Some information about ‘What’s in a name?’[[1]](#footnote-1)

We distinguish a surname (last name, family name) that usually refers to the family of the bearer, and given names (first name, middle name, Christian name) that a person is given at birth. When introducing oneself, it is customary in most corners of Europe to say first one’s given name and then to add the family name. Therefore *John Smith* comes from the Smith family and was given the name John at birth. There are countries in the world, however, where this is not the case, like Hungary or China. In Hungary, for example, a person’s name would read *Varga Péter* rather than *Péter Varga* (shoemaker) as would be expected from the majority of Europeans.

‘… Nicknames are good. All my friends call me Sting. My wife calls me Sting. Even my children know I am Sting. When you are born and your parents give you your name, they do not know you. But if your friends and colleagues give you a name – they know you and the name suits you…’ (Sting said those words in a 21-minute interview that was on Czech Television (ČT1) on Wednesday, October 24, 2001 at 21:50. It was a talk show "Na plovárně se Stingem".)

Most probably it was the Chinese who first started using a system of family names (hereditary surnames). We know that they were using them around 2800 B.C.

In Europe, one of the most complex systems of names (including family names and nicknames) was developed by the Romans. With the fall of their Empire, hereditary surnames fell out of fashion and only much later, along with the need to distinguish more and more people of the same name living in a village, bynames appeared (surnames not inherited, but chosen to describe an individual).

Bynames show up all over Europe in four basic categories:

* patronymic – byname that identifies a person’s father
* locative – byname that identifies where a person lives or was born.
* occupational – byname that identifies a person’s occupation.
* nickname – byname that describes a distinguishing feature of a person (physical appearance, personality, dress). Typically, these are not chosen by the bearer of the nickname, but by family, friends, neighbours, or enemies!

After 1500 the custom of using a hereditary surname started to spread. Many people would take their byname and turn it into the family surname by passing it on their children. If the patronymic suffix -sen identified the father, *Jan Hendricksen* (son of Hendrick) would not name his son *Cornelius* *Jansen* (son of Jan), but establish a hereditary family surname by calling his son *Cornelius* *Hendricksen*. Similar patterns existed elsewhere in Europe, as in the Swedish surname Andersson, son of Anders, and the Spanish surname Fernandez, son of Fernando. In Irish Gaelic, *Mac* originally meant “son” and *Ó* would mean “grandson”, and so names like *Ian Mac Henry* or *Michael O Donald* developed.

In some countries in Europe, the patronymic is still in use in some way. In Iceland, there are no hereditary surnames at all. People’s last names are based their father’s name; *-son* being the suffix for a son and *-dóttir* the suffix for a daughter.

In many cultures it is customary for a woman to take her husband’s name, when she marries. And so Miss *Joan Smith* becomes Mrs *Joan Hardy* when she marries Mr *William Hardy*. However, in Slavic languages the wife’s surname takes a “slightly” different form from her husband’s. In Czech, for example, the general rule is to add *-ová* to the man's surname to create the feminine form. The suffix originates from the possessive case and is in a way a Czech version of the English possessive *'s*. Therefore Miss *Lenka Ková*ř*ová* is the daughter of Mr *Marek Ková*ř (blacksmith) and Mrs *Irena* *Ková*ř*ová*.

In South Africa, the common practice was that the first son was named after the paternal grandfather (the father's father), the second was named after the maternal grandfather (the mother's father) and the third son was named after his own father. If the woman gave birth to a daughter she was named after the maternal grandmother, the second after the paternal grandmother and the third daughter after her own mother. So in many cases it was only the seventh child about whose name the parents were to make a decision.

In Vietnam, on the other hand, people never named their child with name of an older relative, in order to show respect to that person. This applied even when that person had passed away, because people wanted his or her soul to be restful. Therefore, no one would have called his or her name again.

In Russia, the father’s name is usually reflected in a person’s middle name –ic, -evic or -ovic is added to the father’s name to form the son’s middle name, while -evna or -ovna forms the daughter’s middle names. In the light of this, we may presume that *Anton Pavlovic Cechov*’s father’s name was Pavel (Paul) or that *Vladimir Iljic Lenin*’s father’s name was Ilja.

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1. http://archive.ecml.at/mtp2/Lea/results/Activities/petr.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)