

## The Choice of First Names as a Social Resource and Act of Identity among Multilingual Families in Contemporary Sweden

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### Abstract

All choices we make, linguistic choices as well as others, are to some extent choices of identity. This includes parents' choices of first names for their children. Through such choices they create an identity for the child, which will show the child, as well as others, who he or she is and how he or she is related to different groups. In the case of multilingual families the choice of first names often becomes a quite obvious choice between different ethnic identities. These families might choose a first name from the onomasticon of the surrounding majority, or from the onomasticon of their own language(s), or they might try to combine these in some way – and each choice will mean a choice of a different ethnic identity for the child. But the choice is not only a matter of identity. A name can also be a valuable resource that helps to achieve certain social goals. So the name choice can also be affected by more practical issues such as these. In this paper I explore how the choice of first names is influenced by language background in 126 multilingual families in the city of Gothenburg in western Sweden.

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### 1. Introduction

In this paper I explore the choice of first names in 126 multilingual families in Sweden. I primarily concentrate on *which* names are chosen, but to some extent also focus on *how* names are chosen. My aim is to investigate whether these patterns are connected to issues of ethnic identity or to the allocation of other social resources for the child.

I understand the concept of *identity* to mean a person's experience of who he or she is, what makes this person unique, as well as his or her sense of belonging to certain social groups and categories. I also consider identity to be something flexible rather than fixed and something that people do rather than something they are (cf. Omoniyi and White 2006, Taylor and Spencer 2004, Antaki and Widdicombe 1998).

I use the concept of *social resources* in this paper to describe how names, just like other parts of a language (or a language as a whole), can be given a symbolic value in a certain context and therefore be used as a tool to achieve different social goals (cf. Bourdieu 1991). In other words, parents may choose a certain name because they believe that such a name can be a valuable asset for the child in later life.

The results that will be presented here are based on a postal survey, which I conducted in the year 2007 in Gothenburg, Sweden and which is one part of my doctoral thesis on social functions of first name choices. All families in Gothenburg with children born in May and June 2007 received the survey. 126 of the families that responded to the survey reported that at least one of the parents speaks at least one language other than Swedish in their homes. Some of the languages mentioned, apart from Swedish, were: Arabic, Bosnian, Cantonese, Croatian, English, Finnish, French, German, Hebrew, Persian, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, Thai, Turkish, Wolof and Yoruba. It is the answers from these multilingual families that I will discuss here.

First, I would like to describe the social differentiation of the multilingual families in my survey (based on their own reports). 34% of the mothers in multilingual families (43 of 126) are younger than 30 years old. 44% of the mothers are between 30–34 years old (56 of 126) and 18% are over 35 years old (23 of 126). There are more young mothers under the age of 30 among the multilingual families than among the monolingual Swedish families in my survey (34% *versus* 25%). 40% of the mothers in multilingual families (50 of 126) have no university education. 14% of mothers (18 of 126) have 1 or 2 years of university education, while 41% of mothers (52 of 126) have at least 3 years of university education. There are more mothers with no university education (40% *versus* 23%) and fewer mothers with at least 3 years of university education (41% *versus* 62%) among the multilingual families. About 59% of multilingual families (74 of 126) live in rented apartments. 23% of multilingual families (29 of 126) live in privately owned apartments, while 16% (20 of 126) live in privately owned houses. There are more multilingual than monolingual Swedish families in my survey who live in rented apartments (59% *versus* 42%) and fewer multilingual families who live in privately owned houses (16% *versus* 30%). These figures, as well as any figures in the rest of the paper, are proven to be statistically significant at a 5% level through chi-square analysis.

## 2. The name giving procedure

My survey questionnaire contained questions on practical parts of the name giving procedure, sources of inspiration, motives for the name choice, attitudes towards different name characteristics as well as the actual names chosen by the parents. I found no difference between multilingual families and monolingual Swedish families with regard to most of these aspects. There are some aspects though, where the multilingual families stand out. One such aspect is related to time. The questionnaire contained three specific questions related to time: *When did you start thinking about a first name for the child? When did you definitely decide the first name for the child? When did you tell others about the first name of the child?* It is the first of these three questions that shows interesting results related to parents' language background. A majority of parents, regardless of language background, started thinking about a name for their child either when they knew they were expecting the child (46% of 493 monolingual Swedish families and 31% of 126 multilingual families) or some time before the child arrived (31% of both monolingual and multilingual families). However, there were also a considerable number of parents among the multilingual families that had either already started thinking about a name for the child before they were expecting its arrival (16%) or had not begun to do so until some time after the child was born (11%). These answers were significantly less common among monolingual Swedish families (the corresponding figures were 13% and 3% respectively). This indicates that for some multilingual families the name choice is a very delicate matter, which causes some parents already to be considering possible names before they expect a child and others to wait for a long time.

Sources of inspiration is another aspect in which multilingual parents stand out. The survey contained one question on this theme: *Where did you look for inspiration for the name?* The question had several standardized answers to choose from and the possibility of multiple responses. Regardless of language background the most commonly reported sources of inspiration were the Internet and names in the family. However, both of these answers were less common among multilingual families than among monolingual Swedish families. 71% of the 493 monolingual families reported having looked for inspiration on the Internet, whereas only 65% of the 126 multilingual families did so. 67% of monolingual families reported that they had looked for inspiration among names in the family, while only 48% of multilingual families did so. Other sources of inspiration that were reported less often by multilingual families than by monolingual Swedish families were name day calendars<sup>1</sup> (32% *versus* 51%) and newspaper birth

announcements (18% *versus* 47%). Instead the multilingual families more often reported having looked for inspiration in books of names (40% *versus* 33%), television/movies (22% *versus* 9%) and religious texts (17% *versus* 5%). The latter are all sources that might be able to offer a more specific insight to names of other cultures than the Swedish one. Multilingual families seem partly to find inspiration where monolingual Swedish families do not, possibly because these places can offer more inspiration on international names and names typical of other cultures. This would indicate that the starting points for many multilingual families in my survey are foreign or international names, rather than Swedish names.

Yet another aspect in which multilingual parents are partly different from monolingual Swedish families is in the motives for the name choice. The questionnaire contained one open ended question on this matter: *What were the most important reasons for you to choose this name?* Among both multilingual and monolingual Swedish parents, the most common single response to this question was aesthetic (for example “we liked the name” or “we think it is a beautiful name”), the second most common response was name frequency (for example “it is an unusual name” or “we wanted a name that is not too unusual and strange”) and the third most common response was meaning or associations (for example “we chose this name because it was the name of the grandmother of the child” or “we like this name because it is the name of an ancient king in our native country” or “we like the meaning of this name”). Many other motives are also mentioned. One motive, however, is mentioned more often among multilingual families than among monolingual Swedish families. 21% of multilingual families gave as a motive for the choice of name, that the family could agree on it (for example “this was the only name we could agree on” or “we both liked this name”). Such a motive was given by only 13% of monolingual Swedish parents. This once again indicates that name choice in multilingual families can be a delicate matter and that finding a name that both parents like might be even more difficult than among monolingual families.

### 3. The names

As already mentioned different name choices may mean the construction of different ethnic identities for the child. Through choosing a typically Swedish name, or a name that is typical of another culture, or a name that is common to both cultures, or a name that is common to neither of them – parents can lay a foundation for how the child will perceive him- or herself: as primarily Swedish, primarily “foreign”, or both or neither. The name will also signal to others who the child is in terms of ethnic identity and ethnic group membership. So what kinds of names were chosen by the multilingual families in my survey? Out of 126 cases, the name of the child was omitted in 5 cases. The total number of analysed cases are therefore 121. About 55% of these children (66 individuals) were given an official first name that is well established in Sweden and is probably perceived as more or less Swedish by Swedish people in general. Some examples of such names are the girls’ names *Agnes, Alva, Ebba, Ellen, Julia, Nellie, Nora, Olivia, Ronja, Vilma* and the boys’ names *Andreas, David, Elias, Emil, Eric, Leo, Noel, Oscar, Viggo, William*. Although these names are all common in Sweden, most of them have other cultural origins and should properly be labelled as international names.

Another 10% of the children in multilingual families (12 individuals) received names that are common in Sweden, but in another form or with a slightly different spelling. Some examples of such names are the girls’ names *Ania, Emilija, Yasmine* (Swedish forms: *Anja, Emilia, Jasmine*) and the boys’ names *Aleksin, Kimi, Luka* (Swedish forms: *Alex, Kim, Lukas*). These names would all seem familiar to a Swede, but at the same time they have a distinct foreign or different touch.

So it seems that a majority of parents in my survey (64% or 78 families) have given their children official first names that will probably be seen as more or less Swedish and quite familiar in the surrounding environment in Sweden. This indicates that a majority of parents have

constructed an ethnic identity through the choice of first names, which contains at least a certain amount of “Swedishness”. However, since many of these names also fit well into other cultures, through being international in general, or through having a certain foreign spelling or form, they also signal ethnic identities other than the Swedish one. The parents that have chosen these names seem to have found a way of not choosing between, but combining different onomasticons and different ethnic identities.

Only about 36% of the children (43 individuals) were given an official first name that can be seen as “foreign” from a Swedish perspective. As foreign in this context, I would include any name that does not have a very long tradition of usage in Sweden and would not be perceived as Swedish at all by Swedish people in general. Some examples of such names are the girls’ names *Baylie, Delina, Edessa, Grace, Jood, Masiteh, Sabria, Sude, Xochtil, Yara* and the boys’ names *Almog, Atakan, Erwin, Gent, Lawen, Logan, Mael, Maxim, Orhan, Sahib*. These names are of quite different origins, which reflect the many different languages spoken by the families in my survey. Apart from Swedish, some of the most commonly spoken languages are English, Turkish and Arabic, which may be evident from the lists of names above.

About a third of the names in this category (14 of 43) aren’t common either in Sweden, or in the language(s) the parents report speaking. For example a girl with German-speaking parents has received the Danish name *Lone*. Another example is a boy with Thai speaking parents who has received the name *Mario*, which is of Italian/Spanish origin and not common in either Thailand or Sweden. This tendency indicates that multilingual families not only choose between Swedish names on the one hand and names in the onomasticon of their first language(s) on the other, but rather, they also seem to consider names from languages to which they have no specific connection – and therefore could not identify themselves with. In these cases parents have for some reason put aside the ethno-identifying aspect of the name choice – but why? Is it because they favour for example taste or originality?

Among children who have received several first names, it seems to be more common that children receive an official first name that is foreign from a Swedish perspective as well as a second or third name that is perceived as Swedish, than the other way round. Only a minority of the children (18.2% or 12 individuals) who received a more or less Swedish official first name have received a second or third name that can be seen as “foreign” from a Swedish perspective. Most children (81.8% or 54 individuals) who received a Swedish official first name have also received a Swedish second or third name. However, among the 42 children who received a foreign first name, a somewhat larger part (23.8% or 10 individuals) have received at least one other name that can be perceived as Swedish. These results indicate that mixing first names with different ethnic connotations is not a very common tool in the construction of complex ethnic identities among the families in my survey, but when this strategy does occur, it is mostly when the child has received a foreign official first name, that is, when a primarily foreign ethnic identity is being constructed.

#### **4. Usability in several languages**

My questionnaire contained some specific questions on usability in several languages: *Did you choose the name because it could be used in several languages?* and (if the answer was yes) *Why did you want this and which languages/countries did you think of?* It was more common among multilingual families to have considered usability in several languages than it was among monolingual families. A large majority, 80% of the 126 multilingual families, considered this, compared to 46% of the 493 monolingual Swedish families. Among the multilingual families who did consider this matter, 60% only considered Swedish and the language(s) they speak at home, while 40% also considered one or several other languages. Among the families who also considered other languages half of them mention English, whereas the other half mention a vague

“many languages” or “an international context”. This indicates that the multilingual parents in my survey not only wanted their children’s names to be usable both in a Swedish context and a specific foreign context, but also in a greater international context, just as many monolingual Swedish parents in the survey did. Furthermore, just like the monolingual parents, most multilingual parents regard usability in English as the best means of assuring international usability, regardless of the parents’ language background.

Parents’ reasons for choosing a name that can be used in several languages can roughly be divided into two groups. One group contains answers that are closely connected to issues of identity. Some parents have answered that their choice was a natural result of having emotional connections with several languages or cultures. They describe finding it important that a name tells something about the child’s background and who he or she is (for example “we wanted a name which is anchored in both of our cultural origins”). Other parents describe that since they *are* for example one Swede and one Turk, they wanted a name for their child that was also both Swedish and Turkish (or in a similar manner: “he has a mother from Ethiopia and a father from Sweden. So it was important to find a name that fits in both countries”). For the families in this group choosing a name that can be used in several languages seemed most of all to be a way of constructing a certain ethnic identity for the child.

The second group contains answers that are more connected to issues of practicality. Since many multilingual families have strong connections with relatives and close friends in several cultures, they have a need for a name that can be used in all of these contexts (for example “we have relatives in England, Slovenia and Cyprus, so it was important that the name could be used in all of these countries”). Other parents emphasize the importance of avoiding the disadvantages of not having an international name, and of having a domestic name that is too culturally specific. They mention the risks of being bullied, misspelled or misinterpreted both in Sweden and in other countries, if the name is perceived as too foreign or too Swedish (for example “since we have lived and worked in France and Canada, apart from Norway and Sweden, we have experienced difficulties with names” and “we didn’t want a name that he could be a reason for bullying, that would be similar to some unpleasant word, or that Swedes would find difficult to pronounce” and “we didn’t want his grandparents or other relatives to have trouble pronouncing the name”). These answers show clearly that name choices are not only used to construct ethnic identities and emotional relations, but also to allocate resources that may be beneficiary or practical in many ways and in many different contexts, social as well as geographical.

## 5. Spelling

The questionnaire also contained some specific questions on spelling: *Did you consider different ways of spelling the name?* and (if yes) *Which spelling alternatives did you consider and why did you choose the one you did?* It was more common among multilingual families to consider spelling alternatives than it was among monolingual Swedish families. 33% of the 126 multilingual families considered this, while only 23% of the 493 monolingual Swedish families did. The single most important reason for multilingual families to consider different spelling alternatives was usability in several languages, for example which spelling would simplify the pronouncing of the name for Swedes or for relatives in another country. 33% of 41 multilingual families who considered different spelling alternatives answered in this way. One family who chose between *Lone* and *Lune* noted that “this spelling [Lone] worked better in Sweden”. Another family, who chose between *Tiago* and *Thiago*, selected the first “because it [*Tiago*] was easier to pronounce and spell”. Yet another family, who chose between *Aydin* and *Ajdin*, explained that “we chose the Turkish *y* and not the Bosnian *j* since in Turkish it would be pronounced differently if it had a *j* and it would sound wrong when relatives in Turkey called on him”.

Usability in several languages was not a very common reason among monolingual families in my survey. Only 15% of 112 families gave such an answer. Instead the most important reason for monolingual families to consider spelling alternatives was aesthetics or taste, for example whether the name Carl looks better spelled with a C or a K. 36% of the 112 monolingual Swedish families who considered spelling alternatives gave such an answer. However, this reason was also quite common among the multilingual families. 29% of 41 families gave such an answer. One family who chose between *Jacob* and *Jakob* reported that “it [*Jacob*] looked better in writing”. Another family, who chose between *Bailey*, *Baylee*, *Bailie* and *Baylie*, noted that “this [*Baylie*] was the most beautiful spelling”.

To conclude it seems that while the monolingual Swedish families used spelling mostly as a way of expressing taste and constructing a certain social identity, the multilingual families used spelling partly in this way and partly as a way of combining different ethnic identities and constructing a social resource that can be usable in several ethnic contexts.

## 6. The influence of other social factors

So far I have only discussed the choice of first names in relation to the parents’ language background. However, language background and ethnic identities are not the only important factors influencing the name choice in the multilingual families. I have compared the chosen names with some other social background facts reported by the parents and found that name choices in multilingual families are also affected by a number of other social factors.

Firstly, in families where one of the parents only speaks Swedish at home, Swedish names are more common when it is the father who speaks Swedish than where it is the mother who does (93% or 13 of 14 *versus* 60% or 12 of 20). This indicates that the ethnic identities that are being created for the children more often follow the ethnic background of the father than that of the mother, which might be a sign of parents having different gender related roles in the name giving procedure.

Secondly, it is more common that a first child receives a more or less Swedish name than a child with older siblings (63% or 38 of 60 *versus* 38% or 21 of 55). Instead it is more common among children with siblings to receive foreign names (47% or 26 of 54 *versus* 27% or 16 of 60). This might indicate that parents at an early stage aim for their children to have an identity at least partly Swedish, but later reevaluate the importance of also keeping a foreign identity for their children.

Thirdly, parents’ lifestyle and life conditions seem to matter. More or less Swedish names have been chosen by the large majority among parents living in privately owned houses (81% or 13 of 16), while by a smaller majority among parents living in privately owned apartments (63% or 17 of 27) and by an even smaller number among parents living in rental apartments (38% or 26 of 69). Also, more or less Swedish names were chosen more often when the mother has university education than when the mother does not (57% or 37 of 65 vs. 36% or 19 of 48). This indicates that well-educated parents and parents, who have gained enough economic success in Sweden that they can afford a privately owned home, are keener to create a Swedish or partly Swedish identity for their children, than parents without formal education and parents who have not gained such economic success.

## 7. Conclusion

All choices we make, linguistic choices as well as others, can be used as a resource in the continuing process of constructing a certain identity for ourselves and are therefore always to some extent choices of identity. This includes the choice of first names for our children. Through such choices we create an identity for the child, which will show the child, as well as others, who he or she is and how he or she is related to different groups. In the case of multilingual families

the choice of first names often becomes a quite obvious choice between different ethnic identities. These families might choose a first name from the onomastic of the surrounding majority (in this case a Swedish name), or from the onomastic of their own language(s) (in this case a name that would be foreign to a Swede), or they might try to combine these in some way. Each choice will mean a choice of a different ethnic identity for the child.

My study of first name choices in 126 multilingual families in Sweden has shown that name giving is being used as one way to construct a certain ethnic identity for the child. Two tools that seem to be important in this process are usability in several languages and spelling adjustments, while the use of a mixture of names with different ethnic connotations is a less used strategy. The point in time when the multilingual parents started thinking about a name for the child, as well as the motives and sources of inspiration reported by the parents, further emphasize the specific conditions of name choices in multilingual families. The study has also shown that social identities other than ethnically related ones, such as gender and lifestyle, are being simultaneously constructed through the name choices.

However, the construction of different identities is not the only social goal for which the name choice seems to be an important resource. Among the multilingual families in my survey, name choices were also used as a tool to prevent the child being isolated or bullied, or to assure usability if the child chose to work or travel internationally. It seems that the emotional issues of identity are closely intertwined with the more rational issues of practicality.

### Note

1. In Sweden, different days of the year are associated with different names and the day associated with one's own name is celebrated. Most calendars contain information on name days. The custom was originally inspired by Catholic calendars of saints, but is no longer particularly associated with Christianity.

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