What’s in a name?

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1. Introduction

Adam and Eve were walking through the Garden of Eden when Adam spotted a cow. ‘I think I’ll call that a cow,’ he said. ‘Why a ‘cow’?’ asked Eve. ‘Why not a dog?’

‘Because it looks more like a cow than a dog.’

It was a privilege – if a tough job – to name everything on earth, because names have power. Juliet asks ‘What’s in a name’ and the answer is quite a lot, really. It is quite appropriate that a slang term for name is ‘handle’. To know the name of something or someone is to have a purchase on them.

People’s memory for names can vary. Most people at some time or other have had the experience of being greeted by name by someone, whose name they cannot remember. This immediately puts you at a disadvantage. To not remember someone’s name socially may be taken as an indication that you do not remember the person themselves.

Names in programming

One discipline in which people get to frequently invent new names is computer programming. Every entity that the programmer creates must be given a name. In teaching programming I have often asserted that the main challenge of programming is that of choosing the names. This may seem facetious to the neophyte programmer who is struggling with apparently complex concepts such as branching, iteration and recursion, but I do believe there is a level of truth in it. In order to give a good name to a program element, one must have a good understanding of its role in the program. It follows that if one understands all the components of the program that well then one will understand the program.

Introductory programming courses invariably encourage the use of meaningful names. They are part of the documentation of the program. A good test is whether

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1 I probably ought to acknowledge a 1970s student Rag Mag for this joke, but I do not: (1) because I cannot remember which one I read it in and (2) I suspect that such mags were less than punctilious about acknowledging the sources of their own material.

2 In my experience this is not generally the case. I remember the person; I know I should know them but I cannot remember their name and probably where I have encountered them previously.
another programmer can look at your code and understand what it does. Indeed, most programmers have had the experience of returning to a piece of code that they wrote themselves some time previously and have difficulty in comprehending how it works.

One way of creating meaningful names is by using several words that describe the object and concatenating them together. A problem with this is that the resultant compound word is hard to read. One solution to that is to capitalize the initial letter of each of the components, so that you might have a subprogram called `CalculateAverage`. This is a convention which has crept into everyday usage. For instance, the popular TV soap opera is called EastEnders. It is a trend I tried to resist, but I have given up trying to stem that tide. It seems inconsistent with conventional English; would ‘Eastenders’ be a spelling error, for instance?

Program source code is valuable intellectual property, so it is hard to get hold of copies. However, I rather suspect that – regardless of what they were told on their first programming course – most professional programmers do not use long, meaningful identifiers. In their quest for speed in churning out lines of code, they revert to short, easily typed names of one or two letters.

**Jargon**

Jargon is specialist vocabulary applied to a particular subject. Its use is often deprecated, but that is generally when it has been mis-used. Jargon is an inevitable and necessary part of everyday life. As long as both participants in a dialogue understand the jargon, then it is an invaluable aid to communication. Take sailing as an example. Every part of a ship or yacht has a name. ‘Pass me the mainsheet’ is a request that can be quickly met by someone who knows what the mainsheet is. ‘Pass me that rope over there, the one with the blue flecks, not the red one’ is much more open to error. The phrase ‘to know the ropes’ dates back to the era of sailing ships which had hundreds of different ropes. Part of the apprenticeship of a young sailor would be to ‘learn the ropes’, in other words, to learn the names of every rope on the ship. Only once he knew them all could the sailor respond (quickly and in all conditions) to orders.

Jargon gets a bad name when it is mis-used; when one person deliberately uses words that they know will not be understood by another. This a way of asserting power. ‘I am a member of an elite, the magic circle who understand these words – and you are not.’ This is common where technology is used. The informed person can make assertions about the technology in terms that the other person cannot understand. In this way the technologist seeks to make themselves irreplaceable.

**Education**

It is not only in ship-board education that learning names is important. In fact, the essence of education is to teach people names. The name may refer to quite a simple artefact (e.g. a … is a bird found in …) or a highly complex phenomenon (e.g. … is the process whereby …). The former might be mentioned once in as long as it takes to say one sentence, whereas the latter might be the subject of a series of lectures. The point is, that once the lesson has been learned, the name can be used as an immediate, short-hand reference to the object.
Bird spotting

I often wish I knew more about birds. When walking in the country I see interesting birds and I wish I knew what they were. But all I mean by that, is that I wish I knew their name. If I could map their appearance (or call or whatever) to a name, then I would have more power or control. I could look the bird up in a book to find out more about it and its behaviour. I could discuss it with other people. What is the hobby of bird watching, if it is not the collection of names?

Brands

A vital part of modern marketing is the brand name the right name can make a bottom-line difference to the numbers of sales – or so people believe. It is well known that companies spend millions of pounds on devising new names. There are a list of properties that a brand name should have:

• it should have positive associations,

• it should not have negative – and certainly not obscene – meaning in any language,

An extension of the brand name is the trademark.

Names and the internet

People’s names

When a couple are expecting a child, choosing a name can be most traumatic. There is a feeling that the ‘right’ name will give the child a head start whereas the wrong one may be a burden they carry around. Some names are seen as pretty or ugly. Some are felt to be appropriate for a child – but not for an adult. People’s names are very much subject to fashion. This can be verified by looking at the top ten names in birth announcements in The Times year by year.

Individuals associate names with people they know of that name. They could not give their child the same name as someone they dislike. There are social and class associations. Foreign names may be seen as pretentious.

Someone’s name is an important possession. I have worked with children with learning disabilities whose understanding of language may be minimal. In such cases it may be that their name is about the only word they recognize – which means it is vital that everyone calls them by the same name, that they may not be able to cope with or recognize diminutives.

3  See Johnny Cash’s song A Boy Named Sue.