

Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue of *Genealogy* on Surnames

Richard Coates ^{1,*} and Harry Parkin ²

¹ Bristol Centre for Linguistics, S Block, Frenchay Campus, University of the West of England, Bristol BS16 1QY, UK

² The Vicarage, Division of Communication, Screen & Performance, Parkgate Road, University of Chester, Chester CH1 4BJ, UK; h.parkin@chester.ac.uk

* Correspondence: richard.coates@uwe.ac.uk

Giving personal names to individual children is a cultural universal. This happens through a process which is often semi-formal. Individuals responsible for the child and its welfare select one or more names, sometimes in consultation with others who may have a ritual or official role (family members, shamans, priests, government functionaries, etc.). A person does not necessarily bear the same given name throughout their life. Following standards differently set in different societies, an initial given name may be temporary or durable, alterable or set in stone, subject to playful variation, and changed or added to for religious or social reasons which are too multifarious to go into in depth here.

The situation with *surnames*—defined preliminarily as names attaching to an individual in addition to the primary given name(s)—is somewhat different. Not all present-day societies require people to have surnames; for example, Tamil and Indonesian (notably Javanese and Sundanese), though under Western influence individuals in these societies may adopt one. In those societies which traditionally do permit or require surnames, there is often a focus on relationships, and one of two broad but conceptually related strategies is adopted: the additional name(s) may take the form of a genealogical parade (X son of Y son of Z son of A. . .), or may be inherited, typically from the father. In some cases of inheritance, e.g., Portuguese and Spanish names are retained from both parents, though in these the name inherited from the mother is abandoned in the following generation. Genealogies, curated by professional remembrancers, were the staple of traditional (aristocratic) Welsh family history, and remain so in, e.g., Wolof and Manding societies. These typically patrifocal family histories provide a template for one typical form of inherited surname (Y's son). Inherited surnames became the norm in western Europe and have influenced practices worldwide. Formally, the two types may overlap. Icelanders' additional names take the form of a genealogy abbreviated to one generation (Guðni Jóhannesson the current president of Iceland, whose father was Jóhannes), and these are not inherited; additional names of precisely the same formal type may be inherited in e.g., English naming practice (Samuel Johnson the lexicographer, whose father was not John but Michael).

In practical terms, the main function of surnaming is to distinguish bearers of the same given name(s) from each other in societies where given names are typically drawn from a small traditional pool, or where naming a child after another person is prevalent. The outset of surnaming in almost all cases draws meaningfully on the vocabulary of a language traditional or current in the relevant area. A by-product of inherited surnaming is to emphasize genetic ("blood") relationships and the central importance of family unity and status; hence of course the term *family name*, which is often used as a casual synonym of *surname*. We use *surname* here as a cover-term for any additional name in the broadest sense of that concept, respecting the word's etymology (medieval Norman French *surnon*, *surnom* 'additional name').¹

Inherited surnames worldwide tend to fall into a quite small number of categories, notably having lexical reference to the bearer's genetic history or some other relationship (as indicated above), their physical or moral personal characteristics, their occupation or



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social status, and their place of abode or origin. These were no doubt first applied by others as distinguishers, but a chosen self-designation may serve the same function. Historically this choosing has often happened when a society previously without inheritable surnames adopts them systematically. A paradigm case is the requirement of the Surname Law (Soyadı Kanunu) of 21 June 1934 in Türkiye that all people should adopt a surname, where the earlier Ottoman regime had traditionally required no such thing. People, often with guidance, created surnames which were then made official and inheritable, often voluntarily affirming inclusion in the new social order (thus, e.g., *Öztiürk* 'genuine Turk').

In this special issue of *Genealogy*, the Guest Editors have taken a liberal approach to the scope of the subject-matter. In our call for papers, we announced that we would understand *surname* or *family name* to include not just inherited surnames, which are arguably the most salient type of additional name, but also names that perform analogous roles in a wide range of cultures, such as patronyms and metronyms, clan names, *nasab*, *laqab*, *nisba*, and *kunya* in Arabic-language cultures, etc.—any name, in fact, which explicitly positions the individual within a larger social structure. In principle we would also consider submissions on the presence or absence of additional naming in some society.

We observed that relatively little has published globally on the topic of additional-naming, and that what there is tends to focus quite narrowly on a few issues such as name etymology, the role(s) of names in individual family histories, and name change practices in different societies. Much published work involving surnames or family names is genealogical (therefore highly specific to individual families), sociological (therefore tending to focus on particular societies or cultures), or lexicographical (therefore essentially summarizing a current state of historical knowledge). Accordingly, we considered it timely to seek to bring together contributions from as many geographical, linguistic and cultural areas as possible; and from as many as possible of the disciplines which have an established or potential professional interest in personal naming at the family level (or analogous): linguistics/onomastics, lexicography, history, genealogy, social psychology, anthropology, human biology, genetics, computer science and AI, marketing, etc. To achieve this, we did not specify a single overarching theme, because we wanted to expose scholars working in these various fields to the full richness of current thinking, from a wide range of viewpoints, about this socially important and dynamic category of names, not just from a genealogical perspective, and thereby to hint at possible directions for further research and cross-disciplinary collaboration. We were pleased to consider submissions from any disciplinary area, whether oriented to history, praxis or theory, and whether using established or novel methodological approaches to the study of surnames. We expected submissions to fall into five broad areas:

1. Projects and methods in surname research;
2. Systematic aspects of surnames and naming;
3. Linguistic aspects of surnames and naming;
4. Praxis in relation to surnaming;
5. Studies relating to individual surnames, especially family names, but in which the focus was on the name itself rather than on wider genealogical matters.

The papers we put before our readers fulfil our brief as follows.

The surname topics appearing in the papers deal exclusively with the Northern Hemisphere, but they range widely nevertheless, relating to Canada, Iceland, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the former Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, historic Georgia, Ghana and Vietnam as sites of study, and they embrace the wider cultural domains representable as Armenian, Jewish and Caribbean Dutch.

Many of the papers demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature of family name study through their application of methods associated with different and discrete fields. For example, those by Jane Pilcher et al. and Melanie MacEacheron show that methods of social science can contribute a great deal to our understanding of how family names work, while many others reflect the important contribution of linguistic methods, as we shall set out in more detail below.

No imminent or ongoing projects are reported on as such, but a derivative or spinoff of a significant endeavour appears in one paper reported on below, namely the Akan Personal Names Project, being undertaken at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana. Some of the studies were individually grant-funded. That by Jane Pilcher et al. was supported in the UK by the Leverhulme Trust. Some of the research for Kendra Willson's paper was conducted while the author was a Collegium Fellow at the Turku Institute for Advanced Study (2015–2017) and a EURIAS/Marie Skłodowska-Curie Junior Fellow at the Polish Institute for Advanced Study (2018–2019). Žaneta Dvořáková's article was financially supported within the statutory activity of the Czech Language Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences. The involvement of the Guest Editors stems from their participation in the Family Names of the United Kingdom project (2010–16), funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council.²

Systematic aspects of surnaming are covered in Kendra Willson's paper about the social tension between the use of true patronymics and inherited surnames in pre- and post-independence Iceland. Turning to a major linguistic issue, Justyna Walkowiak deals with the vexed and strongly current question of Lithuanian female surnames, these being the only ones in Europe to encode marital status morphologically.

Linguistic analysis features strongly in three further papers. Alexander Beider's article on Jewish surnames of the territory of modern independent Georgia expounds the origin, chronology and morphology of names and name types over a long period. Two papers concentrate on the relation between linguistic and cultural concerns. Yaw Sekyi-Baidoo analyses the conceptual underpinnings of semantically transparent Akan (Fante and Twi) names in the light of Akan culture, identifying *commemorability* as the key driver of traditional and inventive naming, applied first in given-naming with secondary transferred use in family names. In similar vein, Nguyen Viet Khoa's paper covers etymological and pragmatic aspects of Vietnamese (Kinh) surnaming, with a detailed analysis of *Nguyễn*, which is the dominant surname in Vietnam, attaching to about one-third of the population.

As Jane Pilcher and her collaborators affirm, "Names are increasingly recognised in sociology as important routes for understanding family relationships, as well as familial and individual identities". They are therefore bearers of the potential for socially motivated change or substitution. Regarding praxis in relation to surnames, issues of status and identity are dealt with in several papers, both historical and current in content. Žaneta Dvořáková analyses changes in surnames among Czech and Moravian Jews between 1867 and WW1, and concludes that the main goal was less a quest for assimilation to the surrounding German-speaking culture than an attempt to discard names perceived as ethnically stereotypical and potentially stigmatizing. Two papers follow a social science approach. Melanie MacEacheron's survey of choices made by Canadian brides seeks to establish what indicators are the best predictors of birth surname retention. Jane Pilcher, Jan Flaherty, Hannah Deakin-Smith, Amanda Coffey and Eve Makis's novel study deals with how the question of surname choice is viewed, understood and operationalized in the UK both by adopted children and by people who adopt them, and explores how tensions between the two perspectives may arise.

Two papers focus on issues that are essentially those of diaspora. An analysis of the Armenian diaspora in France on the basis of material in the INSEEE database is provided by Pierre Darlu and Pascal Chareille's paper on the changing distribution of Armenian surnames in 20th-century France. Leendert Brouwer's polemical article deals with some issues, amounting to contradictions and absurdities, arising in the Dutch legal system regarding the right to change or create one's surname, especially in the way that this affects people of Caribbean origin residing in the mainland Netherlands.

One paper provides a historical analysis of a particular surname, namely the Vietnamese *Nguyễn*, as noted above.

We believe that the topics and methods covered by the papers in this Special Issue reflect the unique interdisciplinarity of the study of family names and names in general, and the strength of the papers shows how vibrant and varied the field has become. When

considered together, and in the context of previous research on names, it is clear that the study of family names continues to develop in new and interesting ways, and that they can be acknowledged as a significant site of research from a wide range of perspectives.

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Notes

¹ It is of course possible for some element to be appended to a given name irrespective of its distinguishing function, for example, as an honorific like Turkish *bey* or the various Zulu *izibongo* or Yoruba *oriki* ‘praise names’ which we do not regard as *name* elements. We also do not treat *byname*s as such in this Special Issue of *Genealogy*, insofar as they overlap with the traditional classical concept of *epitheton ornans*, e.g., *Apollo Musagetes* ‘Apollo, [in his guise as] leader of the Muses’, where *Musagetes* does not distinguish one Apollo from another, but singles out one aspect of the uniquely-named god Apollo’s nature. We acknowledge, of course, that what was originally a descriptive byname may give rise to an inheritable surname, especially in Western contexts, e.g., *Whitehead*, *Legrand*, *Fusco*, *Suess*, *Latif*.

² <https://gtr.ukri.org/person/44806162-0882-485E-B2EA-23303F253834>, accessed on 7 June 2024.

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