

DICTIONARIES OF PERSONAL NAMES¹

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4.1 INTRODUCTION: NAMING SYSTEMS

IN Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere, a person is identified by a name composed of two component types: one or more 'given names' (sometimes referred to as 'first names' or 'forenames') given to him or her at or shortly after birth, and a 'surname' or 'family name', which is normally inherited from the bearer's father. This chapter discusses dictionaries of both kinds of names. Both have long and complex histories, involving normal and abnormal processes of linguistic change and often reflecting long-dead conventions of meaning, as well as elements of both ancient and medieval social structure, custom, and religious beliefs.

This 'binomial naming pattern' has been standard throughout Europe since the Middle Ages, though some societies were slower than others to adopt it. In Wales and Scandinavia, for example, the older 'patronymic' system (e.g. *Rhys ap Rhydderch* 'Rhys son of Rhydderch', *Sven Persson* 'Sven son of Per', *Anna Magnúsdóttir* 'Anna daughter of Magnus') continued in use until well into the nineteenth century and even beyond. The patronymic system continues to be the norm in Iceland to this day. Ashkenazic Jewish communities used a patronymic (and metronymic) system of family names until surnames were imposed by law in central and eastern Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

There are variations on the binomial pattern. Many individuals have one or more middle names, which generally serve as additional or alternative given

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names, but which are sometimes used to preserve the surname of the mother's family or some other ancestral family connection. From the Middle Ages until the late twentieth century, it was normal for a woman to take the family name of her husband on marriage, but nowadays many women continue to use their 'maiden name' (inherited family name) after marriage. This presents the family with a choice when children are born into the marriage: most children in Britain still receive their family name from their father, but some receive the mother's family name, while others receive both names in a hyphenated form (a practice formerly largely reserved for grand alliances among rich and aristocratic families). This latter practice may work satisfactorily for one generation, but it presents an interesting dilemma for second and subsequent generations: which of the four or eight potential hyphenated surnames should the child receive?

The family name is used for official purposes, preceded by an honorific such as *Mr*, *Ms*, or *Dr*. Until recently, the family name with an honorific was also used in business contexts and in addressing colleagues, but now increasingly in the English-speaking world many business acquaintances get onto first-name terms soon after first contact, while nowadays sales representatives address people they have never met before by their first names, which to older people seems like undue familiarity. This contrasts with nineteenth-century practice, when it was unthinkable for strangers to use first names, and when even wives would address and refer to their husbands respectfully by the surname with honorific, as readers of Dickens will recall ('I will never desert Mr Micawber', said Mrs Micawber). The first name used to be something special and intimate, not for bandying about in public. It is no longer so.

The practice of addressing fellow members of a group (for example at boys' schools) by the surname alone, without an honorific, was common until the 1960s but has died out, though use of the surname alone is still common in academic references. On the other hand, nicknames continue to thrive. For a splendid collection of nicknames of well-known public figures, past and present, see Delahunty (2003).

Two striking exceptions to the binomial system are the names of peers and Muslims. The personal names of members of the aristocracy in Britain and elsewhere in Europe are governed by sets of extraordinarily complex conventions—too complex to spell out here. Accounts of the Arabic naming system are given in Schimmel (1989) and Ahmed (1999). The latter is a dictionary of Muslim given names with their religious significance. In the English-speaking world Arabic or Muslim names are often adapted to the binomial system by treating part of the name as if it were a hereditary surname, sometimes with bizarre effects, as when the Hindu feminine honorific *Begum* (approximately equivalent to English *Mrs*) is