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NAMING CHILDREN IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD

Introduction

A culture is mirrored in naming practices. Changes in society are reflected in the names that parents choose for their children. Though research has shown that predominantly motives of an esthetic and traditional kind determine the choice for particular names, it is worthwhile to study changes in naming patterns within a context of social transition. An important aspect concerns the effect of increasing globalization, which threatens national and regional identity. More so than ever, films and soap series have a world-wide impact. Besides television, Internet is now rapidly advancing as an important medium for spreading global trends. As a result of these developments, children are more and more becoming citizens of the world and parents increasingly choose international names for their offspring. Of course, a contrary movement may also be detected, but its impact is totally outweighed by common favourites, as popular names chosen in various countries demonstrate. Further research into the background of the effect of globalization on naming practices is therefore required.

Names in a changing society

Do parents wish to convey a message when they pick a name for their child? Do they, for example, explicitly choose regional, national or international names? If one were to ask parents this question, they would probably reply that they just wanted to have a nice name for their child. Alternatively, they might come up with some other reason, like naming the child after its grandparents. This however, is no reason to stop investigating the relation between first names and changes in society. There is reason enough to believe that first names express the identity of a community. Such a community could be a social or ethnic group, but it could also be a region or a country. Parents may not be aware of any messages incorporated in the names they choose, but when we look at first names on the level of groups, it becomes clear that they are an expression of the identity of a group. In the Netherlands, for example, there is a specific group of names that is typical of traditional Protestants – we do have a bible belt in the Netherlands. Furthermore, there is a relation between name-giving practices and income: well-to-do parents tend to give their children other kinds of names than people with lower incomes. Regional names can also be found, mainly in the northern

province of Friesland, the so-called Frisian names¹⁾.

So there is no doubt about the fact that names do express the identity of a community. This is also true on a national level, as Gulbrand Alhaug showed for Norway. In Norway, the years from 1925 till 1949 represent the strongest period for Nordic names. This can be seen in relation to strong contemporary national feelings. He compared top names in Norway and Sweden, and found out that among these names, the Nordic element is much stronger in Norway than in Sweden. This stronger national tendency in the name stock in Norway might be explained by the fact that Norway – in contrast to Sweden – is a relatively young nation. Such a national tendency can also be seen in other areas. Norwegian women, for example, possess national costumes far more often than Swedish women. They wear such costumes on special occasions, for example the National Day²⁾.

International names in the Western world

In a world dominated by television and global trends, national and regional identity is threatened. Many people in the Western world – and Eastern Europe as well – are influenced by the same sources: American movies and television series, the same pop music and pop musicians, the same sports heroes, etc. Young people all over the world buy their food at McDonald's, wear similar clothes, and adore the same celebrity idols. So one might say that younger generations are influenced by the same sources and develop a similar taste. Considering the fact that this is a relatively young trend, we can only expect it to grow in importance.

No doubt this global trend has its influence on people's name preferences. We can expect names chosen in different countries to show increasing similarities. This means that more and more parents will prefer names that are used in many other countries as well. We could call such names international: they are used and known in many countries. Of course the pronunciation of names differs from country to country: there are various international names which the French pronounce differently from for example the English and the Germans, like Sarah and Benjamin.

When we look at popular names in European countries³⁾, the dominant presence of international names is obvious. In for example the Netherlands there are only a few

¹⁾ G. Bloothoof – E. van Nifterick – D. Gerritzen, *Over voornamen. Hoe Nederland aan z'n voornamen komt* (About first names. How the Netherlands gets its first names), Utrecht 2004, p. 135 ff.

²⁾ E. Caffarelli – D. Gerritzen, *Frequenze onomastiche. I prenomi più frequenti nel mondo alla fine del 2° millennio* (The most frequent first names in the world at the end of 2nd Millennium). *Rivista Italiana di Onomastica VIII*, 2002, pp. 631 – 709, pp. 663 – 664.

³⁾ An overview can be found on www.voornamelijk.nl and in E. Caffarelli – D. Gerritzen 2002, o. c. in note 2.

Dutch names among the popular names, international names like Lisa, Max, Julia, Thomas, Emma, Daniel dominate. When we look at the present popular names in Germany – with names like Marie, Sophie, Anna, Leonie, Lea(h); Maximilian, Alexander, Paul, Leon, Lukas – it is hardly possible to guess what country we are dealing with. The Germans turned their back on German names, probably because they became emotionally charged after the Second World War⁴⁾. The names Germans give to their children are strongly international. Among the popular names only a few can be recognized as foreign names, like Jessica, Vanessa and Kevin from English, Michelle from French and Lara from Russian. However, these names are popular in many other countries as well, so we could also consider them as international.

Also in the Scandinavian countries many popular names have an international image, in Denmark for example Emma, Mathilde, Laura, Sofie (but also Freja, Lærke, Signe), Mathias, Lucas, Frederik, Sebastian (but also Mads, Rasmus, Malthe); in Norway Emma, Nora, Emilie, Anna (but also Malin, Tuva, Vilde), Mathias, Martin, Andreas (but also Sondre, Ole, Håkon); in Sweden Emma, Julia, Hanna, Klara (but also Elin, Linnéa, Alva), Filip, Oscar, Lucas, Alexander (but also Linus, Rasmus – and a few English names: William, Kevin, Liam). In general, international names are dominant in the Scandinavian countries. In Finland we find a mixture of international names (Emma, Sara, Emilia, Julia; Matias, Elias, Jesse, Joonas), and Finnish names or name forms (Venla, Aino, Oona, Pinja; Eetu, Veeti, Juho, Aapo). The international names are mainly present among the girls' names, whereas the list of popular boys' names looks more Finnish.

Only a few names among the popular girls' names in England and Wales can be recognized as English, examples are Jessica, Megan and Katie; the majority can be considered international (Emily, Sophie, Chloe, Olivia, Hannah). Among the popular boys' names there are more English forms (Jack, James, William, Harry, Matthew), but the international names dominate here as well (Thomas, Daniel, Benjamin, Alexander, Jacob). The same goes for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Ireland, although we find a few typical names there: Niamh, Aoife (girls) and Callum (boys) in Northern Ireland; Niamh, Eilidh, Isla (girls) and Callum (boys) in Scotland; Aoife, Niamh, Caoimhe, Roisin, Aisling (girls) and Cian, Eoin, Darragh, Oisín (boys) in Ireland.

⁴⁾ J. Gerhards – R. Hackenbroch find an increase of German boys' names in Gerolstein (Rheinland-Pfalz, Germany) in the 1930s. They interpret this development as "den Einfluß des politischen Regimes des Nationalsozialismus auf den allgemeinen Kulturwandel einer Säkularisierung" and link it to the "Männlichkeitsideologie des Nationalsozialismus". In the 1970s, the German names disappear (J. Gerhards – R. Hackenbroch, *Kulturelle Modernisierung und die Entwicklung der Semantik von Vornamen. Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 49, 1997, pp. 410 – 439, pp. 418 – 419 and p. 430).

Some of these regional names made an international carrier, like Erin, Sean and Aidan. In general however, international names are the favorite names in the English speaking countries of Europe. This is also true for the USA, Canada and Australia, where names like Emily, Sophie, Emma, Olivia, Hannah; Jacob, Thomas, Michael, Daniel, David, Alexander are popular. Just like in the English speaking countries of Europe we find English names and name forms (Madison, Ashley, Taylor; Harrison, Ryan, Cooper⁵⁾, Abigail, Grace; Andrew, Nicholas, John).

In France the international names dominate (Lea, Emma, Chloe, Clara; Lucas, Thomas, Hugo, Leo), but French names are also well represented (Manon, Juliette, Charlotte; Antoine, Louis, Romain). Many Italians express their nationality in the name form they give to their children. About half of the popular girls' names have an Italian form, like Giulia, Francesca and Federica. And although the popular boys' names can be recognized from an international perspective, they all show an Italian form (Alessandro, Lorenzo, Riccardo). We do not dispose of any national data for Spain, but we do have recent data from Catalonia, a province in the northeast, where Barcelona is the main city. There are various international names on the list (Paula, Maria, Carla, Laura; Marc, David, Daniel, Joel), but we also find names that do not belong to the international name stock; examples are Laia, Nuria, Nerea (girls), and Oriol and Iker (boys).

In the naming of children in Western Europe, international names appear to be people's favourites. Nevertheless most of the lists with popular names make clear from which country they come, with the exception of Germany. The Scandinavian countries as a whole express their identity in a modest way in their popular first names. The Italian boys' names show the characteristics of the language to the largest extent.

The popularity of international names weakens the position of national and regional names. These national and regional names can also be found among the popular names, but in many countries the international names account for the majority of names. Popular names in the Western world – and to some extent also in Eastern Europe – are beginning to show more and more similarities.

In general the girls' names are more international than the boys' names. A possible explanation for this could be that people tend to be more conservative when choosing a name for a son than for a daughter, in which case parents are more inclined to choose something new⁶⁾. And since international names are apparently the latest fashion, the girls' names present a more international picture than the boys' names.

⁵⁾ Strikingly, all names are originally family names.

⁶⁾ D. Gerritzen, Changes in the naming patterns for girls and boys in the Netherlands against the cultural background (XXth century), *Onoma* 34, 1999, pp. 181 – 195.

International names in a wider perspective

A comparison of international names in the western world with the ones in the rest of Europe gives us an idea of widely spread international names. The comparison that has been made here ignores spelling and form variation, all the more because there will be pronunciation differences between countries as well. For some of the similarities, we will have to be aware of the fact that the names belong to the traditional stock of Christian names. We do not know in detail which names belong to the traditional name stock in which countries. A large variety in form, like with Andrew (Andreas, André, Anders), John (Johannes, Jan, Jens), Katherine (Katrine, Caitlin, Karen) and Michael (Mikkel, Miguel, Michiel), is an indication that the name has been in use for a long time. Conversely, a stable form is related to a recent spread. Examples of this are Emma, Jessica, Julia, Kevin, Laura and Sara(h). Exceptions to the rule that a stable form indicates recent spread are Anna, Daniel, Maria and Martin. These names may have a long history in many countries, but nevertheless, there is little variation (only Marie is a widespread alternative form). Names like these are classical: they fit into many languages and it is hard to tell whether they are modern or traditional. Other names that take a strong international position are Alexander, Christian and Christina, David, Lucas and Thomas. Most of the international names belong to the general Western name stock. Exceptions are Kevin and Jessica. These two English names can be considered as recent export products, whereas many other names were spread under the influence of Christianity, a long time ago.

The influence of media

Research in the Netherlands analyzing the rationale behind naming practices – with respect to children born in the period 1922 – 1995 – shows that most parents are driven by motives of an esthetic nature, partly in combination with the desire to call their child after a member of the family. Names that run in families, usually old-fashioned by nature, are relegated to the second and third position in a name series. Factors such as 'naming after celebrity idols', 'found in a reference book of names' and 'the meaning of the name' are of secondary importance in the search process⁷⁾. This has been a recognizable pattern for decades, leading to the conclusion that television has not significantly altered the motives for choosing names.

Research performed by Rast has yielded remarkable results. This investigation measured the effect of the very popular television series „Ein Sommer mit Nicole“ as

⁷⁾ D. Gerritzen, First Name Choices in the Netherlands 1992 – 1995. In: W. F. H. Nicolaisen, Proceedings of the XIXth International Congress of Onomastic Sciences, Aberdeen 1998, Volume 3, pp. 140 – 147.

regards the popularity of the name Nicole. No causal connection proved valid here; in the three months after the series' final episode the name even proved to be chosen less frequently. Soon after, its popularity increased, but the television series may only be attributed a boosting effect, at the most⁸⁾.

The influence of various media usually does not simply concern direct naming after celebrity idols. Vandenbosch correctly states „that the influence of mass media on given names is more complicated than it might at first appear and it encompasses considerably more than a straightforward ‚naming after media personalities‘ would suggest“⁹⁾. Of course, the indirect influence of media is definitely strong, as famous name bearers – either real or fictitious – determine a name's reputation. This process proves most intense whenever films and television series are involved. Also, we get to know many names through the media. For a start, you may just think of the names that become part of our system as they feature in the credits of a film or television series. Research by Vandenbosch shows that television influenced 18% of parents in choosing a name. By adding the influence of novels, newspapers, magazines, films, music, sport and radio, she establishes a percentage of 34% (alongside ‚personal contacts‘ 48%) and ‚books of names‘ 34% (multiple responses were possible)¹⁰⁾. Therefore, the media do not so much influence naming practices through the direct naming after celebrities, but are first and foremost important sources of inspiration: we are acquainted with many first names by engaging with modern media.

The increase of our individual stock of names is also relevant as regards the Internet. Though it has to be said that research into the motives and sources of inspiration for naming has not been sufficiently updated to incorporate ‚found on the Internet‘. In future, this category will have to be included, for the Internet offers possibilities in close keeping with the tendency to choose international names. An important advantage of the Internet concerns the flexible way in which information can be searched and provided. Names are not only accessible in alphabetical order, but may in principle also be traced on account of a range of characteristics, such as length, meaning and frequency. Also, Internet allows for an interactive approach: parents may consult one another on the subject of naming.

As stated above, internationalization is an important trend in recent naming practices. More and more often parents choose names which are used internationally and are familiar to people in large parts of the world. This makes clear that an

⁸⁾ F. Debus, *Namengebung. Möglichkeiten zur Erforschung ihrer Hintergründe*, *Onoma XVIII*, 1974, pp. 456 – 469, pp. 461 – 462.

⁹⁾ H. Vandeboosch, *The Influence of Media on Given Names*, *Names* 46, 1998, pp. 243 – 262, p. 244.

¹⁰⁾ H. Vandeboosch o. c. in note 9, p. 248.

increasing number of parents – consciously or unconsciously – seem to anticipate their children's future international contacts. Even the Japanese know how to deal with Julia and Thomas.

The Internet is an aspect of our society's growing international outlook. As regards first names, there are two significant stimuli at work here. On the one hand, the Internet strengthens our self-perception of being citizens of the world; on the other, names from other parts of the globe have come within reach. The first development causes a growing awareness among parents that their children will not only be active in their home area, but will also participate in more wide-ranging networks. For many people, international contacts have become part and parcel of daily life.

The Internet not only provides for our participation in global networks, but also supplies a huge potential of information. Data banks of first names may be found via search engines and websites that are relevant to expecting parents (to be found by entering keywords such as baby, pregnancy etc.). The increasing number of parents that makes use of Internet search options when looking for names, may cause exotic and unfamiliar names to become more popular. Such future development, readily anticipated, will further strengthen recent tendencies towards differentiation in naming practices. More and more, parents look out for names that are special, preferably unique. In this way, the Internet will contribute to the current trend towards individualization in society. The internationalization of naming practices, however, is of greater importance than individualizing tendencies. In this respect also, current developments in society are relevant as globalization plays an ever more important role. As to the close interaction between alterations in naming practices and changes in society, Internet is the perfect medium. As concerns the Internet's effect on naming practices, expectations are high – quite rightly so.

Further research

An investigation into the relation between first names and globalization should not be limited to a study of popular names in various countries, although they tell us a lot about the major trends in the naming of children. What we need is background information, for example a study of the relation between name preferences, language attitude and globalistic thinking. Is there a clear relation between the three? In the Netherlands, for example, many people are complaining about the use of English words in the Dutch language. But do these people prefer Dutch names and dislike English names? And can these people be considered as anti-globalistic?

We need additional research, which consists of two elements. First of all, a group of people – and this should be an adequate representation of the population – will be requested to indicate their appreciation of certain names, and of course these names will be chosen from various groups: names typical of the country in question, regional names, international names, and two kinds of foreign names: foreign names the people in question are familiar with, and foreign names unknown to them. Secondly, this

research effort should make use of a questionnaire by means of which information on language attitude, including dialect attitude, as well as (possible) globalistic tendencies may be gathered. Other issues to be considered here are sympathy for regional matters and the extent to which interviewees may be called nationally minded. This combination of name appreciation, language attitude and globalistic thinking will offer possibilities to explain important trends in the fashion of first names, especially if this research is done in several different countries.

Résumé

Pojmenovávání dětí v globalizujícím se světě

Příspěvek se zabývá společenskými faktory, jež mají vliv na výběr rodných jmen; pozornost je věnována především roli médií, zvláště pak televize a internetu. Dále autorka podává přehled současných trendů v „západním světě“: ukazuje se, že v mnoha zemích hrají dominantní úlohu mezinárodní jména. Následuje porovnání se situací ve východní Evropě a seznam nejrozšířenějších mezinárodních jmen. V závěru článku jsou naznačeny možnosti dalšího výzkumu.