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Name Trouble - Part One

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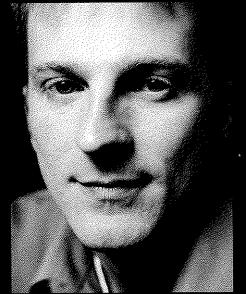https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/englishfacpub/48

FRANKLY
SPEAKING
A DISCUSSION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
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easy for us to call a rock a *moose* or a *sushi* or a *tipi*. And names for people and places are similarly arbitrary. However, the names we learn for places and people can sometimes carry such powerful emotional associations that we have a hard time changing our minds about them, hence the resistance to calling "Squaw Creek" anything but "Squaw Creek."

While linguists believe names in all languages are arbitrary, many people have a tough time believing it because names don't really seem arbitrary. Some families, for example, like to observe the tradition of naming the first born son after his father. Royal families often repeat this practice for generations, thereby creating a need for a system of distinguishing an earlier Henry from a more recent Henry. But the fact that naming practices are traditional means that people developed ways of naming over time. Despite the arbitrary nature of names, we still feel that our names are irrevocably essential to our identities.

A question of semantics

Semantics, the study of meaning, helps us

nouns like *Rutgers*, *Argentina*, *ConAgra*, and *Greg Louganis* don't really have synonyms. They might have nicknames (maybe Greg's close friends call him *Lou*), but by and large they have one and only one name with no equivalents.

Synonym choice means that speakers always have to select the word they think is best in any given situation. When do we use *shore* instead of *beach*? When do we use *rock* instead of *boulder*? Sometimes the choice is determined by the situation — an enormous rock is a boulder, especially if it can tumble down a mountain. Other choices have more artistic, poetic effect. For instance, the word *paradise* denotes "a place of ideal beauty or loveliness." In writing about a certain kind of paradise, Stevie Nicks penned "Trouble in Shangri-La" on her 2001 album of the same name. The name *Shangri-La*, according to the *American Heritage* dictionary, comes originally from James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon*. Stevie could have used the title "Trouble in Paradise" or "Trouble in Utopia," but *Shangri-La* somehow has a specific, exotic connotation that the ordinary, more familiar synonyms lack.

What's in a name?

Shakespeare, speaking through his two most famous lovers in *Romeo and Juliet*, discusses the problem of naming. As Juliet pines for her new love, Romeo, she engages in a difficult debate that the playwright attempts to explore in just a few short lines. (My source is *The Riverside Shakespeare*):

O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet. [...]
'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
[...] O, Be some other name!
What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet....
(Act II, Scene 2)

What Juliet is talking about is the fundamental nature of a name. Does a name necessarily have any connection to the object or person it's attached to? Does the name *Montague* have an unbreakable bond to the person that Juliet loves? Logic tells us that there is no connection between the name (the sign) and the person named (the signifier), that *Montague* has no hold on Romeo; but our emotional response tells us otherwise.

Name Trouble — Part One

I hereby re-christen thee...

The state of Nebraska recently witnessed a controversy surrounding the names of several geophysical features, like rivers or creeks. According to a February 19, 2001, *Omaha World-Herald* article by Todd von Kampen and Nichole Aksamit, the push was to change all the place names that contain the word "squaw" to more appropriate, less offensive names. The movement was strictly voluntary; no law required the changes. However, there was a good deal of resistance, even from some lawmakers. According to the article, Bellevue City Councilman John Stacey said, "I don't have any problem with the name Squaw Creek. It's not derogatory...." Similarly, Councilman Hastings Banner said "Sometimes I think this 'politically incorrect' goes a little too far."

I think many of us would agree that the name we call something is important. It's also important, though, for us to remember that language is essentially an arbitrary system — there's no *inherent* connection between an object in the real world and the word we use to name it. For example, a stone is a stone, and we have other words for types of stones: *rock*, *gravel*, *pebble*, *boulder*. But it would be just as

understand that we respond to words in different ways, on different levels. The linguist Edward Finegan identifies a number of meaning types. The dictionary definition of a word, its denotation, is called *referential meaning*. For instance, the first entry in my *American Heritage* dictionary for the word *beach* is "the shore of a body of water, especially when sandy or pebbly." The referential meaning of *beach* is largely uncontroversial. However, the *affective meaning* of the word *beach* depends on interpretation. Sylvia might hear the word *beach* and dream of warm sand, the soft crash of waves on the shore, the comforting heat of midsummer's sunshine. Juan, on the other hand, may despair because he remembers getting stung by a jellyfish, getting sunburned on his left shoulder blade (where he forgot to put sunblock), and having his nose bloodied by a rogue ball from a nearby beach volleyball game. Sylvia has a positive experience with *beach*, so it conjures a positive affective meaning. But Juan will not be vacationing in Miami any time soon.

There are synonyms for *beach*, like *shore*, *ocean*, *sea*, *oceanside*, and *seaside*, indicating more than one name for that strip of sandy, aquabound geography. In contrast, proper