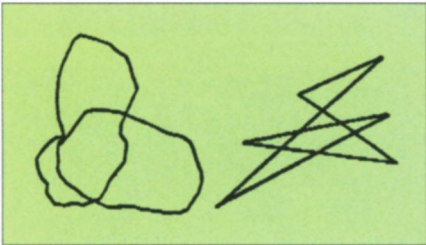


Ethnobiology

From a meeting in Athens, Ga., of the Society of Ethnobiology

What's in a name? Sound symbolism . . .

In his 1929 book *Gestalt Psychology*, Wolfgang Köhler described a classic experiment that uncovered a striking consistency in the names people picked for two abstract drawings. A rounded doodle was associated with a soft-sounding name; a pointy scribble got the hard consonants. Such sound symbolism, according to some scholars, goes beyond the onomatopoeia of words like "bow wow" and reflects an intuitive attempt to capture in human speech the salient or essential traits, like size or shape, of at least certain objects.



Maluma or taketa?

"It's essentially gesturing with the mouth," says anthropologist Brent Berlin of the University of Georgia in Athens.

For evidence of sound symbolism, Berlin has looked into the languages and fauna of South

America. He described a preliminary analysis of the words for two different animals—the tapir and the squirrel—in 19 distinct Indian languages, whittled to omit those with borrowed words.

In 14 of the languages, the pair of words fit a pattern. The tapir was represented by a word containing the vowel sound "ah," as in *mezaha*, while the squirrel was represented by a word containing an "ee" sound, as in *kuzikuzi*.

To test whether those sounds were symbolic of the large, slow-moving tapir or the quick, small squirrel, Berlin shared the list with a class of 82 English-speaking undergraduates. He pronounced the paired words and asked them to pick the word for squirrel. For the 14 languages fitting the ah-ee pattern, a substantial majority of the students chose the correct squirrel name more often than one would expect by chance. For the 5 other languages, the students picked correctly about as often as chance would dictate—except when the word for tapir carried the high-frequency "ee" sound. In that case, three-quarters of the students assigned it to the squirrel.

Berlin says that sound symbolism can also be heard in South American Indian words for fish and bird, as well as rat and bat. Although linguists generally consider the sounds of words to be arbitrary, Berlin says the tapir-and-squirrel results are "fairly dramatic and indicate that some kind of sound symbolism is at work." — C.M.

. . . or natural world symbolism?

As The Artist Formerly Known As Prince can well attest, every society has rules when it comes to picking personal names. Anthropologist Ben G. Blount of the University of Georgia in Athens is looking into what those rules are and how much the natural world influences personal names across different groups. The inquiry is a spin-off of cross-cultural research into the universal ways people name living things (SN: 11/16/96, p. 308).

Blount began with an analysis of English, in which personal names have been well cataloged but, it turns out, hardly inspired by nature. Only 202 of the 4,828 names in the 1990 *A Dictionary of First Names* (Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges, Oxford: Oxford University Press) could be traced to plants, animals, or landscapes. "For English first names, the natural and biological world is not a major source category," says Blount.

The analysis turned up other insights, depending on how the categories were carved out. Animal-derived names, such as Buck or Caleb (from the Hebrew word for dog), and land-

scape-derived names, such as Alan (from a Celtic word for rock) or Forrest, account for a large portion of the 202 names. They usually come from Old English and are predominantly male.

Only 14 names come from birds. Most of these are either female, such as Paloma (from Latin, for dove), or unisex, such as Robin. Almost no female names with sources in nature came from Old English. The 30 flower-derived names, such as Lily, Rose, and Heather, are derived from a variety of other languages and are all female, with one exception—Narcissus.

Blount suspects the natural world is more often a source of personal names in forager societies, although names tied to myths and religion abound in all societies, he says. Comprehensive lists of personal names from forager societies are scarce, but ethnographic descriptions suggest that each individual in these groups has a unique name. "As societal complexity increases, you get increased recycling of names," says Blount. — C.M.

Faunal fashion of early floor patterns

Birds may not rate as a source of personal names, but they have inspired place names. Perched on a high hill midway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Sea of Galilee, the Roman settlement of Sepphoris seems to have taken its name from the Hebrew word for bird, *zippor*. Some 30,000 people lived in Sepphoris, a major city in the fourth century and now a national park in Israel.

A centerpiece of the site is a large public building undergoing excavation by researchers from the University of South Florida in Tampa. The size of a city block, the basilical building is noteworthy for its many mosaics—the floor in every room was patterned with naturally colored stones. "They show a high level of artistic craftsmanship," says zooarchaeologist Arlene Fradkin of the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville.

Their detail has enabled Fradkin to identify many of the animals incorporated in the mosaics: a cape hare nibbling on grapes, a partridge holding a flower, and seven types of Mediterranean fish, including a dolphin fish and a distinctive conger eel with a starfish.

Fradkin also noted that most of the animals pictured in the mosaic are nondomesticated species that are rare in the archaeological record at the site. Some of the stylized animal motifs, however, including the conger eel and starfish, have turned up in mosaics at other Roman sites in the region.

Fradkin thinks the mosaics are the work of traveling artisans who had books of patterns, as other scholars have suggested. The citizens of Sepphoris might have picked out the designs not because the animals were important to them but because they were fashionable. Says Fradkin, "it was like buying wallpaper." — C.M.

Floor decor: Stylized animal motifs like the conger eel on a starfish (top) and the dolphin fish turn up in mosaics at Roman sites in the Middle East.

