequences that follow from a range of those practices.

Method

To gather data about naming practices in studies of normal child language learning, I first consulted historical summaries and bibliographies such as Bar-Adon and Leopold (1971) and Leopold (1972). Using these resources I identified case study-based research, then examined a representative sample of that work going as far back as possible, which turned out to be the late 1700s. Table 1 lists in chronological order some of texts I examined.

< See Table 1 >

Table 1 somewhat artificially separates authors' practices of referring to language learners into three categories: the use of "Names" (essentially, birth names, including personal names and family names), "Epithets" (which describe the referent in terms of his

or her relationships or traits, rather than by use of a label), and “Pseudonyms” (which like names are labels rather than descriptions, but which differ from names in that they were variously created in the context of the research itself). In some cases, a researcher employed more than one naming practice to label the same individual, or used a naming practice not easily identifiable within these three categories. In certain other cases, a researcher who studied his or her own children used different naming practices in reference to the researcher’s own children, compared to naming practices used in reference to children unrelated to the researcher. Table 1 records these facts as relevant. The last two entries in Table 1 augment the data from studies of child language learners with some suggestive findings from two recent case studies of adult foreign language learners.

I also examined case studies of speakers with unconventional language profiles, whether or not the subjects were studied in childhood. These sources were identified through informal ‘snowball sampling’, that is, by following a chain of references from one source to related work. Table 2 lists the findings, spanning the same approximately 200-year interval as the data in Table 1.

< see Table 2 >

The data in Tables 1 and 2 are, of course, illustrative rather than comprehensive. They do not represent a complete survey of naming practices in linguistic case studies, or even those accessible in English. Rather, they highlight some common practices as evidenced in a sample of case studies, with the hope that these results will stimulate more comprehensive research.

Naming practices in studies of normal language learning

Turning first to case studies of normally developing child language learners, authors before the beginning of the twentieth century rarely used names to label their subjects. Tiedemann (1787/1971) wrote about his son's language development, exclusively referring to his own child as "the boy"; a hundred years later Taine (1877/1971) wrote about his daughter, identifying her as "a little girl" or "the child". Other parental diary studies in the late 1800s similarly used epithets rather than names, with some authors specifying their relationships with the child being studied with labels like "my oldest boy" (Schliecher 1861–1865/1971) or "one of my own infants" (Darwin 1877/1971). The actual names of children, however, were routinely withheld. This carried over to texts where one author cites another's work, so that children studied by parents X or Y entered into the literature depicted as "X's son" or "Y's daughter" (Franke 1912/1971).

By the beginning of the twentieth century labeling practices diversified. Parental authors began to refer to their own children by their personal names: Stern (1924/1975) called his own children "Hilde", "Gunther", and "Eva"; Jespersen (1922) cited his son as "Franz". However, Table 1 shows that when a case study included data from children other than those related to the author, the convention seems to have been to refer to them in a more guarded, impersonal manner, or at least in a manner that presumes less familiarity—for example, as "E.L.", "Hilary M.", or "a little nephew of mine." Likewise in the early 1920s Piaget (1936/1977) studied his own three children under their first names ("Jacqueline"; "Laurent"; "Lucienne") while truncating the names of other

children into phonotactically unconventional semi-pseudonyms like “Hei” or “Id” or “Sli” (1926/1959). In the same decade, Lewis (1936/1999) conspicuously obfuscated whether the child he studied was his own son. Appropriately, Lewis referred to the child exclusively with the bare letter “K”, strategically splitting the difference between the parental personal-name convention and the more impersonal non-parental epithet convention.

To many, psycholinguist Roger Brown initiated modern study of child language with his 1962 generative-influenced diary studies of three children he called “Adam”, “Eve”, and “Sarah”. These are true pseudonyms, with Brown’s biblical allusions seeming to anticipate that his work would stand at the head of a new tradition. Brown (1973) probably does stand at the head of a tradition of naming practices, since following him it has become standard to refer to child learners by a single personal name—either a birth name or pseudonym, with the distinction not always marked, and regardless of whether the child is related to the author. Bloom (1973) is typical of the modern practice in referring to her own child as “Allison” (the child’s birth name) and to other children as “Eric”, “Gia”, and “Jane” (which may or may not be pseudonyms). Reference by personal name is now almost universally adopted. For example, the index of Ingram’s (1989) survey of research on child language acquisition includes 70 entries under “child subjects”. Two of those 70 are labeled “daughter” (both from studies carried out in the 1800s). Three are labeled with an initial, including Lewis’s (1936/1999) subject “K”. In one study, the child subject is referred to alternatively as “Amahl” or “A”. The remaining

64 entries under “child subjects”, almost all culled from late twentieth-century research, are labeled by a single personal name.

Reflecting on these data, the shift from a diversity of naming practices to the modern personal name-only standard is instructive. A complex web of factors bears on the choice of a label for a child language learner. Among those factors is the tenor of parent-child interaction (in particular, father-child interaction, since until the mid twentieth century most published linguists were male), and whether researchers conceived of parental status as enriching scientific observation or as threatening its legitimacy. Moreover, since these studies were conducted variously by German, French, Danish, Swiss, English, and American scholars, culture-specific attitudes and naming practices no doubt come into play. Culture-specific assumptions about how much autonomy an adult should attribute to a child are also relevant. Another critical factor is the tension between researchers’ ethical responsibility to protect the privacy of children (the importance of which has been emphasized from the 1950s) by withholding or disguising their names, and researchers’ scientific responsibility to reveal as much detail as possible about participants in a study.

To language scholars in the 1800s, objectifying one’s own offspring with labels like “the boy” or “a child” apparently best satisfied their prioritization of these complex criteria. Late twentieth century language scholars seem to weigh the variables differently: they avoid both objectification and the foregrounding of relational status implied in epithets like “my daughter”. Instead, they identify child subjects using names that do not reference the child–researcher relationship. This practice invests more in the autonomy of

the child learner, and communicates that children are observed at close range *as individuals*. But since some of these names are actually pseudonyms imposed by the researcher (without any pretense of accurately representing the child's ethnicity, family tastes, or even gender; and sometimes without indicating whether the name is in fact a pseudonym), no true recognition of the child's individuality may be entailed. Thus the actual identity of the child may be more thoroughly hidden—or misrepresented—behind a name like “Mary” or “Kim” than behind an epithet like “a little girl”.

Two case studies of adult second language learning cited at the bottom of Figure 1 suggest how additional complexities may come into play in this context. Adult learners' identities are presumably already fully developed within their native culture, with their names often serving as a focal point (Nuessel 1992, 3–5). Huebner's study of a Hmong-speaking adult's naturalistic acquisition of English uses the clan name “Ge” to identify the subject. To most English-speaking readers, “Ge” is not obviously either a first or a last name, and therefore escapes both the potential brusqueness of last name-only reference, and the potential infantilization of first name-only reference. Rather, “Ge” largely registers the foreignness of its referent. With this choice Huebner opted to foreground the ethnic affiliation of his subject, a factor highly relevant to his acquisition of English. Since Hmong recognize each other more by personal than by clan names, Huebner's suppression of Ge's personal name also provides a measure of privacy within the subject's own social group. In this sense, Huebner's choice skillfully meets many of the naming-practice criteria prioritized by late twentieth-century language science, and communicates the cultural sensitivity of this case study overall.

Lardiere (2007) invited her adult subject, a friend who was a Chinese-speaking learner of English, to select her own pseudonym. She chose the name “Patty”. Lardiere (personal communication) disclosed that Patty’s choice was, in effect, a wry commentary on cross-cultural misrepresentation of identity. The name derives from the coinage an oblivious mutual acquaintance who insisted on reducing Patty’s public self-chosen Western name “Patricia” to “Patty”, despite Patty’s openly expressed distaste for that nickname. When it came to representing herself as the subject of Lardiere’s study, Patty selected that pseudonym as an ironic gesture indexing how, perforce, her identity has been shaped by others, especially others who natively control the language of local prestige, English. Thus in both Lardiere’s and Huebner’s research, the label selected to identify an adult foreign language learner tacitly sets a particular tone for the relationship of researcher, subject, and reader.

Naming practices in studies of persons with unusual language profiles

Turning to Table 2, children or adults with unconventional language profiles have also been the focus of case studies. Here somewhat different naming practices obtain. This makes sense, because normal language learners by definition represent the general case; Brown’s (1973) subjects “Adam” and “Eve” stand for “Everychild”. By modern standards, where language departs from the usual patterns a researcher must *both* more richly particularize the individual, *and* more assiduously protect his or her privacy. Therefore naming practices bear an extra, paradoxical, burden in this context.

Sometimes the goal of particularizing is met by full disclosure. This was the fate of the deafblind child Laura Bridgman, whose name has never been disguised. Laura Bridgman grew into maturity in the full glare of nineteenth century public scrutiny into her education, personality, religious experiences, family, and incidentally, name (Freeberg 2001; Gitter 2001). Even more baldly particularized than Laura Bridgman was the famous patient of Paul Broca (1861/1960), who helped mid-nineteenth century medical science identify language centers in the brain. Broca referred to his patient both by his real surname, “Leborgne”, and by a nickname assigned by the staff of the hospital where he lived for years as an inmate. Leborgne was called “Tan”, or “Tantan”, in imitation of the single vocal production he was capable of after his epilepsy developed into muteness. Twenty-first century scientific ethics would reject both these means of identifying an especially vulnerable person. But working as Broca did within a different scholarly world, he particularized his patient and enhanced readers’ confidence in his own authority by specifying both the man’s name and his sobriquet.

Instead of using real names in case studies of these sorts, many researchers choose to—or occasionally have to—invent names to refer to their subjects. In that circumstance, scholars may go beyond merely supplying a label, to implicitly define the dynamics of their work through their choice of pseudonym. Consider the case of the feral child called “Victor”, the so-called “wild boy of Aveyron” (Shattuck 1980). In 1799 Victor’s teacher Itard imposed that name on this otherwise unidentified child ostensibly because the boy showed a preference for the phoneme /o/ (Itard 1894/1962, 29). But if sound alone were his inspiration, Itard might have done better selecting a name like “Oscar”, “Auguste”,

“Aurélien”, or “Olivier” instead of “Victor”—except that Itard had, notoriously, recruited Victor into a key role in his own professional struggle to demonstrate the superiority of his educational methods. In his work with the child optimistically named “Victor”, Itard had tried to accomplish “a victory over nature”—to quote words eventually used to eulogize Itard (Shattuck 1980, 165).

Another feral child was given a pseudonym that also arguably reflects on the name-givers. In 1970 a 13-year old girl taken into custody from her abusive parents in Los Angeles. She was assigned the name “Genie”, in the words of her therapeutic team, “to protect her privacy”; privacy was essential to the child’s rehabilitation, since she had “previously existed as something other than fully human” (Curtiss 1977, xiii). Tragically, and confounding the hopes of those who coined her pseudonym, Genie never completely recovered from the abuse she had suffered and remains, linguistically and cognitively, not fully integrated into the world in which she lives. Like a prototypical genie, the individual given this pseudonym has effected change in the world outside of which she stands, in that her failure to master certain facets of language is frequently cited as support for the Critical Period Hypothesis (Aitchison 2008, 90–5). Moreover, in the account of Rymer (1993), the therapeutic team’s well-intentioned but poorly-coordinated efforts to help Genie sometimes worked significantly to her disadvantage, as if the team had not sufficiently considered the proverb about being careful about what you wish for.

But aside from occasional circumstances where choice of a pseudonym seems almost too apt, the most revealing aspect of naming practices in studies of people with unusual language profiles lies in how authors negotiate the tension between publicity and

privacy. Poizner, Klima, and Bellugi (1990) analyzed the effects of aphasia among six deaf adults. The question of how to label these individuals may be particularly charged granted the small pool of aphasic users of American Sign Language, and hence their plausible identifiability within Deaf culture. Poizner and others supply each with a pseudonym consisting of a first name plus surname initial, as “Paul D.” or “Karen L.” The homogeneity of these six pseudonyms suggests that they were imposed by the researchers rather than selected by the subjects, since subject-selected pseudonyms tend to be idiosyncratic, and as a group, heterogeneous. A pseudonym like “Paul D.” avoids the presumption of referring to adults by first name only, the style now reserved for child subjects, and avoids the depersonalization of using false full initials (like “P.D.”).

Conflicts between privacy and publicity also affect naming practices in other work listed in Table 2. Yamada (1988) studied a young woman who has a low non-verbal IQ and relatively elaborated language, referred to by the pseudonym “Marta”. But without explanation Yamada (1990) subsequently replaced “Marta” with the woman’s actual birth name “Laura”. Perhaps the decision to expose Laura’s real name has to do with a shift in perspective on her disability, either by Yamada, Laura’s parents, or Laura herself—a shift that accepts Laura’s unusual linguistic status as worthy of public acknowledgment, rather than something to be hidden. If so, replacement of “Marta” by “Laura” masks a major change in the implied relationship between researcher, subject, and readership.

Another recent case study sheds a different light on privacy versus publicity—in this case, better framed as privacy versus celebrity. Smith and Tsimpli (1991, 1995) have

written extensively about Christopher, a British man born in 1962 who displays extraordinary talent for language learning against a backdrop of very depressed cognition. Publications about Christopher provide detailed information about his life and background; reproduce his drawings; display his solutions to arithmetic problems; communicate the results of cognitive and perceptual texts he has taken; and analyze his speech. Smith and Tsimpli (1995) opens with a full-length photograph of Christopher. In addition, the Linguistic Society of America has archived on their website five 3- to 4-minute videotapes showing Christopher interacting with Smith. Other video footage of Christopher, replete with viewers' commentary, is accessible on YouTube.

In their publications, Smith and Tsimpli refer exclusively to this man by his personal name "Christopher". Materials posted on the Internet, however, identify Christopher by his personal name plus his surname. The difference is telling, in that the small but studied remnant of privacy Smith and Tsimpli provide to Christopher has been casually stripped away online. Christopher was already an adult when he became the object of scientific inquiry. He must have agreed to some extent of public exposure in that, at age 30, he displayed his linguistic talents on television. Public fascination with Christopher is evinced by citations of Smith and Tsimpli's work in popular as well as specialist literature. That fascination has been magnified by the indiscriminate access that Internet posting of video materials provides, probably sustaining and intensifying scrutiny of Christopher beyond what anyone imagined when he agreed to appear on television in 1992. Yoking Christopher's full name to his recorded image, which can be played, re-played, and manipulated at the will of the viewer, exposes him to public

attention of the rawest sort. Is there an ethical issue here, centering on the question of how much privacy the public owes even a person who does not demand privacy, or at least did not demand it at the crucial moment when public curiosity was being materialized in print and on videotape? And how does the answer to that question balance the rare scientific contribution that Smith and Tsimpli's work arguably makes, against the fact that Christopher's cognitive status warrants special accommodation?

In one final, liminal, case, the question of how to label a subject clearly disrupted a linguistic case study and became a focus for self-conscious discussion of the power inherent in naming practices. This is the case of "Ishi", the last independent member of the Yahi tribe, who emerged in 1911 into intense public and scientific scrutiny from a solitary life in the mountains northeast of San Francisco (Kroeber and Kroeber 2003). Ishi lived for more than four years at the University of California Museum of Anthropology until his death, but following Yahi cultural norms, declined to reveal any kind of name for himself. He was eventually labeled "Ishi", which means "man" in Yahi, a coinage Ishi himself apparently calmly tolerated. But the fact that "Ishi" is neither a real name nor a pseudonym became symbolic of Ishi's profound otherness with respect to the culture in which he lived his last years (Strankman 2003). The anthropologists, linguists, and historians who studied and wrote about Ishi were disconcerted on many levels by his lack of a genuine name—or even a genuine false name!—and by his self-possession in the face of that lack, as if not having a name with which to define his position relative to others, and moreover not caring that he had no name, rendered him ineffable and beyond the reach of their science. The extent of commentary on the naming of Ishi is a high

tribute to the power we invest in names, and to the impact of naming practices in linguistic case studies.

Conclusion

Names, epithets, and pseudonyms have been employed differently over time to label subjects in linguistic case studies. Although authors rarely comment on naming practices, conventions seem to have shifted to reflect shifts in the prioritization of such factors as the drive to richly particularize subjects of case studies; recognition of the value of protecting subjects' privacy; the extent of autonomy a researcher imputes to a child subject; the balance a parent-researcher strikes with respect to his or her two roles; the urge (probably unrecognized) to label subjects in ways that reveal aspects of the complex and mutable relationships holding among researchers, subjects, and the public. These aspects of "the semiotic design of naming patterns" (Nuessel 1992, 126) come into play when linguists label participants in linguistic case studies.

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TABLE 1

NAMES, EPITHETS, AND PSEUDONYMS IN CASE STUDIES OF CHILD LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND ADULT SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS: A SAMPLE ARRANGED CHRONOLOGICALLY

REFERENCE	NATURE OF CASE STUDY	NAME(S)	EPITHET(S)	PSEUDONYM(S)
Teidemann (1787)	Diary study of author's son		<i>the boy</i>	
Schleicher (1861–1865/1971)	Diary study of author's several children		<i>my oldest boy</i> <i>my little girl</i>	
Taine (1877/1971)	Diary study of author's daughter		<i>a little girl</i> <i>the child</i>	
Darwin (1877/1971)	Diary study of author's several children		<i>one of my own infants</i> <i>the infant</i>	
Franke (1912)	Digest of multiple diary studies. Most conducted by parents, including study by author of his son		[x]'s son; [y]'s daughter [z]'s niece; my oldest son	
Jespersen (1922)	Diary study of author's son Reference to child learners unrelated to author	<i>Franz</i>	<i>a little nephew of mine; a Danish boy</i>	<i>Hilary M.; Tony E.; S.L.; C.L.M.</i>
Stern (1924/1975)	Diary study of author's 3 children Reference to child learners unrelated to author	<i>Hilde; Gunter; Eva</i>	[x]'s son	<i>E.L.</i>
Piaget (1926/1959)	Study of >30 6-year olds unrelated to author; (birth?)names systematically truncated			<i>Lev; Pie; My; Béa; Ar; Schi; Ez; Maz; Hei; Ri; Pli; Id; Sli</i>
Piaget (1936/1977)	Diary study of author's 3 children	<i>Jacqueline; Laurent; Lucienne</i>		

Lewis (1936/1999)	Diary study of child whose relation to author is unspecified		<i>K</i>
Leopold (1939–49)	Diary study of author's daughter (bilingual)	<i>Hildegard</i> [used very sparingly]	<i>the child</i> ; [rarely] <i>my child</i> ; <i>my daughter</i>
Brown (1973)	Diary study of 3 children unrelated to author		<i>Adam</i> ; <i>Eve</i> ; <i>Sarah</i>
Bloom (1973)	Diary study of author's daughter Reference to child learners unrelated to author	<i>Allison</i> <i>Eric</i> ; <i>Gia</i> , <i>Jane</i> [pseudonyms?]	
Huebner (1983)	Study of adult second language learner unrelated to author; identified by clan name	<i>Ge</i>	
Lardiere (2007)	Study of adult second language learner unrelated to author; identified by self-selected pseudonym		<i>Patty</i>

TABLE 2

NAMES, EPITHETS, AND PSEUDONYMS IN CASE STUDIES OF CHILDREN OR ADULTS
WITH UNUSUAL LANGUAGE PROFILES: A SAMPLE ARRANGED CHRONOLOGICALLY

SUBJECT(S) DATES	NATURE OF CASE STUDY	SUBJECT(S) NAME / EPITHET / PSEUDONYM (REFERENCE)
c. 1777–1828	Feral child; name given by Itard in response to special attention child reportedly paid to phoneme /o/	<i>Victor</i> (Itard 1894/1962:29)
1829–1889	Deafblind child educated by Samuel Gridley Howe, identified publicly by birth name + surname	<i>Laura Bridgman</i> (Gitter 2001; Freeberg 2001)
?1849–1861	Adult Broca’s aphasiac. Identified both by surname and by nickname imitating patient’s productive speech following brain damage	<i>Leborgne / Tan(tan)</i> (Broca 1861/1960)
d. 1916	Last independent Yahi, studied from 1911. Following Yahi culture, he declined to reveal any name. <i>Ishi</i> means “man” in Yahi	<i>Ishi</i> (Kroeber 1961; Strankman 2003)
b. 1956	Abused, isolated child. Therapeutic team chose pseudonym “because [...] she emerged into human society past childhood, having previously existed as something other than fully human” (Curtiss 1977:xiii)	<i>Genie</i> (Curtiss 1977; Rymer 1993)
b. 1963	Child with IQ c. 40 but relatively intact verbal skills. Yamada (1988) used pseudonym; switched to birth name in Yamada (1990:xv)	<i>Marta</i> [pseudonym] / <i>Laura</i> [birth name] (Yamada 1988, 1990)
b. 1910s–1950s	6 deaf adult users of ASL aged 37–81 diagnosed with aphasia 1–10 years earlier. “In order to protect the anonymity of the patients, we do not use their real names or initials” (Poizner, Klima, & Bellugi 1990:57)	<i>Paul D.; Gail D.; Karen L.; Brenda I.; Sarah M.; Gilbert G.</i> (Poizner, Klima, & Bellugi 1990)
b. 1962	Adult linguistic savant: low nonverbal IQ, extraordinary capacity to learn foreign languages. Identified by birth name; surname suppressed by Smith & Tsimpli, but freely revealed on YouTube	<i>Christopher</i> (Smith & Tsimpli 1991, 1995)