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What's in a name? Teaching linguistics using onomastic data

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TEACHING LINGUISTICS

What's in a name? Teaching linguistics using onomastic data

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This article describes how students can be introduced to the basics of linguistic analysis using personal, product, and place names as data. I outline several areas of linguistics that can be effectively taught at an introductory level through name data and provide examples of accompanying in-class and take-home exercises. Throughout the article, I demonstrate that the everyday familiarity of names and the ready availability of name data combine to create a class that not only engages students but also teaches them practical data-analysis skills.*

Keywords: pedagogy, names, onomastics, toponyms, hypocoristics, general linguistics

1. INTRODUCTION. One of the most appealing aspects of studying language, for students and professionals alike, is what Chafe (1994:38) calls ‘the experience of becoming conscious of previously unconscious phenomena’. This article describes how instructors of linguistics can leverage this inherent advantage of the field through an undergraduate course that introduces students to the basics of linguistic analysis using names as data. Students can learn how to recognize phonological rules and generalizations in everyday nicknames. They can practice morphological analysis on place names. And they can discover through hands-on data analysis that trends in baby names change in patterned and systematic ways. By the end of a course on the linguistics of names, students will have become keen observers and analysts of the structure and use of the names—and, more generally, the language—that they encounter in daily life.

This article has two primary goals. The first is to demonstrate that names hold a wealth of potential for introducing elementary linguistic concepts and teaching analytical skills. Specifically, I outline several areas of linguistics that can be effectively taught at an introductory level through name data, and I provide examples of accompanying in-class and take-home exercises. The second goal of the article is to bring together a number of scholarly works that many linguists may not be familiar with, but which all demonstrate the operation of a number of linguistic principles in the domain of naming. As Köhnlein (2015) observes, names have been overlooked in many areas of linguistic theory. The compilation of works provided here may thus spark novel research.

The article is structured as follows. I first provide background on linguistic research on names, linguistics classes on names, and the specific course that served as the inspiration for this article (§2). I then describe course content and exercises in the areas of phonetics, phonology, and morphology (§3); course content and exercises in sociolinguistics (§4); and course content and exercises in psycholinguistics (§5). Section 6 concludes.

2. BACKGROUND.

2.1. SCHOLARLY RESEARCH ON NAMES. Research on names takes a wide range of perspectives. Anderson (2007:73) reviews traditional research on names, all of which is

* This article would not exist if the Department of Linguistics and English Language at the University of Manchester had not let me create and teach The Linguistics of Names from 2013–2016. Thanks to members of that department and the students and teaching assistants of The Linguistics of Names for letting me develop the content presented here; I am very grateful for their support. Thanks also to two anonymous referees and the associate editors of *Teaching Linguistics* for their thoughtful comments, which have substantially improved the paper. Finally, George Bailey contributed the assignment on blends and Naomi Lee provided valuable research assistance; thanks to both of them for their contributions.

characterized by a ‘focus on considerations of meaning’. One area of traditional name study, to which the term ‘onomastics’ is often applied, deals with name types, name origins, cultural and social conditions on naming, and the functions of names in language use. Other traditional research on names is situated in the philosophy of language and semantics, and addresses questions including whether names have meaning; what their sense, reference, connotations, and denotations are; which functional and grammatical categories they occupy; and whether they divide into semantic subclasses with prototypical and peripheral members.

More modern research looks at the linguistic structure of names and the place of names in the grammar. A persistent thread running through this work concerns whether names behave linguistically like the other elements of a language. Longobardi (1994) and Anderson (2004) investigate this question by considering names’ syntactic and semantic properties, Cutler and colleagues (1990) and Köhlein (2015), their (morpho)phonology. This research differentiates itself from traditional onomastics (at least under Anderson’s definition) by carrying out formal linguistic analysis of the structure of names. Still other research, which I discuss further below, considers the psycholinguistics of naming, or the sociodemographic correlates of name choice. In essence, all of the traditional subfields of linguistics are represented in the body of literature on names, and thus names lend themselves naturally as a data source for students newly encountering the scientific study of language.

2.2. EXISTING COURSES ON THE LINGUISTICS OF NAMES. Helleland 2002 compiles a list of university-level courses in onomastics taught, as of 1999, in eight different countries around the world; other surveys of academic onomastics offerings include Murray 2001 and Koopman 2009 (the latter specific to South Africa).¹ Where the English-speaking world is concerned, Helleland (2002:78) observes that ‘specialized courses in onomastics are not possible at most universities’ in the United States.² Indeed, combing the course catalogs of several major US linguistics departments and searching Google for names- or onomastics-related college and university courses turns up no regularly offered dedicated onomastics courses in the US.

However, name-related topics have appeared as components of other, more specialized courses within American linguistics departments. These include *The Language of Food* (Dan Jurafsky, Stanford University), which contains content on food names; *Language of Space and Place* (Hilary McMahan, University of Chicago), which contains content on toponyms; *World of Words* (Sarah Ogilvie and Elaine Treharne, Stanford University), in which a referee notes that ‘names pop up during certain unit discussions’; and *Introductory Sociolinguistics* (Marisa Brook, then at Michigan State University), which includes an exercise on baby-name trends as a way of teaching data visualization and graph interpretation (Brook 2017).

Dedicated courses on names are more common in the United Kingdom. The University of Nottingham, the University of Glasgow, Newcastle University, the University of

¹ It must be noted, however, that each of these is now out of date, citing courses that no longer exist, and I was unable to find a comprehensive, up-to-date listing of university-level onomastics courses.

² A referee asks why this might be. Helleland does not provide a reason. However, Murray (2001) suggests that onomastics is not taken seriously by many scholars outside of the discipline, and he attributes the lack of university-level courses on onomastics in the US to a number of factors. These include ‘intellectual snobbery against onomastics and onomasts’ (Murray 2001:216), a failure of onomastic research to keep up with the rising standards for research quality expected of other academic disciplines, and a lack of willingness on the part of onomastic researchers to publish in nononomastic journals, thus preventing researchers outside of the discipline from finding and teaching research on names.

the West of England, and the University of Edinburgh all offer a strong slate of undergraduate and postgraduate onomastics and place-name studies courses. These are usually housed within a program or department of English Language and Linguistics, and the syllabi reveal an Anglo-Saxonist and/or Celticist focus on the toponyms and surnames of the British Isles. Elsewhere in the world, the University of Zimbabwe, the University of the Western Cape (South Africa), and Makerere University (Uganda) have onomastics courses within their African Languages departments focused on names and naming practices among the languages of the area.

In sum, existing university-level names content appears to take two forms: short discussions of name data in courses largely devoted to other topics, or courses in traditional onomastics (as defined in §2.1), often with a connection to the indigenous languages of an area. What is not attested is a course that introduces students to the basics of linguistic analysis and the scientific study of language solely through name data. That is what this article aims to contribute.

2.3. BASIS FOR THE MATERIAL PRESENTED HERE. The topics and exercises presented in §§3–5 were developed for an undergraduate-level course called *The Linguistics of Names*, taught by the author at the University of Manchester, a large public university in England, for three semesters between 2013 and 2016. This course attracted 100–120 students each time it ran and received consistently positive feedback from students, who praised the uniqueness and novelty of the course, the breadth of material covered, the practical skills taught, and the inherent interest and societal relevance of the material.

The large majority of students enrolled in this course were specializing in Linguistics or the related area of English Language, and had already received some basic introduction to linguistics as a science and its major subfields. To this end, the course was designed to serve as an elective for these students, with the intention of solidifying their knowledge of concepts they had studied elsewhere through the application of those concepts to novel (onomastic) data. The course additionally presented new or more advanced aspects of subfields that the students had already studied at an introductory level and placed an emphasis on training students in skills of linguistic and quantitative analysis.

This course met once weekly over a twelve-week semester, with fortnightly small-group discussion sections. The syllabus for one semester's offering of this course (with university-specific information redacted) is provided in the online supplementary materials.³ This sample syllabus contains references to exercises and assignments that are also provided in the supplementary material, and which are described in §3.5, §4.4, and §5.4.

While the students enrolled in this model course did generally have some prior experience with linguistics, a course on the linguistics of names could easily be geared toward students with no linguistics background at all. Accordingly, the majority of concepts and exercises I present in §§3–5 are suitable for students with no previous experience with linguistics. Taken together, and stretched out over the length of a typical American fourteen- or fifteen-week semester, they could constitute a general education course on the linguistics of names at many American universities. Where a topic or an exercise is more appropriate for advanced students, I have indicated this. These more advanced topics could be incorporated into an elective course on the linguistics of names for students with some linguistic experience already (as was done in the case of the model course), or could be incorporated piecemeal into advanced classes on particular linguistic subfields.

³ Available online at <http://muse.jhu.edu/resolve/57>.

2.4. OVERVIEW OF COURSE CONTENT. The model course was designed around one central question: are names a special component of language? In other words, do proper names behave, linguistically, like the other words in a language? Or are names somehow special? Throughout the semester, students were guided toward an answer to this question through a number of different routes. Through the lecture content, they explored a body of research that has identified linguistic patterns and regularities in names. Through in-class and take-home exercises, they applied skills of linguistic and quantitative analysis to novel name data in order to uncover patterns themselves. Ultimately, in the final exam, they were asked to propose an answer to the question, weighing the evidence from each side.

The topics covered in the course—phonetics, phonology, morphology, sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics—were chosen primarily to speak to different sides of this question. As will be evidenced in §§3–4, the phonetics, phonology, morphology, and sociolinguistics of names bear many similarities to the phonetics, phonology, morphology, and sociolinguistics of nonname words. By contrast, the psycho- and neurolinguistics of names (§5) reveal considerable differences between names and nonname words. Students were thus given two different perspectives on the linguistics of names, which they could then weigh and evaluate.

These topics were chosen for other reasons, as well. For one, they formed an appropriate amount of material for a typical English twelve-week semester. Even a course that meets more often (for instance, for a typical American fourteen- or fifteen-week semester) may have difficulty covering much more material if it enrolls students with no prior experience in linguistics, meaning the instructor will need to spend more time introducing the basics of the field. Another reason these specific topics were chosen was that they all could be covered at a fairly introductory level. While there is considerable research on the syntax and semantics of names, much of it requires a level of expertise beyond what the students enrolled in the model course would have had. Topics in the syntax and semantics of names are thus not addressed here. However, instructors interested in incorporating these aspects into their own courses on the linguistics of names could start by consulting works such as Longobardi 1994, Anderson 2004, and Anderson 2007.

In the following sections, I summarize the course content in each of the areas covered and provide suggestions for in-class and take-home exercises and activities, many of which are provided in the online supplementary materials.

3. PHONETICS, PHONOLOGY, MORPHOLOGY. Basic concepts in phonetics, phonology, and morphology can be introduced using name data by teaching several different topics, enumerated below. Through these topics, students learn that names, like language, have structure; that names conform to rules and patterns which we are aware of despite never having been explicitly taught them; and that these structures and patterns can be analyzed scientifically.

3.1. SOUND SYMBOLISM. Sound symbolism—the association of particular sounds with particular meanings—has been identified in several different types of name data, including given names (Cutler et al. 1990, Whissell 2001, Pitcher et al. 2013, Sidhu & Pexman 2015), nicknames (de Klerk & Bosch 1997), brand or product names (Klink 2000, Yorkston & Menon 2004, Lowrey & Shrum 2007), and names of fictional characters, such as Pokémon (Kawahara & Kumagai 2018, Kawahara et al. 2018). A unit on sound symbolism in naming allows the introduction of two fundamental concepts commonly covered in introductory linguistics courses. One is the arbitrariness of the lin-

guistic sign (de Saussure 1916). The other is the description and categorization of vowels and consonants, as sound-symbolic effects have been found to differentiate between front and back vowels, and voiced and voiceless obstruents.

3.2. NICKNAME FORMATION. The formation of nicknames, or hypocoristics, follows regular phonological patterns in a number of languages (Mester 1990, Ito & Mester 1997, Nelson 1998, Lappe 2007). Exploring how nicknames are formed in a familiar language introduces students to the concept that phonological rules are part of their grammar: for instance, native English-speaking students can instantly recognize that a *Jessica* may go by *Jess* but will never go by *Je*, *Jessic*, or *Ca*. Studying the mechanics of how names are truncated to form nicknames in English introduces students to the concept of the syllable, the identification of its component parts (onset, nucleus, rhyme), the notion of syllable stress, and the phonotactic constraints on syllable structure. In comparing truncation patterns across a range of names, students can come to identify the basic generalization governing how nicknames are formed in English (namely, a single, maximal syllable that does not violate phonotactics is taken, starting at the stressed syllable of the name).

Students can also explore the various affixes that can be attached to a truncated form to generate English hypocoristics, including [i], as in *Eddie*; [s] or [z], as in *Becks* or *Jules*; [o], as in *journo* (< *journalist*); and [ə-z], as in *preggers* (< *pregnant*), the latter two exemplifying that nonname words undergo the same processes as names where hypocoristic formation is concerned. Extending the discussion to affixation alludes to topics discussed elsewhere in the course, namely morphology (§3.4) and—given that different varieties of English use different affixation strategies, and that these strategies may show age-specific patterning (Kidd et al. 2011)—language variation and change (§4).

More advanced students can use what they have learned about the patterns present in English to identify the generalizations governing nickname formation in an unfamiliar language. (Section 3.5 provides an example.) They can also explore the optimality-theoretic machinery that has been employed to analyze nickname patterns in the above-cited literature, and can branch out to study nicknaming patterns that employ reduplication rather than truncation and affixation (Nelson 1998, Gorman & MacKenzie 2009), thus gaining an introduction to templatic morphology.

3.3. RHYTHM AND PROSODY IN NAMING. Shih (2012, 2014) analyzes first name/surname pairs in a corpus of Facebook user data and finds that name pairs in English tend to adhere to general principles of phonological well-formedness. Specifically, the Facebook data attest to a slight dispreference for name pairs that contain a stress clash (e.g. *Suzanne Smith*) or a stress lapse (e.g. *Melanie Fitzgerald*), as opposed to name pairs in which stressed and unstressed syllables alternate. This provides an opportunity to teach the concept of rhythm in language, building on the notion of syllable stress introduced earlier. From here, students can explore other phenomena connected to linguistic rhythm, such as text-setting and rhythm-conditioned variation in language (Lieberman & Prince 1977, Wright et al. 2005, Benor & Levy 2006, Ehret et al. 2014).

More advanced students can explore Shih's other findings, such as the dispreference in the Facebook data for name pairs that contain adjacent identical segments at the first name/surname junction (e.g. *Michael Lee*). Shih attributes this to an OBLIGATORY CONTOUR PRINCIPLE (McCarthy 1986) effect; Martin (2007) finds the same effect operating within first names and in brand names. Students can explore this phenomenon in other, nonname elements of language by learning about synchronic and diachronic processes of dissimilation (Campbell 2004).

3.4. MORPHOLOGICAL DECOMPOSITION OF NAMES. Both place names and personal names can be used to teach students morphological analysis. After being introduced to the concept of the morpheme and the basics of morphological decomposition, students can apply what they have learned to a few different types of data sets. One is English toponyms: many toponyms of England are historically morphologically complex, with frequently recurring Old Norse or Old English elements (Mills 2011). Students can examine maps of different regions of England, identifying common recurring toponym components, and cross-referencing them with Mills's (2011) place-name dictionary to learn more about the meanings communicated by place names and the way place names can reveal who settled in a region and which language they spoke (Darby 1976).⁴ A second way morphological analysis can be taught through name data is by exploring morphologically complex personal names. These are particularly common in Bantu languages, including Zulu (Koopman 1979, 1990), Xhosa (Neethling 1994), Nyoro (Beattie 1957), and Shona (Pongweni 1983). Data sets culled from these and other sources can provide students with morphological-analysis exercises analogous to those used in traditional introductory linguistics classes, but with an onomastic twist. (See §3.5 for an example.)

More advanced students can explore cases of morphology/phonology mismatches in naming, such as Köhnlein's (2015) study of certain Dutch place names that are semantically monomorphemic, but behave with respect to the language's phonotactics as if they are polymorphemic. This connects to theoretical debates concerning whether certain words are lexically stored or derived on-line (Bermúdez-Otero 2012).

3.5. ACTIVITIES AND EXERCISES. There are many ways in which students can apply their knowledge of sounds, sound patterns, and morphology to name data. Here, I suggest three in-class activities followed by five problem set-style data-analysis assignments. The latter are provided in the online supplementary materials and could either be given as homework or worked through together in class.

'Name bingo' is an effective way for students to review how to describe and classify vowels and consonants, and also to learn each other's names. An online bingo card generator⁵ can be used to create bingo cards containing phonetic descriptors of the names of students in the class, such as 'Starts with a voiced consonant', 'Ends with [ə]', and so forth. Students then have to meet their classmates and phonetically analyze their names in order to complete their cards. Findings on sound symbolism can be brought to life with clicker polls (Marlow 2010). These allow students to log in with their mobile devices (or a provided clicker) to an online polling site and, for instance, replicate the famous *bouba/kiki* experiment (Köhler 1929), or match names to products or invented Pokémon characters. Results are displayed onscreen immediately after the poll is closed, allowing students to gain hands-on experience with participating in linguistic research and letting them assess on a first-hand basis the validity of previous researchers' findings. Figure 1 provides an example.

Finally, nickname formation can be reified by the lecturer: with printed IPA transcriptions of names, a document camera that projects them onto the wall of the classroom, and a pair of scissors, the lecturer can physically perform truncation by slicing off part of the transcription to leave the truncated form (e.g. [ˈdʒɛ.sɪ.kə] → [dʒɛs]), then

⁴ Though less directly relevant to the topic of morphological analysis, students who are interested in the connection between toponyms and settlement history can also explore the way stream names in America also reflect settlement patterns, with non-English generic terms for streams such as *kill*, *rio*, *arroyo*, *cañada* proliferating in areas with historical Dutch or Spanish settlement (Zelinsky 1955, Watkins 2011).

⁵ For example, <http://myfreebingocards.com/bingo-card-generator>.

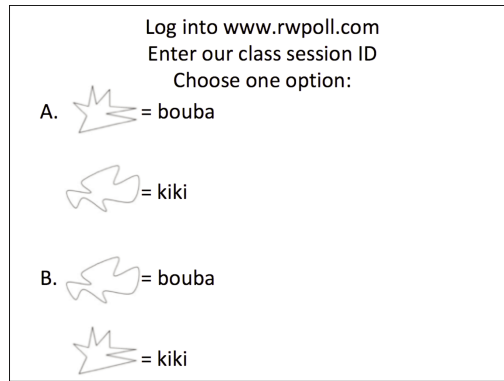


FIGURE 1. Screenshot of a Microsoft Powerpoint slide incorporating an interactive student poll using the ResponseWare plugin. A graph of results would appear automatically on the right side of the screen after the instructor closed polling.

use adhesive tack to ‘stick on’ an affix (e.g. [dʒɛs] + [i]). Students can follow along with their own transcriptions and scissors.

Several of the topics enumerated in this section can also be reinforced through data analysis. In the online supplementary materials, I provide five sample assignments that allow students to explore the phonological and morphological structure of names in different domains. Sample assignment 1, based on DiGirolamo 2012, has students investigate the phonological properties of blended couple names (e.g. *Brangelina*). Students consider the properties of a successful name blend, and then evaluate the well-formedness of blended names and develop novel ones based on these properties. Sample assignment 2, based on McCulloch 2013, has students examine a data set compiled from online sources of parody names for the actor Benedict Cumberbatch.⁶ Students are asked to identify generalizations concerning which phonological features of the original name tend to be preserved in the parody names. Sample assignment 3, based on Koopman 1979, has students perform morphological analysis on Zulu personal names and Zulu nouns, identifying similarities and differences in how the two are formed. Sample assignment 4 asks students to determine the phonological processes involved in nickname formation in an unfamiliar language (Dutch) by considering a data set of given names and their hypocoristics, and sample assignment 5 has them identify the phonological processes in a set of child language data that reflect those commonly found in nickname formation (such as reduplication, truncation, and cluster simplification). The former three assignments are appropriate for introductory-level students; the latter two are geared more toward students with some experience with phonology.

4. SOCIOLINGUISTICS. Students can be introduced to several different aspects of sociolinguistics through name data; I present three below. Throughout this portion of the course, the general points can be made that much language behavior is probabilistic (as opposed to deterministic) and correlates with sociodemographic factors, and that names are no different. Additionally, this unit provides the opportunity to broach the topics of

⁶ A sampling of parody first names: *Anglerfish, Bodybuild, Buttercup, Wimbledon*; parody last names: *Capnerunch, Cuckoo'clock, Cucumberwubwub, Scratchnsniff*. These can then be mixed and matched with humorous results.

linguistic and onomastic profiling and discrimination, and to teach cultural sensitivity and tolerance of variation both in names and in language.

4.1. NAMING AND GENDER. Ochs's (1992) foundational concepts of direct and indirect indexing of gender in language are easily exemplified in the domain of personal names. Students will be familiar with the idea that most given names are sex-specific—that is, they directly index gender. Indeed, though androgynous given names (names that can be bestowed on a child of either sex) do exist, Lieberson and colleagues (2000) find that they skew female over time in the US, an observation that can be connected to differing societal expectations for children of different genders (that is, American society allows girls to have 'boy things', but not the reverse; Sweet 2013). Where indirect indexing of gender through names is concerned, much research has found probabilistic associations between various phonological characteristics (syllable count, stress placement, vowels used) and gender in English first names (Slater & Feinman 1985, Cutler et al. 1990, Barry & Harper 1995, Cassidy et al. 1999). Through these findings, students learn that the phonology of names is not wholly arbitrary, and that patterns underlie variable linguistic behavior more generally (Weinreich et al. 1968).

4.2. LANGUAGE CHANGE. It is commonly known that names and even sound combinations within names go in and out of style; this has been the subject of a number of popular blog posts and news articles (e.g. Wattenberg 2004, Okrent 2014, Silver & McCann 2014). Students are likely to be very aware of the way certain names or sound combinations within names sound 'old-fashioned' or 'trendy', and similarly of the way certain words or ways of speaking sound old or new. Recognizing changes in naming thus sets students up to recognize that other elements of language change over time as well.

In fact, names do not simply change; they change in a systematic way, and in a way that is also evident in nonname elements of language. Lieberson (2000) argues that innovations in tastes do not arise in a vacuum, but rather consist of subtle variations on what was previously popular. Via this 'ratchet effect' governing changes in tastes, elements of fashion—including clothing characteristics, the phonological shape of names, and even, as argued by Labov (2010), vowel pronunciations—change through minute shifts incremented over several decades. Studying how a popular name like *Jason* has given way to similar-sounding *Jacob* and from there to similar-sounding *Mason*⁷ can set students up to find parallels in, for instance, the gradual, systematic movements of vowels involved in a chain shift.

4.3. NAMING AND IDENTITY. An important point to note about names is that, in the majority of cases, they have not been chosen by their bearers: they have been bestowed. In this respect, our names are very similar to our native language and dialect, which we acquire at an early age from our parents and peers, which bear hallmarks of our regional, ethnic, and class background, and which we can change only with difficulty. Indeed, just like aspects of phonology, morphology, and syntax, personal names covary with ethnicity and social class (Lieberson 1984, Lieberson & Bell 1992, Pharr 1993, Lieberson & Mikelson 1995, Barry & Harper 2010, Bloothoof & Onland 2011).

Given this, names are something of a double-edged sword sociolinguistically. On the one hand, a name can constitute an important aspect of one's family identity (Edwards & Caballero 2008, Finch 2008, Davies 2011). At the same time, because certain names

⁷ Period of time each name was among the top ten baby names given to American boys, according to name data available from <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/>: *Jason*: 1971–1983, *Jacob*: 1993–present, *Mason*: 2011–present.

or name characteristics are associated with marginalized groups, names can be the target of stigma and discrimination (Bertrand & Mullainathan 2003, Figlio 2005, Arai & Skogman Thoursie 2009, Sweeney 2013), in the same way that language can (Purnell et al. 1999, Lippi-Green 2012). For instance, much research attests to the pressure on immigrants to change their names in order to assimilate and the identity conflicts that this raises (Bursell 2012, Tummala-Narra 2016, Greenberg 2017). Discussing naming and identity can thus lead students to recognize the social messages sent by both names and language, to critically examine their own beliefs about onomastic and linguistic diversity, and, ideally, to challenge discriminatory ideologies.

4.4. ACTIVITIES AND EXERCISES. As Brook (2017) describes, diachronic name data can be used to introduce students to the basics of data visualization and interpretation in an accessible and approachable way. Brook uses interactive name databases such as the Baby Name Voyager (Wattenberg 2005), which charts the popularity of names among American births over time, to introduce students to hypothesis testing and graph interpretation. However, the raw data that a site such as this is based on is freely available online and can equally form the basis of student exercises. This is particularly useful for courses or programs that have quantitative-analysis skills as a learning objective.

To this end, two exercises in the supplementary materials, sample assignments 6 and 7, have students use quantitative analysis to explore changing patterns in baby naming over time. Sample assignment 6 has students investigate whether male and female names have diverged phonologically over the twentieth century. Students code male and female names for the phonological correlates of gender identified by Barry and Harper (1995) and Cutler and colleagues (1990), and explore whether names have become more or less ‘gendered’ over time. This assignment makes use of both American and British baby-name data,⁸ and works well as an in-class exercise where the class is divided into groups. Each group is given one data set and one method of quantifying a name’s genderedness, and the groups compare and discuss their results at the end. Sample assignment 7 has students examine whether certain cultural and orthographic trends in baby naming have changed over time in the UK. The data associated with this assignment comprises the top 100 names per sex for one year from each decade between 1904 and 2004, obtained as described in n. 8. This exercise not only tests students’ quantitative data-analysis skills, but also requires them to understand the difference between sound and spelling in linguistic analysis, as it asks students to consider whether a rise in names spelled with final <n> is attributable to a change in popularity of the sound [n] or to that specific spelling. Both of these exercises can be completed using a spreadsheet program like Microsoft Excel and require nothing more quantitatively complicated than calculating an average. For more advanced students, however, they could easily be modified to incorporate more sophisticated data-analysis techniques, to be carried out in other statistical software such as R or SPSS.

Outside of the quantitative realm, the intersection of naming and society is rich with opportunities for interactive activities and in-class discussion. One way of bringing the

⁸ American name data was obtained from the US Social Security Administration (<https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/>), which provides the number of children of each sex given each name for every year from 1880 to the present. For this exercise, this was pared down to the top ten names per sex for one year from each decade between 1890 and 2010. British name data was obtained from the UK Office of National Statistics (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/babynamesenglandandwales/previousReleases>), which provides the top 100 names per sex for one year from each decade between 1904 and 1994, and all names given, by sex, from 1996 onward. For this exercise, this was pared down to the top ten names per sex for one year from each decade between 1904 and 2004.

phonological correlates of gender in naming to life is by replicating the Cassidy et al. 1999 study of gender and name phonology using a clicker poll. Cassidy and colleagues asked English-speaking adults and children to match pseudonyms, which had been manipulated to show different phonological correlates of gender, to dolls of different sexes, and they found remarkable consistency in subjects' responses. Having students replicate these findings in the classroom can demonstrate that we have subconsciously picked up on phonological cues to gender through our experience with language. Students can also discuss naming trends and formulate hypotheses about them. For instance, even without quantitatively analyzing whether name 'genderedness' has changed over time, students can speculate on whether they think it might have decreased (due to greater equality between the sexes) or increased (following increasing gender-specificity in some areas of American society, such as toy advertisements; see Sweet 2013). Students can also discuss their experiences with naming and gender in different languages and different societies. And, again without having to do any quantitative analysis, students can brainstorm phonological features of names that they think may have peaked at particular points in time and check their intuitions with the Baby Name Voyager or England & Wales Baby Names, an analogous website for the UK (<http://names.darkgreener.com/>), which allows searching with regular expressions.

The topic of naming and identity can lend itself well to ethnographic research assignments. Students can be assigned to interview individuals of their acquaintance who have or have not changed their names for various reasons, and to report on their choices (following the models of, for instance, Dempsey & Lindsay 2018, which examines surnaming practices within lesbian families, or Edwards 2006, which investigates Chinese students' choices of English and anglicized names).⁹ Naming and identity may also generate considerable discussion among students who wish to share their own experiences.

At the same time, it is important to note that this topic may be a difficult one to broach, since many students may be self-conscious about their own names. Indeed, discussing name-based discrimination and stigma raises many of the same pedagogical issues that arise in sociolinguistics classes, where instructors must confront negative attitudes toward nonstandard varieties of English that may be spoken by members of the class. Lippi-Green (2012:xx) speaks of the importance of engaging in these difficult dialogues with students, and of linguists' responsibility to work toward dispelling negative opinions about language variation (see also Labov 1982). One productive step that could be taken in this direction is to have students write a popular web article or a secondary-school lesson plan on language, naming, and discrimination as a way to bring this issue to wider attention.

5. PSYCHOLINGUISTICS. Three major lines of inquiry have provided a psycholinguistic perspective on names. These are research on how names are processed, on naming and memory, and on the neural localization of name recognition. Interestingly, when the psychological and neurological aspects of names are examined, names and other elements of language are found to behave markedly differently, in contrast to what we have seen in the previous two sections. Accordingly, a unit on the psycho- and neurolinguistics of naming not only introduces students to introductory-level concepts in these areas of study, but also provides a counterpoint to earlier content in the course, which has emphasized the similarity between names and nonname words in their structure and use.

⁹ Instructors should always check with their local Institutional Review Board or ethics committee to ascertain whether approval is required for student work with human subjects.

5.1. NAMING AND LANGUAGE PROCESSING. The fact that names, as proper nouns, refer to specific things, including our own selves, means that names interact with systems of speech perception and production differently from nonname words. One dimension of this concerns the importance of our own names in cognition. Research has found that when given a choice, we prefer letters that are present in our own names (the ‘name letter effect’; Nuttin 1985, Treiman et al. 2001).¹⁰ We also recognize our own names better than other words, both when spoken in noise (the ‘cocktail party effect’; Wood & Cowan 1995) and when shown visually (Shapiro et al. 1997, Yang et al. 2013). The cocktail party effect has been found to start when we are as young as five months old (Newman 2005); indeed, a child’s ability to recognize their own name has been identified as an important step toward learning word segmentation (Bortfeld et al. 2005). Presenting these results introduces students to topics of fundamental importance in psycholinguistics, such as priming, word recognition, and speech-stream segmentation. Students also gain an understanding of the types of methods used by researchers to investigate these areas.

5.2. NAMING AND MEMORY. There are also important cognitive consequences of the ‘specialness’ of names where other people’s names are concerned. Names have been found to be harder to learn than nonname words, even when the phonological form of the two is identical (for instance, the surname *Baker* compared to the occupation *baker*; McWeeny et al. 1987, Cohen 1990). Names are also harder to recall than nonname words (Young et al. 1985, Hanley & Cowell 1988) and result in more tip-of-the-tongue states, where semantic but not phonological information is readily available (Gruneberg et al. 1973, Yarmey 1973, Cohen & Faulkner 1986, Brennen et al. 1990, Burke et al. 1991). In exploring these results, students can learn more generally about how lexical access works. They can also be introduced to research that has connected naming recall to cognitive impairment (Pelamatti et al. 2003) and the cognitive changes that come with aging (James 2004).

More advanced students can explore the different proposals that have been put forward to explain why name learning and retrieval are so difficult. Many of these proposals implicate the semantics of proper names: their arbitrariness (Cohen 1990), their use as pure referring items (Semenza & Zettin 1988, 1989), and their lack of meaningful connections to other concepts or lexical items (Burke et al. 1991, Brédart 1993). However, also proposed is the large plausible phonological size of the set to which names belong: words for occupations have comparatively less phonological diversity than do names (Brennen et al. 1990).

5.3. NAMING AND THE BRAIN. Students can learn the basics of how language is localized in the brain by exploring the neural correlates of naming and contrasting them to the neural correlates of nonname words. For instance, neurolinguistic research has shown that, while language is typically associated with the left hemisphere of the brain, proper names show right-hemisphere activity, potentially attributable to their personal relevance (Ohnesorge & Van Lancker 2001). Research making use of event-related potentials has found evidence for different processing of personal names compared to nouns, and of one’s own name compared to other personal names (Müller & Kutas 1996, Tacikowski & Nowicka 2010, Zhao et al. 2011, Tacikowski et al. 2014, Shi

¹⁰ Some researchers have even taken this so far as to propose that our names influence our careers or our choices of where to live, with people named Dennis more likely to become dentists, or people named Virginia more likely to move to Virginia (‘implicit egotism’). This has been disputed (Simonsohn 2011a,b).

2016). Finally, research on aphasiacs shows differences between names and nonname words as well, with some aphasic patients able to recall names but not nonname words (Cipolotti et al. 1993, Semenza & Sgaramella 1993, Warrington & Clegg 1993, Martins & Farrajota 2007), and others the reverse (McKenna & Warrington 1980, Semenza & Zettin 1988, 1989, Lucchelli & De Renzi 1992). Presenting this body of research not only underscores the considerable differences between names and nonname words in this domain; it also introduces students to the methods and basic research questions of neurolinguistics.

5.4. ACTIVITIES AND EXERCISES. Several published psycholinguistic studies on names can be fairly easily replicated by undergraduate students. If a class is large enough, each student can conduct an experiment on five to ten people and then pool their results with those of the rest of the class, producing a sizable body of data to analyze. This could serve as the basis for teaching hypothesis generation, experimental design, and data analysis, thus leading students through all of the steps of an empirical research project.

One such study is McWeeny et al. 1987 (replicated by Cohen 1990), which asked subjects to learn to associate a surname and a profession with several faces. Subjects were divided into four groups: one group was given meaningful surnames and professions (e.g. *Mr. Carpenter is a lawyer*), a second was given nonword surnames and meaningful professions (e.g. *Mr. Ryman is a lawyer*), a third was given real-word surnames and nonword professions (e.g. *Mr. Baker is a ryman*), and the final group was given surnames and professions that were both nonwords (e.g. *Mr. Talmer is a ryman*). The experimenter recorded the percentage of surnames and professions that were recalled among each group; results indicate that, when a nonword and a real word are paired, the real word is remembered better than the nonword, regardless of which is the name; but when two real words are paired, the profession is remembered better than the name. Thus, it is the ‘meaningless’ label that is harder to recall, but when both the name and the profession carry meaning, the name is the more difficult one.

Research on the ‘name letter effect’ can also be replicated by students. A simple assignment could have students attempt to replicate Nuttin’s (1985) finding that subjects prefer the letters in their own name when presented alongside not-name letters. Students could test whether this effect differs when the name is a first name versus a surname, or between subjects of different ages or different linguistic backgrounds. They could also be asked to speculate on whether any social or personality differences might correlate with the effect, and how those might be tested in follow-up work.

6. CONCLUSION. In this article, I have shown how names can be used as a teaching tool to engage undergraduate linguistics students. Because names are so familiar, even quotidian, students are generally fascinated to learn that they nonetheless have hidden structure and predictable patterning, and that language users have subconscious knowledge of many of their attributes. And because much name data is easily accessible, names can be used to teach a range of skills, from phonological analysis to quantitative techniques.

A secondary goal of this article was to show that there is a wealth of material of linguistic interest in the domain of names. In fact, given that much of the work cited here has appeared only over the past ten or fifteen years, it seems that linguistic research on names is a growing area, and that teaching linguistics with names is becoming even more viable. It is thus my hope that many current and future linguists will be able to make use of the ideas provided here.

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