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Linguistic Commentary #2

Naming Practices and Addressing Children in Chinese Culture

In various cultures, naming practices are prized as a priority, since names are shorthand indicators to our personalities. In many ways, names can be given based off of qualities and attributes that a parent wishes for his or her child to have. However, not all cultures share the same practices, due to individual names having individual histories, frequencies, and associations. The semantics of proper names is a large field that can be difficult to pinpoint and explain the specifics. Therefore, I will be focusing on Chinese naming practices and how families address others by using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage.

Naming practices in Chinese cultures are quite complex, as names represent the importance of family inheritance, collectivism, and gender specific ways of address. Specifically, it is common for people to have two different names. In my case, I have a name in English, and one in Mandarin. Both signify different meanings, and different variants when addressed. For example, my Chinese name is Li Hsing Mei (李馨梅). Li signifies my surname (Lee), and this is placed first before my given name. This is opposite from ways of address in English where surname is placed after the given name. The main reason for this application has to do with the events of 1949. During this period, the Chinese Communist regime started imposing the one child policy rule. This brought about the necessity for descendants of several generations of the same ancestry, to get together and form a family system. This is one of the main reasons why family name inheritance is important, as a collective family system became the basis of Chinese society.

The second part of my name is known as something called “the spreading character.” This is representative of traditional Chinese family culture, as this is also a given name chosen by descendants of my family. This common character signifies the common family name as it indicates the generation within the family system. Also, it is gender specific, as all the girl cousins on my side of the family share the same spreading character of Hsing (馨). However, the

boy cousins on my side of the family share the spreading character of Chien (健). Therefore the first two characters of a Chinese name are pre-decided and based off of family culture.

The last part of a name is a character that is chosen by the parents of a child. Ultimately, when parents decide the last character for their child, they express their desires and wants for their child. This character can be a specific characteristic, trait, or gender specific attribute. My last character of Mei 梅 directly translates to “beautiful” or “plum.” When choosing this name, my Mother expressed how she chose it because it signifies a rare flower that blooms during the wintertime. Thus signifying the flower’s strength during winter conditions. Ideally, many last characters are common among Chinese names, as there are also gender-based names. Many parents acquire masculine names to boys to imply strength, while female names acquire characters relating to beauty and flowers.

Overall, naming practices vary between cultures. In Brazil, parents have the tendency to use foreign names when naming their children. This is due to the fact of parents holding certain rich countries in higher esteem, thus foreign sounding names sound illustrious to them (Petroswick, 2014). Also, names can reflect history or time periods; whether that be centuries of immigration, conquest and slavery, or revolutionary names. Ultimately, names are a fusion of identities, and they undergo boom or bust cycles (Pinker, 314-315). Similar to cycles of fashion, names change with the times yet they don’t reflect other social trends. Each culture has their own way of expressing a calling convention, as well as ways of address.

When referring to ways of address, I will be focusing on familial relations. A polysemous word that is widely used in Mandarin is Mei Mei (小妹); it directly translates to little sister. However, it carries a variety of meanings depending on the context in which it is used. For example, it can also mean daughter. It is a universal word that can be applied between families, as my Brother, Father, or Mother can call me by that name. Unlike English familial relations, a Mother can only refer to her female child as “daughter” or her name; while a brother refers to his sister as “sister,” or by her name. Similarly, the word Gē Ge (哥哥) directly translates to older brother, and it can also be used like little sister between familial members. I address my brother this way, as well as my parents.

In contrast to other languages like Polish and English, Chinese familial addresses are more direct. Polish words like *Corka* and *Corus* are used to express intimacy and emotions. Shortened forms of address indicate a shorter interlocutor distance, while longer forms of address indicate closer relationships (Dziwirek, 5). Ultimately, when addressing “son” or “daughter” in Mandarin, there are no other words that express closeness or intimacy. For example, English-speaking parents use “son” in context of giving advice. This is spoken more by a father, and can also be addressed by older men in position of authority towards younger men who are not their children (hierarchically structured groups). Also, English speakers tend to elongate words like “doggie” to make dogs less threatening. There is no relevance or similarity of this in Mandarin, since addressing a son or daughter is straightforward. There is however a difference in context when trying to address a child for a specific reason. For example, when my Mother is mad at me, she would not call me daughter (Mei Mei). Rather she would use my Chinese name, but exclude the surname. This indicates a level of authority and a heightened attention for me to listen to her since address by my Chinese name is rare.

A. Use of Chinese Name (Hsing Mei)

- a. I want to speak to you with a level of authority.
- b. I want to speak to you in order to get your attention, and express urgency.
- c. I think/know that you did something bad.
- d. I want you to listen and I want you to feel something bad.

B. Mei Mei

- a. I want to speak to you the way people speak to a child.
- b. I want to speak to you as an older authoritative figure.

C. Use of English Name

- a. I want to speak to you with urgency.
- b. I want to speak to you in order to get your attention.
- c. I think you did something bad/ or good.

As expressed in the diminutive I made above, the use of my full English name can mean different things in contrast to the use of my full Chinese name Hsing Mei. When expressing gratitude or happiness, my parents would not use my Chinese name, but rather use the word

daughter (Mei Mei). However, in English my full name can be used to express a congratulatory phrase, or disdain/disapproval from an authoritative figure. Components (c) in explication A and C both express a sense of wrong doing, as component (b) and (a) share a similarity in urgency when addressing by full name. Ultimately, familial ways of address varies in different cultures, and a reason for that has to do with cultural value. Polish is based more off of child directed discourse. It is richer when compared in English, because Polish speakers use various forms of words for son, daughter, and child to convey shades of meaning (Dziwirek, 16). In contrast, Chinese speakers use words that are polysemous that can be applied to different things. In order to address relationship ties and closeness, Chinese names are used. Lastly, English-speaking parents do not use similar terms because they do not exist. This lack of existence is due to the cultural value of individuality. This is seen in naming practices as well, as calling children by names and nicknames are forms of endearment.

Ultimately, names are indicators to our identity, whether that is a form of address, or indicator to our personality. A name may signify a significant quality or attribute that “defines” us as an individual. Though naming practices and familial addresses may vary between cultures, names are a key to our daily interaction and communication with others. This is relevant to the semantic metalanguage, because as Wierzbicka mentions, words are significant since they are often inherited from earlier times and older concepts and ideals (Wierzbicka, 133). Similar to names, we may not be able to claim it as universal, but we are able to better understand the similarities and differences between cultural values and norms, and how they came to be by looking at their origins.

Works Cited

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