

Name Mispronunciation in the UC Davis Community:

The Experience and Its Explanations

Hadil Djadri

University of California, Davis

UWP 1: Academic Literacies

George Hegarty

December 5, 2021

Introduction

I've grown accustomed to the furrowed brows, inquisitive looks, and hesitant tones that accompany people's uncertainty when trying to pronounce my name, which was just one more thing that alienated me from my peers. So, Anglicanization of my name pronunciation was the closest I could get to "normalcy." Though I eventually embraced my name, I recently began to do the same with my name *pronunciation*. I pronounce my name the Arabic way with members of the MENASA¹ and Muslim communities here at UC Davis because I know that many (but of course not all) are familiar with Arabic pronunciation. For example, there is a phonetic distinction between a "soft L" (what Arabic uses) and a "hard L." Second, I do so in my Arabic class, given that "Hadil" is an Arabic name, which my instructor recognizes and thus pronounces accordingly. My personal experience with Anglicizing my name pronunciation led me to pay attention to whether or not people did the same. I would listen in on how students pronounce their names to baristas at coffee shops as well as to fellow students. I also began to wonder whether or not the way people pronounce their name depends on the ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds of their interlocutors.²

As I reflected on my observations, I realized I can connect my experience with and curiosity about name pronunciation to my academic work. The diverse student body is an invaluable resource to tap into given the plethora of perspectives that are brought to the table. Thus, I researched the extent to which students in the UC Davis MENASA/Muslim communities

¹ MENASA: acronym for the Middle Eastern, North African, and South Asian student affinity group on campus.

² Interlocutor: a person who takes part in dialogue or conversation (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

adjust their name pronunciation. I paid particular attention to a) the reasons behind the decision, b) whether it is audience-specific, and c) whether it internally affects the individual. I also examined the psychological explanations for name pronunciation. I focused on the MENASA/Muslim communities because I am a part of both and have access to community members. Extending the reach to students in the MENASA community as a whole (rather than just students who identify as Arab) broadens the prospective participant pool and augments the richness of perspective that I believe my research paper brings to those who read it.

Linguistic Ideology and Polyonomastics

Linguistic ideology is the “set of beliefs about language and about groups of people that are used to make and explain certain linguistic choices” (Pennesi, 2014). In her research journal, Karen Pennesi, Associate Professor at the University of Western Ontario, explains this concept by stating that names are part of these linguistic ideologies and are more than just “units of language”: they are also “symbols of persons,” or representations of who we are both as individuals and as members of social groups.

Pennesi conducted a study on name pronunciation at convocation ceremonies³ at Western University in Ontario, Canada, where the diverse student body resulted in a campaign to pronounce the students’ names correctly: right before the commencement of the diploma-giving, students write out their name pronunciation on name cards, which the faculty read before they

³ Convocation ceremony: an event in which graduating students at a college or university receive their diplomas.

announce students' names. Students used accent marks and specified which syllables of their names need to be emphasized (Pennesi, 2014). The name cards reflect what the student believes to be the most difficult parts of their names, and what they thus need to make more clear. Here, we see the connection between names as “units of language” and as “symbols of persons” in terms of how the students perceive their names. She provides several examples of what the students wrote, including this:

Nguyen>Win

Pennesi also interviewed faculty, staff, and students about factors that make names harder and easier to pronounce. Some of the factors that hindered pronounceability were uncertainty about the pronunciation or spelling of the name and unfamiliarity with the name's language of origin (Pennesi, 2014). Pennesi inferred that people are hesitant to assume how to pronounce a non-Anglican name because they recognize that the orthographic system⁴ is different. Thus, a familiar-looking syllable may *seem* to be pronounced as it would be in English, but because people are unfamiliar with other language structures, they can only infer. In thinking about why name mispronunciation occurs, I find myself agreeing with this linguistic uncertainty notion. The part that confuses people with my name is how to pronounce the “dil” ending. It makes sense why an English speaker would pronounce it like the word “dill” rather than “deal” based on what is most familiar to them. Additionally, because the “soft L” is not used in English, native speakers may not catch the difference.

⁴ Orthography: the set of norms for writing in a language that includes spelling, emphasis, and punctuation, among other things (*Orthography*, n.d. Google Arts and Culture).

The subjects noted that familiarity with the name's language of origin, or even just similar languages, reduces uncertainty about pronunciations as well as regular interactions with students that have a certain linguistic background. For example, one of the subjects "taught many Chinese students and made a point of learning how to pronounce Chinese names, including the correct tones" (Pennesi, 2014). The subjectivity of names is made clear here: the personal background and experiences of the "name-pronouncer" is substantial in how they perceive name pronunciations. However, Pennesi describes the "pitfall" of being familiar with the language when people actually *prefer* the Anglicized pronunciation of their name. She also introduces the concept of hypercorrection, or pronouncing names according to the linguistic rules of the name's origin (Pennesi, 2014). Here, I see a clash between names as words and names as persons. Hypercorrection is built on the idea of names as merely words that have only one proper way of pronouncing them, while names are also representations of the individual who chooses how to introduce themselves (for example, when they use the Anglicized pronunciation, though it's not the "correct" way linguistically).

In her analysis, Pennesi also refers to "polyonomastics" (simply a merge of the words "polyonomy"⁵ and "gymnastics"). Polyonomastics is the concept that an individual chooses to pronounce their name differently depending on their audience, essentially "performing" for different linguistic and ethnic contexts (Pennesi, 2014). Pennesi refers to Maryann Parada's research where people in Chicago with Spanish names chose either the Spanish, English, or

⁵ Polyonomy: The use of a variety of names for the same object. Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary (1913)

hybrid pronunciation depending on whether they were talking to a monolingual or a bilingual person (Parada 2013). Polyonomastics is something I have done myself; whether I'm "Hadil" with a hard "L" or "Hadil" with a soft "L" depends on who I'm speaking to. The "hybrid" pronunciation that Parada's subjects referenced is also something I've done to find a middle ground between the two. Additionally, Pennesi's interviews shed light on how her subjects often preferred the Anglicized pronunciations of their names in "one-time encounters" and how correct pronunciation is more valued when there's a closer relationship between people. The interlocutor knows very little about the name-bearer in a one-time encounter, and thus the name merely serves as an identifier; the name-bearer sees no need to give the proper yet more difficult pronunciation or to correct the interlocutor's attempts if they'll never see the person again. As I was reading this part of the article, my mind wandered to my observations of how people (including myself) pronounce their names at coffee shops. The conversation with a barista is a one-time encounter, and thus it makes sense why some people don't feel inclined to give the proper pronunciation.

The Social Psychology of Name Change

Researchers Darrell W. Drury and John D. McCarthy examined name change in response to environmental pressure to see if the decision is determined by the costs and rewards of "interpersonal exchange" (Drury & McCarthy, 1980).

Though their research was focused on name change and not necessarily pronunciation, I was still able to find psychological explanations they proposed that can be applied to my research. Drury and McCarthy introduce the formal exchange theory, which states that "the

greater the gains of an activity or behavior, the more likely one is to engage in it and conversely for the costs” (Drury and McCarthy, 1980). In the context of name pronunciation, if a name-bearer is rewarded for the Anglicized pronunciation of their name through social acceptance and thus an increase of self-esteem, they may be positively reinforced to repeat the behavior. Drury and McCarthy also pose alternative reasons for name change examined by other researchers, like symbolic interaction, where the images others have of us (which they display through gestures, words, or actions) are significant to our sense of self to the point where we may adopt their view of ourselves instead of our own (Drury and McCarthy, 1980). In my experience, this explains how the “furrowed brows” and “inquisitive looks” that I receive when pronouncing my name to others correlated to me internalizing the view of my name as “outlandish.”

Method

Using a case study approach⁶, my primary research consisted of a survey sent out to members of the MENASA and/or Muslim communities at UC Davis as well as one-on-one interviews with willing survey participants.

Survey:

My research survey received twenty-eight responses. It consisted of five required questions (as well as optional spaces to elaborate on answers), and two questions at the beginning to gauge the participants’ demographics (school year and age). Two questions on the frequency of name mispronunciation and the importance of correct pronunciation were presented

⁶ Case study approach: a research approach that is used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context (US National Library of Medicine Institutes of Health, 2011).

on a scale from 1 to 5: 1 being “rarely” and 5 being “on a daily basis” for the frequency question, and 1 being “I don’t care too much” and 5 being “incredibly important” for the important question. There were also “yes,” “sometimes,” or “no” questions on whether or not the participants correct people when their names are mispronounced, whether they introduce themselves using their Anglicized pronunciation, and whether the background of the interlocutor (i.e. their linguistic ability, ethnic background, and/or relationship to the participant), matters in which name pronunciation they use. These one-word answers allowed me to report a quantitative percentage to give a basic overview of the results, while the optional spaces for elaboration provided reasoning for the participants’ choices and more qualitative responses.

Interviews:

I conducted semi-structured interviews⁷ with three UC Davis students who identify with the MENASA and/or Muslim communities. Interview answers were written down for accuracy. I noted on my survey that participants can reach out to me if they are interested in being interviewed, but did not receive responses. I then reached out to students I know personally who I knew had some sort of interest in the topic.

⁷ Semi-structured interviews: a type of interview in which the interviewer asks only a few predetermined questions while the rest of the questions are not planned in advance (Pollock n.d.)

Results

	1	2	3	4	5
How important is it to you that your name is pronounced correctly?	17.9%	7.1%	25%	14.3%	35.7%
	Yes	Sometimes	No		
Do you usually correct people when your name is mispronounced?	53.6%	n/a	46.4%		
When you introduce yourself to other people, do you pronounce your name how it is pronounced in the name's language of origin? (or do you "Anglicize" the pronunciation i.e. make it sound more "Western")	53.6%	25%	21.5%		
Does the individual you're introducing yourself to matter in deciding how to pronounce your name? (i.e. their ethnic/racial background, linguistic ability, their relationship to you)	60.7%	n/a	39.3%		

Quantitative results from my survey.

The results of my primary research are consistent with polyonomastics. The background of the interlocutor does, in fact, matter in assessing how to present one's name. Interviewee #1 noticed that she pronounces her name the correct way around people in the Muslim Student Association or people from the Eastern/Middle Eastern region of the world in general. In my survey results, 60.7% of participants indicated that the ethnic/racial background and/or the linguistic ability of the individual they introduce themselves to matters in deciding how to pronounce their names, as well as their relationship to them. Interviewee #1 also commented that she expects people who share a similar cultural background with her to pronounce her name correctly, whereas the same level of expectation is absent in interactions with those outside of

this background. When prompted about the “coffee shop phenomenon” of changing one’s name for a barista’s ease, she shared her experience with shortening her name (“Mina’s just fine”) to avoid inconveniencing the baristas.

Through my interviews, I thought about how the relationship between the individual and the interlocutor matters in name pronunciation. Interviewee #1 shared a story in which an apartment manager from her youth gave children who lived at the complex nicknames and thus started calling her “Mimi” (which the kids emulated), which she didn’t care about since she was a child. She noted that her family usually calls her by nicknames (unless she is in trouble, then her full name is used). There’s always some sort of backstory or memory attached to the nicknames that give them value. However, her experience with being nicknamed by the apartment manager was simply for their convenience.

My survey brought up an important phenomenon within the MENASA community that I hadn’t considered. A couple of participants of South Asian origin described how their name is an Arabic name, so Arab speakers tend to pronounce their name the Arabic way; however, the participant prefers the way their families pronounce their names. Reading this made me more conscious of pronouncing people’s names the way they want them to be pronounced and not how I’m used to simply because it is an Arabic name.

My findings on how name mispronunciation internally affects the individual were mixed. Several participants noted they shouldn’t have to Anglicize their names for other people’s convenience, and that they have recently begun to “correct people after letting it slide” for many years. However, other participants responded that names are just “one part of social encounters”

and their identities, and thus the pronunciation does not matter to them as much; this leads them to give the Americanized pronunciation out of ease. For example, Interviewee #2 noted that his self-identity is not shaped by his name. However, he comments that internally it does make him feel better when people pronounce his name the way it's supposed to be pronounced but he has never really considered introducing himself with it.

Interviewee #3 recounted a story in which she told a middle school friend how her name is supposed to be pronounced. The friend said that the pronunciation was “really hard” and that she would still call her by her Anglicized name pronunciation. She described the annoyance at others thinking they can pronounce her name better than she can, and nowadays, she usually corrects people who mispronounce her name. Consistent with this, one participant in the survey elaborated on their “Yes” answer to correcting name mispronunciation. They wrote that “...it's my name. If you don't pronounce my name right, then are you really saying my name?”.

I was also able to connect the formal exchange theory presented in “The Social Psychology of Name Change” to my research results. One survey participant shared how when naming their children, her parents “had issues with [their name pronunciations] and only chose names easy for Americans to pronounce. They chose spellings...that were phonetic and asked the nurses at the hospital to read through a list of different spellings to figure out which was the easiest one.”

Here, her parents adopted the view that Anglicized names were easier to pronounce due to the rewards (i.e. social acceptance) that come with easier pronunciations, hence why they asked the nurse to give her input.

Analysis and Conclusion

My research results support my expectations. I have found that there is a connection between the background of the interlocutor and the name pronunciation given to them. The results also show the importance of name pronunciation in self-esteem and self-identity. It has also given me a better understanding of the psychological implications of name pronunciation, primarily with the adoption of other people's expectations for what is "normal" and what is not. In reality, there is no "normal." To me, my name is an integral part of my identity, and it makes me unique. I have been more conscious of pronouncing my name the way it's intended to be pronounced and "owning it." Like several survey participants, being at UC Davis has also made me more inclined to give the correct pronunciation of my name, as I find myself in a more accepting and larger Muslim/MENASA community than I'm used to.

Limitations:

A limitation to my research is the sample size; I only received twenty-eight responses. The time constraint could have hindered the size of the participant pool. Also, I reached out to the MENASA Center but did not receive a response, so that may have also increased the pool size. I was initially planning on reaching out to psychology professors at UC Davis that specialize in linguistic or social psychology. This primary research would have contributed well to my results but I believe the results presented suffice.

References

- Drury, D. W., & McCarthy, J. D. (1980). The Social Psychology of Name Change: Reflections on a Serendipitous Discovery. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 43(3), 310–320. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3033733>
- How We Pronounce Student Names, and Why it Matters*. (n.d.). Cult of Pedagogy. Retrieved October 20, 2021, from <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/gift-of-pronunciation/>
- Interlocutor* | Definition of Interlocutor by Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Retrieved November 10, 2021, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/interlocutor>
- McLaughlin, C. (n.d.). *The Lasting Impact of Mispronouncing Students' Names* | NEA. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/lasting-impact-mispronouncing-students-names>
- Nast, C. (2013, December 19). *Why Your Name Matters*. The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/why-your-name-matters>
- Orthography*. (n.d.). Google Arts & Culture. Retrieved November 29, 2021, from <https://artsandculture.google.com/entity/orthography/m05kns>
- Pennesi, K. (2014). Reading and Righting the Names at a Convocation Ceremony: Influences of Linguistic Ideologies on Name Usage in an Institutional Interaction. *Names*, 62(1), 37–48. <https://doi.org/10.1179/0027773813Z.00000000070>
- Somvichian-Clausen, A. (2020, February 20). *What's it like to grow up in America with a non-American name?* [Text]. TheHill.

<https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/diversity-inclusion/483720-the-struggle-of-growing-up-in-america-with-a-non>

The Difference Between Structured, Unstructured & Semi-Structured Interviews. (n.d.).

Oliver Parks Consulting LLC - Technology Sector Recruitment Experts. Retrieved

November 10, 2021, from

<https://www.oliverparks.com/blog-news/the-difference-between-structured-unstructured-amp-semi-structured-interviews>

The Name Change of Asian Immigrants | Psychology Today. (n.d.). Retrieved November 29,

2021, from

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/minority-report/202103/the-name-change-asian-immigrants>

Understanding Name-Based Microaggressions | Psychology Today. (n.d.). Retrieved

November 29, 2021, from

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/underdog-psychology/201909/understanding-name-based-microaggressions>