

A Sociolinguistic Study of the Implications of Masculine Personal Names among Urban Communities in Jordan

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Abstract

The present study attempts to investigate personal masculine names throughout three successive generations (grandfathers, fathers, and sons) among an urban community in Jordan. It aims at investigating the sociolinguistic implications of the names and pointing out the factors influencing the process of name-giving among the people of such communities. Analysis of 300 school students' names of the elementary stage together with their fathers and grandfathers' names indicated that naming has different social reasons and cultural backgrounds. However, no significant differences in this regard was noticed across the urban generations. The names among these different categories have almost the same implications and backgrounds. They center on either the religious or the societal values dimensions. The most frequent names in each of these generations turned out to have the same motives. The only difference, albeit slight, was the existence of a few foreign names in the sons' category, and days' names in the fathers' category opposed to none in the other categories.

Keywords: Masculine Personal Names, Sociolinguistic Implications, Onomastics, Jordan, Urban Communities.

1. Introduction

Personal names exist in all cultures and human languages and can be a fundamental source of information about the holder. A personal name says Hawana (1977: 2), can reflect the nationality, religion, or race of its bearer. Apart from mirroring the social, cultural, ethnic, and ideological backgrounds of the named person, personal names can call to mind the events and conditions encountered in people's lives and recount stories of historic importance (Ansu-Kyereme, 2000:27).

Onomastics, which is concerned with studying proper nouns, subdivides into two main parts. These are *anthroponomy* which is concerned with studying personal names, and *toponymy* which refers to studying place names (Agyekum, 2006; Mutanda, 2016; among others).

The interest in personal naming has been attracting scientists representing varying fields of studies over the years, and it has been the subject of comprehensive inspection in a broad array of languages and cultures. In addition to first names, other types of names have been investigated. Investigating family names, for example, was the subject of many studies (Hussein, 1997; Al-Tahat, 2014, among others). Furthermore, nicknames and the functions they serve, the motivations behind them, their classification, and their effects on the holders have been the subject of extensive investigation (Kolawole, et al., 2009; Garayevaa, et al., 2016, to mention only a few).

People should take into consideration that the name will suit the named person throughout all his age stages as the name will stay with the person for his/her entire lifetime and may cause some embarrassment for him/her. In this connection, the literature noted an association between an individual holding an undesirable first name and the emergence of the development of psychopathology (Ellis and Benchley, 1954). However, other researchers argued against too much significance on the harmful effects of an undesirable first name on predicting personal characteristics (Steele and Smithwick, 1989; Mabuza, 2014) and highlighted a positive side to uncommon names (Zweigenhaft, 1977).

The memory for personal names comparable with other personal identity information (e.g., the names of places, occupations, and hobbies) is also looked at through some experimental researches (Cohen and Faulkner, 1986; Terry, 1994; among others). Some researchers opted to explore the influence of the name a person bears on the behavior of the named persons themselves (e.g., Sabir and Nawaz, 2015).

Personal names were the subject of the present study though other types of names will be part of the discussion. These included first names, which were used in the literature interchangeably with given names, birth names, and forenames; surnames; clan names; matronyms (personal names based on the given name of one's mother); patronyms (personal names based on the given name of one's father); teknonyms (personal names based on the given name of one's eldest child); nicknames; and ethnonyms (names used to refer to an ethnic group, tribe, or people). Some of these names are used in official situations (e.g., forename and surname) while others are used in informal situations (e.g., nicknames and teknonyms). In some studies (e.g., Machaba, 2004), personal names are usually dealt with as having two general subcategories, individual names and group names. An individual name refers to a name that is given to a particular individual to identify him or her. A group name, which is often known as surname, refers to a name that is shared by a particular group of people who belong to the same clan. In the following subsections a brief description of the main types of personal names is given.

1.1 First Names

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Some researchers use the term *personal name* to refer to first name, middle name, and surname. However, others use this term to refer only to the first name. Depending on the author, first names are also referred to as forenames (Bramwell, 2012), given names (Mehrabian, 1997; Seeman, 1983), Christian names (Huschka, et al., 2009), and baptismal names (Lawson, 1984). Forenames, as a plural form, are defined as names other than one's surname whereas a forename is one's first name (Collins English Dictionary, 2019). In this respect, the most widely used term in the relevant literature to refer to the name that is given to a child at birth is first name (Ellis and Beechley, 1954; Abdul, 2014; Seide and Petrulionė, 2018, to mention only a few).

1.2 Surnames/ Family Names

The study of surnames, as mentioned earlier, is a subcategory of anthroponomastics. The surname is defined linguistically as the name that one shares with other members of one's family, that is, the last name (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). Legally, the surname is defined as a name added to the Christian (first) name, and which, in modern times, has become the family name. They are called surnames because originally, they were written over the name in judicial writings and contracts. They were taken from something attached to the persons assuming them, such as John Carpenter, Joseph Black, Samuel Little (The Free Online Legal Dictionary, 2013).

In the relevant scholarly literature, surnames are dealt with by many researchers in different cultures and languages. They are referred to by different labels such as surnames, last names, or patronyms (Lawson, 1984; Bramwell, 2012; among others), and family name (e.g., Hussein, 1997; Al-Tahat, 2014). Individuals sharing the same last name are described by some researchers (e.g. Lawson, 1984) as having an *isonym*.

Africans also use the term *clan names* for surnames. This is explained by Molefe (1999: 3) in terms of the Zulu (the largest ethnic group in South Africa) context:

In a sequence of antecedents, a name of one of them can be used as *a clan name*. This means that the offspring that come after that forefather will all name themselves after him/her. The idea that all of them are born of that individual converts the name of the ancestor at issue into a surname or a clan name.

In the Arabic context, the *nisba* is similar to the term *surname* as it is often used as the last name. The term *family name*, as mentioned in a previous context, is often used in the relevant Arab literature instead of surname. It usually stands for a tribe or family, an occupation, or a geographical location. However, Netzon and Nesom (2005) indicate that the use of this term among the Arab countries varies greatly.

1. 3 Nicknames

A nickname is an “informal, often humorous, name for a person that is connected with their real name, their personality, or appearance or with something they have done” (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2006). Bramwell (2012: 132) defines a nickname as “an unofficial name which replaces the forename, rather than being used alongside it as in bynames.” Investigating nicknames tends to focus on the motivations behind nicknames, their linguistic structure (Koehn, 2015; Butkus, 2013), their impact on the bearers (Starks and Kerry, 2011), and the semantic features of nicknames (Lawson, 1985; Garayevaa, et al., 2016).

1. 4 Background to the Research Locale

The research vicinity was represented by an urban area in the capital city of Amman. This locale is amalgamated, i.e., inhabited by people from different social, political, religious, and economic backgrounds.

2. Research Questions

In general, the study aims at providing evidence to suggest that the change of the lifestyle of communities has a significant influence on the naming system among their people. Briefly, the study seeks to answer the following main questions:

- (1) What are the primary factors behind the name-giving process among urban communities in Jordan?
- (2) To what extent have the sociolinguistic implications of personal names among these communities changed over generations?

3. Methodology

In this section, I presented the theoretical framework on which the study draws. I also identified the sources of data and the methods that were used to gather the data as well as the sample of the study.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The study is inspired by the theory, which argues that there is a close relation between a community’s language and its lifestyle and cultural practices. William Labov, a prominent scholar in the field of sociolinguistics, introduced this theory, which is known as variationist sociolinguistics. This theory holds that language has an underlying structure, and that this structure changes according to external linguistic variables such as age, social class, gender, nationality, community membership, and so on (Botha, 2011: 2).

3.2 Data Collection

Fieldwork was used as the main source of data collection for this study. The main objective of conducting field research was to collect the names of males belonging to three successive generations among an urban community in Jordan. The reason for choosing different generations was to see if there were changes in the naming patterns among communities over time.

3.3 Data Sources

The full names of male school students from the fifth and sixth grades of the academic year 2018/2019 were obtained in an urban community represented by a number of modern cultivated neighborhoods in the capital city of Amman. Name lists of the targeted classes were collected from the Directorate of Education of Amman/Kasbah Brigade, which incorporates several areas in Amman (e.g., Shmeisani and Abdoun). This directorate incorporates a total of 144 schools of all grades: 50 for males and 94 for females, with a total of 83,007 students. However, the researcher obtained the full names of male students of the fifth and sixth graders who were registered in 10 male schools distributed among different areas. The number of the obtained names totaled up to 2879.

3.4 Sample of the Study

Three hundred full names were selected out of the 2879 names which were, as mentioned above, obtained from 10 elementary single male schools. The 300 male students' names were selected by drawing 30 names from each of the 10 male schools. Alongside their fathers and grandfathers' names, the total number of the sample mounts to 900 names. It is worth noting here that the names in the original lists that were drawn from the database of the Directorates of Education are distributed randomly. Therefore, there was no need to follow certain procedure when selecting the sample of this study.

4. Findings and Discussions

In this section, the differences in the naming process adopted in this community over three categories were discussed. In the following sections, the findings associated with each category were discussed separately. These include the grandfathers, the fathers, and son's category.

4.1 Grandfathers' Names

Analyzing the grandfathers' personal names revealed that the majority of the names encoded either religious inclinations or social values. The latter aspect reflected the namer's aspirations and expectations. Like in the other two categories (i.e., the parents and the sons), the grandparents' category names depicting the circumstances surrounding the birth of the name bearer were almost missing. However, a few names were found to derive from natural objects. In the following subsections, the types of names belonging to this category are discussed.

4.1.1 Names Expressing Religious Connotation

In this category 166 (55%) names out of the out of the 300 grandfathers' names were identified as reflecting religious impact. Religious names were those pertaining to the attributes and names of God (theophoric names) and those referring to the names of prophets or the four rightly guided caliphs in Islam. The most frequent name in this classification was /mḥammad/, the Prophet Muhammad which registered 41 instances, followed by the name /aḥmad/ 'derived from the Prophet Mohammad's name' and /ibra:hi:m/ 'the Prophet Ibrahim', with 20 and 18, respectively. Another name for the Prophet Muhammad (i.e., /ṭaha/) also occurred two times. Another 12 names of prophets were noticed. These include /ibra:hi:m/, which registered, as mentioned above, the most frequency with 18 occurrences followed by the name /yu:sef/ the Prophet Yusuf with 8 instances. Also, 11 theophoric names (i.e., those that are often a combination of /ʿabd/ 'slave' with one of the divine attributes of God) were identified with the name /ʿabdallah/ 'slave of God' being the most frequent (7 times). Additionally, the name /ʿali/ turned out to be the most frequent name in the names of the fourth caliphs of Muslims (18 instances).

4.1.2 Names Expressing the Positive Values of Society

Names relating to the social values of society made up the second major source of names in this category. Approximately 125 (42%) names were found to reflect such a component. The remaining few names were found to be names of natural objects, specifically names of favored animals (e.g., /nimr/ 'tiger'), names of planets (/najm/ 'star and /badr/ 'full moon'), names of months and seasons (/rajab/ 'the seventh month of the Islamic calendar', /rabi:ʿ/ 'the season of spring').

4.2 Fathers' Names

Like grandfathers, fathers' names were mainly derived from religion. 136 (45%) names out of the fathers, category was identified as bearing religious signification. Names expressing social values of society constituted the first major source of names in this category (154 [51%] names). Few names were also found to derive from the natural environment. These include names of animals denoting masculine traits such as fierceness, courage, etc. (e.g., /ḥaydar/, /ʿurwah/ 'lion,' and /haytham/ 'falcon'), names of days, particularly /khami:s/ 'Thursday' and /jum ʿah/ 'Friday' and the names of the seasons (/rabi:ʿ/ 'Spring'. The most frequent religious names were the name /mḥammad/ with 47 instances followed by/aḥmad/ and /maḥmu:d/ which is also derived from the Prophet Mohammad's name, with 15 and 13 cases, respectively. Six names of other prophets were also noticed as well as four compound names.

4.3 Sons' Names

Parallel to the grandfathers and fathers' categories, the sons' names also divided into two main divisions, specifically religious (147) and social value names (86). The names /mḥammad/

and /aḥmad/ also turned out to be the most frequently used names in the religious names and in the category as a whole with 44 and 18 occurrences, respectively. The rest of the names were primarily derived from nature including plants, animals, landscapes, and other features. Examples included

- /ayham/ ‘high mountain’
- /raʿid/ ‘thunder’
- /rayḥa:n/ ‘a sweet smelling herb used in cooking’
- /ward/ ‘flower’
- /layth/ ‘lion’
- /ʔuays/ ‘young wolf’

In this connection, it is worth mentioning that no names denoting jewels and precious stones were found in the urban male group as a whole. Foreign names were found but in a very meager quantity in the sons’ category. Only two names were found of foreign origin. These were /beybars/ ‘courageous; defiant’ and /maya:r/ Turkish origin meaning ‘rose of paradise.’

5. Conclusion

Examining masculine personal names within an urban community in Amman, as explained previously, aims at pointing out the different sociolinguistic implications of the names in three successive generations (grandfathers, fathers, and sons), and to find out the factors influencing naming process in each category. In general, the study seeks to reveal to what extent the lifestyle of a community affects naming throughout successive generations.

As a general conclusion, the present study, which is carried out in line with the variationist sociolinguistic theory revealed that naming has different social reasons and cultural backgrounds. However, no significant differences in this regard was noticed across the urban generations. The names among these different categories have almost the same implications and backgrounds. They center on either the religious or the societal values dimensions. The most frequent names in each of these generations turned out to be the same. The only difference, albeit slight, was the existence of a few foreign names in the sons’ category, and days’ names in the fathers’ category opposed to none in the other categories.

One more observation is that the sequence of the names follow no particular pattern. This sequence is composed of one’s given name followed by one’s father, grandfather’s given names, and, in most cases, this sequence is ended with the family name which indicates the *nisba*: a similar term to what people in the West call the surname. However, no morphological or syntactic relation was found between names.

It is worth mentioning here that the Arabic custom of using the *nasab*, or the patronym, which is a component of a personal name based on one's father's name preceded by *ibn/bin* 'son of' is rarely found among the people of Jordan. Matronymics, which takes the form of a component of a name based on the name of one's mother or a female ancestor preceded by *bint* 'daughter of' is also not used in the Jordanian naming system as a whole (cf. Beeston (1971). An account of Arabic nomenclature (in the sense of a naming system) since pre-Islamic times, when a person is addressed by his/her personal name (the *ism*), or by their identity (the *nasab*), according to the study, is a genealogical chain in the form of 'son of x' until modern times. See Hedden (2007) for a similar description of the Arabic nomenclature adopted in different Arab countries).

Bearing in mind the direct influence of peoples' lifestyle on naming among their communities, it can be suggested that the change in the lifestyle of the urban community over the past few decades was not as significant as might be in Bedouin community (cf. Aljbour and Al-Abed Al-Haq 2018), for their investigation of the sociolinguistic implication of the feminine personal names among a Bedouin community in Jordan over time where a striking difference between the implications of the names across generations was reported; a change that starts with peculiar Bedouin-exclusive names and ends with names familiar to all communities. This remarkable change was attributed to the dramatic change in the lifestyle of Bedouin communities in Jordan which has a direct influence on naming).

6. Recommendations

This study, as stated previously, attempts to do a synchronic sociolinguistic analysis of personal names among an urban community in Jordan. It also attempts to reveal to what extent the change of the lifestyle of people affects naming among their communities over generations. This assumes that this study is just a starting point in anthroponomastics among this particular community, and much still remains to be done in this field. Further research into the differences, if any, in naming conventions between urban communities and Bedouin communities, which witnessed a dramatic change in the lifestyle of its people over the last few decades, is also called for. Such research is likely to produce some interesting findings. Still further, the study indicated that information gained from personal names can provide authentic information about the people involved and their composition. Therefore, personal names are of interest not only to scholars but also to different international organizations. This conveys an implication for security services to attach special importance to personal names as they indicate valuable information about the holder (e.g., the physical features, the order of birth, the location of birth, and the membership in certain tribe or group).

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Appendix 1
Transliteration symbols

Arabic words which appear in this paper are transliterated according to the following phonetic system

Arabic alphabet	Symbol	Example	Meaning	Description
ء	ʔ	ʔamal	hope	voiced glottal stop
ب	B	ba:b	door	voiced bilabial stop
ت	T	ti:n	figs	voiceless alveolar stop
ث	Th	tha ^c lab	fox	voiceless inter-dental fricative
ج	J	jamal	camel	voiced post-alveolar affricate
ح	<u>H</u>	<u>h</u> ub	love	voiceless pharyngeal fricative
خ	Kh	khubz	bread	voiceless uvular fricative
د	D	dars	lesson	voiced alveolar stop
ذ	Dh	dhahab	gold	voiced dental fricative
ر	R	rasama	draw v.	voiced alveolar approximant
ز	Z	zayt	oil	voiced alveolar fricative
س	S	sama:ʔ	sky	voiceless alveolar fricative
ش	Sh	shams	sun	voiceless alveopalatal fricative
ص	<u>S</u>	<u>s</u> ayf	summer	voiceless velarized alveolar fricative
ض	<u>D</u>	<u>d</u> ayf	guest	voiced velarized alveolar stop
ط	<u>T</u>	<u>t</u> i:n	mud	voiceless velarized dento-alveolar stop
ظ	TH	THuhr	noon	voiced velarized alveolar fricative
ع	^c	^c abd	slave	voiced pharyngeal fricative
غ	Gh	gharb	west	voiced uvular fricative
ف	F	fan	art	voiceless labiodental fricative
ق	Q	qalam	pencil	voiced uvular stop
ك	K	kalb	dog	voiceless velar stop
ل	L	la:ʔ	no	voiced alveolar lateral
م	M	madrakah	school	voiced bilabial nasal stop
ن	N	najm	star	voiced alveolar nasal stop
ه	H	hawa:ʔ	air	voiceless glottal fricative

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و	W	ward	rose	voiced labio-velar glide
ي	Y	yawm	day	voiced palatal glide
فتحة ()	A	kataba	he wrote	short low front unrounded
ضمة ()	U	kutub	books	short high back rounded
كسرة ()	I	sin	tooth	short high back unrounded
مد طويل ا/ى	a:	ka:tib	writer	long low front unrounded
ضممة طويلة و	u:	fu:l	beans	long high back rounded
كسرة طويلة ي	i:	fi:l	elephant	long high front unrounded
شدة	CC	ˤamma:n	Amman	geminate consonant
Diphthongs	Aw	mawt	death	
(أصوات علة مركبة)	Ay	bayt	house	