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ARE NAMES REALLY THE 'SWEETEST SOUND'? – ON THE POTENTIAL OF USING PERSONAL NAMES AS TOOLS OF SUGGESTION

Summary. This article reviews how a person's own name functions as a privileged cue in communication and influence, and it delineates how this cue may be harnessed deliberately in practice. We first synthesise evidence from classic and revised dichotic-listening studies showing that instructions preceded by the participant's own name penetrate selective attentional barriers and open a brief processing window spanning the next one to three words. We then situate these findings within early– and late-selection accounts of attention – notably filter and filter-attenuation theories – to argue that names act as high-priority signals that lower activation thresholds for subsequent material. Research in the realm of neuroimaging is also studied, which sheds light on the distinct processing of one's own name, with effects observable even under reduced consciousness, thereby underscoring the robustness of the cue. Turning to application, we examine two patterns from clinical hypnosis, namely Ericksonian hypnosis, that explicitly incorporate personal names: *Generalised Referential Index with a Suggested Noun Phrase* and *Embedded Command*. We explicate their proposed mechanism – transderivational search between surface and deep structures, aided by presupposition in the latter case – and argue that name-prefacing can enhance the impact of these techniques. This research lays the theoretical groundwork for the subsequent experimental study of using personal names as tools of influence involving name-prefaced hypnotic suggestions under controlled conditions, comparing name versus non-name prompts while measuring attention, recall, absorption, and behavioural compliance. The study's implications extend across domains where successfully influencing others is the goal – for example, sales, psychotherapy and education.

Key words: influence, psychology, psycholinguistics, onomastics.

Introduction. As Dale Carnegie observed in ***How to Win Friends and Influence People***, 'a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language' [1, p. 79]. The aim of this paper is to investigate whether addressing an individual by name can influence – or even shape – the addressee's attitudes and behaviour, thereby testing this claim.

To do this, we shall undertake the following tasks:

1. Review the existing body of research in psychology and neuroscience on the role of personal names in communication, specifically how hearing one's own name influences the individual.

2. Examine the practical applications of personal names in professional domains where influence is central, such as sales and psychotherapy.

3. Identify techniques used in modern clinical hypnosis that rely on the use of personal names to achieve persuasive effects.

Personal Names and Shifts in Attention. Psychologists have long established empirically the subjective importance of one's own name. In one study, participants listened to two simultaneous prose streams presented dichotically, via headphones that delivered similar-in-form but different-in-content passages to the left and right ears (each containing instructions such as 'change to your other ear'). Additionally, the participants 'shadowed' one of the channels by repeating aloud the contents of the other. This led to a near-complete failure to perceive the contents of the shadowed channel: they reported hearing the shadowed instructions only 4 times out of the 36 times presented. The only stimulus 'important' enough to break through this perceptive barrier was the participant's own name – instructions preceded by the participant's name were heard 20 times out of the 39 times presented [2].

This phenomenon – often termed the *cocktail party phenomenon* [3] or *cocktail party deafness* [4, p. 215], so named for the tendency of partygoers to attend to a single auditory channel while treating the rest as background noise – was revisited repeatedly in subsequent research.

One such study identified limitations in Moray's methodology – namely, the small sample size, possible acoustic artefacts that might have attracted attention independently of the name cue, and participants' unfamiliarity with shadowing. The researchers strove to replicate Moray's study while addressing these limitations. The audio channels contained common English words read with different voices (male and female). The participants had to repeat the words from one channel (termed the 'attended channel') and ignore the other (termed the 'irrelevant channel'). The results showed that 34.6% of the participants recalled hearing their name on the irrelevant channel. Another finding was that both the number of mistakes in repeating words from the attended channel and the response lag increased rapidly over the next 1–3 words in participants who heard their name, which the researchers explained by the fact that the name attracted and shifted their attention. An interesting detail is that the number of mistakes and the response lag also increased in those participants who were presented with their name but did not report hearing it, which could hint at the fact that people unconsciously registered their name; however, these increases did not persist over the following few words, unlike in those participants who reported hearing their name [3].

Seeking to explain the selective attention humans possess, Broadbent [as summarised in 5, p. 66–67] described 'human processing as an information channel with limited capacity', formulating his *filter theory*. This is an early-selection theory, which describes information processing in the following stages:

1. The *sensory input* from our organs, such as the eyes or ears is received.

2. The sensory input is kept in the *short-term store*.

3. A decision mechanism Broadbent referred to as a *filter* decides what deserves our attention and discards the rest so as not to overload the *limited-capacity channel*.

4. The information that passes the filter is processed and acted upon.

However, some stimuli – such as a person's name (as discussed in the studies mentioned above) or mothers registering the sound of children crying [another example mentioned in 2] – can overcome this filter. This led Treisman [6] to propose an expansion of Broadbent's filter theory, named *filter-attenuation theory*, according to which 'the unattended message is not blocked out entirely but only has its "volume" decreased, or attenuated' [as summarised in 5, p. 67–68]. According to this theory, incoming sensory information is evaluated by the filter according to subjective criteria – which are prone to change – and is registered by the individual if it passes a certain threshold, which is determined by recent experience, habituation to the information, or its perceived importance [7].

Modern neuroscience has corroborated these findings. fMRI scans show that 'there is unique brain activation specific to one's own name in relation to the names of others. In addition, the patterns of activation when hearing one's own name relative to hearing the names of others are similar to the patterns reported when individuals make judgments about themselves and their personal qualities, and include the regions of the medial frontal cortex and superior temporal cortex near the temporo-parietal junction' [8, 3.4].

Furthermore, studies have shown that hearing one's own name consistently improves performance across perception, attention, and memory – participants respond more quickly and accurately when the query is accompanied by their own name – and it captures attention so strongly that the brain still responds to it during sleep, under anaesthesia, in vegetative states, and even when the name is presented below conscious awareness [as summarised in 9].

Summarising the information given above, we may come to the following conclusions:

1. Uttering an individual's name attracts their attention, breaking through the perceptual filters in a statistically significant number of cases.

2. Even if the attention is drawn away again by other activities, the individual registers the next 1–3 words that follow their name.

3. The individual pays more attention to information preceded by their own name, responding more quickly and accurately.

The above-mentioned findings have significant implications for those who wish to influence other people with their words: utter a person's name, and their undivided attention is yours, at least over the next 1–3 words. Let us examine concrete techniques of influence that utilise this peculiarity of our psyche.

Techniques of Influence that Utilise Personal Names

The results so painstakingly verified through rigorous scientific research have long been intuited by the professionals in the field of influence, such as salespeople and psychotherapists.

Books on sales often contain adages like this: 'Use the person's name immediately. This is crucial. Using their name soon and often causes them to listen more closely to your message' [10, ch. 10]. This piece of advice is sound, as research suggests that using a person's name increases compliance with purchase requests: one study shows that 85% of those who were addressed by name bought cookies, while only 50% of those who were not did so [11, p. 207].

The potential for names to be used as tools of influence was noted not only by sales professionals but also by psychotherapists. Among them was the hypnotist Milton H. Erickson – the creator of an indirect method of hypnosis, often called Ericksonian hypnosis after its founder.

It should be noted that in this paper, by 'hypnosis' we shall mean the theory and practice of clinical hypnosis as an instrument of psychotherapy, which is both recognised by professional organisations such as the American Psychological Association (home to Division 30 – Society of Psychological Hypnosis) and shown to be efficacious in scientific studies: a recent systematic review of '49 meta-analyses with 261 distinct primary studies' has highlighted 'the potential of hypnosis to positively impact various mental and somatic treatment outcomes, with the largest effects found in patients experiencing pain, patients undergoing medical procedures, and in populations of children/adolescents' [12].

In Ericksonian hypnosis [14], two patterns of hypnotic speech that involve the name of the person being hypnotised (henceforth we shall use the conventional term 'client') are employed.

Hypnotic Technique 1: Generalised Referential Index with a Suggested Noun Phrase

The first is called *Generalised Referential Index with a Suggested Noun Phrase* (originally, the authors spelt it 'generalized' and omitted the indefinite article for brevity). It involves using a non-specific noun phrase that describes the actor of the sentence, most often the subject, in conjunction with the client's name. The proposed mechanism is that the client will, in the absence of a concrete referential index, via a process called *transderivational search*, apply the sentence to themselves. For example: *You know, Isabella, people can feel sleepy while listening to my voice.* The therapist's intent is to suggest that Isabella is sleepy [13, p. 158–159].

The notion of transderivational search merits more attention before we proceed. The authors draw a distinction between the *surface structure* – 'the representation of the way it [the sentence] actually sounds (or, if written, by the way it actually appears)' – and the *deep structure* – 'the representation of its meaning' [13, p. 8–9]. These notions were borrowed from Noam Chomsky, who, for every sentence, distinguished between its deep structure (its 'semantic interpretation') and its surface structure (its 'phonetic interpretation') [15, p. 15]. A simplistic illustration would be the sentence *My name is Isabella*, where the sounds and letters making it up would be the surface structure, while the meaning – that your interlocutor's name is Isabella – is the deep structure. Additionally, different surface structures may express the same deep structure; for example, the sentence *I'm Isabella* has a different form from the previous example but still bears the same meaning.

Bandler and Grinder referred to the process that links deep and surface structures as *derivation* [13, p. 9–10], during which such transformational processes as *deletion*, *distortion*, and *generalisation* occur. In the broadest terms, if an individual wants to pass a message, this message undergoes the following stages [13, p. 152–158]:

1. The original meaning (deep structure) undergoes derivation, during which it is subject to deletion, distortion, and generalisation. Some information is usually lost.

2. The surface structure is uttered or transmitted via another channel to the intended recipient.

3. In order to make sense of the message, the person who has received it must fill the gaps left by deletion, distortion, and generalisation (both those that occurred during encoding and those intro-

duced during decoding). Bandler and Grinder argue that this is commonly achieved by projecting their own thoughts onto the utterance, which they refer to as *transderivational search*.

This process corresponds closely to the foundational Shannon–Weaver communication model [16]:

1. The information source produces the message.
2. The transmitter encodes the message into a signal and sends it through the channel.
3. The signal may be subject to a noise source in the channel during transmission.
4. The receiver decodes the signal back into a message.
5. The message reaches the destination.

Hypnotic Technique 2: Embedded Commands

The second hypnotic technique of influence utilised by Erickson is *Embedded Commands* (originally, the authors spelt it 'imbedded'), which involves 'making suggestions to the client indirectly' while masking them within a larger sentence, often unrelated in meaning. Most commonly, the client's name would be followed by a short command and preceded by a modal verb. For example: *I may, Isabella, relax and talk to you for a while*. In this example, the embedded command was *Isabella, relax*, but it was disguised as a statement about the therapist's own actions [13, p. 172–173].

This technique is part of a broader category the authors termed *Lesser Included Structures*, which, in addition to *Embedded Commands*, also encompasses *Embedded Questions*, the aim of which is 'building response potential in a client by raising questions without allowing an overt response from the client'. This often takes the grammatical form of a question in reported speech. This prompts the client to contemplate the topic without requiring an answer. For example, *I wonder whether you are susceptible to hypnosis*. This sentence compels the client to contemplate whether they can be hypnotised while not requiring an answer [13, p. 171–172]. Applying the lessons from the studies cited above, we may increase the impact of the technique by placing the client's name before the question: *I wonder whether you, Isabella, are susceptible to hypnosis*.

It should be noted that ideas completely novel to the client may be introduced using this technique by utilising something Bandler and Grinder called *presupposition* – referring to the desired outcome matter-of-factly, as if it were something that has already happened. For example, the therapist wants to instil in the client the desire to close their eyes, which is a common practice for a hypnotic session. The words the therapist might choose in this case might be as follows: *I am curious, Isabella, if you are aware of the increasing weight of your eyelids.* This plants in Isabella's mind an idea that her eyelids might be growing heavy. Research suggests that the mere act of contemplating a prompt increases the likelihood of compliance: 'It has been shown that verbal prompts can lead to significant increases (16–18 percentage points) in sales of side dishes in fast food restaurants' [17].

Conclusions. We have looked at classic dichotic-listening studies, which show that one's own name can penetrate selective attention. Filter and filter-attenuation theories explain how highly salient stimuli can penetrate attentional filters even when the channel is dismissed as background noise. Neuroimaging shows distinct processing of an individual's own name. Together, these studies indicate a brief increase in detection and processing immediately after one's own name is heard.

This has immediate implications for the spheres where influence is necessary, such as sales and psychotherapy; for example, addressing people by name has been linked to higher engagement and greater compliance.

We then examined applications in clinical hypnosis, namely Ericksonian hypnosis, that explicitly rely on names to be more persuasive: *Generalised Referential Index with a Suggested Noun Phrase* and *Embedded Commands*. Their mechanism relies on transderivational search between surface and deep structures, involving derivation, during which deletion, distortion, and generalisation occur.

Building on this theoretical overview, our subsequent research will focus on experiments designed to test the suggestive potential of name-prefaced hypnotic suggestions under controlled conditions, comparing name versus non-name prompts while measuring attention, recall, absorption, and behavioural compliance.

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Карпенко М. Чи справді імена є «найсолодшим звуком»? Про потенціал використання особових імен як інструментів сугестії

Анотація. У статті розглянуто, як власне ім'я людини функціонує як пріоритетний сигнал у комунікації та впливі, а також окреслено, як цей сигнал можна свідомо використовувати на практиці. Спершу ми синтезуємо дані класичних і переглянутих досліджень дихотичного слухання, які показують, що інструкції, яким передує власне ім'я учасника, проривають бар'єри вибіркової уваги й відкривають коротке вікно обробки, що охоплює наступні від одного до трьох слів. Далі ми розглядаємо ці результати в контексті моделей ранньої та пізньої селекції – зокрема теорії фільтрації та теорії аттенюатора – й доводимо, що імена діють як високопріоритетні сигнали, які знижують пороги активації для подальшого матеріалу. Також розглядаються нейровізуалізаційні дослідження, що висвітлюють специфічну обробку власного імені; ефекти спостерігаються навіть за зниженого рівня свідомості, що підкреслює надійність цього сигналу. Переходячи до прикладного застосування, ми розглядаємо два патерни з клінічного (еріксонівського) гіпнозу, які прямо залучають особові імена: *Generalised Referential Index with a Suggested Noun Phrase* та *Embedded Command*. Ми пояснюємо запропонований механізм – трансдеривaційний пошук між поверхневою та глибинною структурами, у другому випадку посилений пресупозицією – і стверджуємо, що винесення імені на початок може підсилювати ефект цих технік. Це дослідження закладає теоретичне підґрунтя для подальшого експериментального вивчення використання особових імен як інструментів впливу – шляхом вживання гіпнотичних навіювань, що починаються зі звертання на ім'я та без нього у контрольованих умовах та вимірюванням уваги, пам'яті та ступені дотримання інструкцій. Практичні імплікації дослідження охоплюють чимало сфер, де метою є успішний вплив на іншу особу, зокрема продажі, психотерапію та освіту.

Ключові слова: вплив, психологія, психолінгвістика, ономастика.

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