

What's in a Name?

By SAM KEAN OCT. 28, 2007

Shirley Temple didn't make many enemies, but Alleen Nilsen can think of a few people who loathed America's sweetheart. Nilsen, a professor of English at Arizona State University and president (with her husband, Don) of the American Names Society, once met a Shirley from a family that used the name for four generations — for its men. As soon as Temple stamped it as indelibly girlish, Shirley IV disgustedly switched to Shirl. There was no Shirley V.

Dozens of longstanding male names — Kim, Beverly, Ashley, etc. — have met the same fate. Linguists know the pattern well: not long after a boy's name catches on with girls, parents shy away from christening sons with it. “We crowd them out,” Nilsen says. Consider some examples from the Social Security Administration's baby-name database. Through 1955, “Leslie” consistently appeared among the 150 most popular boys' names. About a decade earlier, it began to catch on among girls. And the “crowding out” Nilsen mentioned took place. “Leslie” fell out of favor, dropping from a peak of 81 in male popularity rankings in 1895 to 874 a century later, and will most likely never gain traction with men again. Dana, Carol and Shannon met similar ends.

By contrast, Jordan has appeared in the Top 100 most popular names for both sexes since 1989, and other modern unisex names coexist peacefully, too. Angel, overwhelmingly male until the mid-'50s, became popular for girls around 1972. Yet boy Angels surpassed girls in 1986, and the name now sits at No. 31 for men, 160 for women. And the popularity of Logan for boys (it perennially appears in the Top 50) may have eroded its cachet for girls, an unusual reversal.

The best example of a new gender-fluid name is Peyton, which wasn't popular until the quarterback Peyton Manning emerged. It tested parents' tolerance of ambiguity, since it lacked strong gender connotations. The name caught on with girls first in 2000. But parents, perhaps hopeful for their sons' athletic futures, loved it for boys too. Strikingly, its popularity with both sexes surged and dipped in lock step over the past decade — meaning parents responded to the fickle laws that govern name popularity identically, as if sex made no difference. Peytons of both sexes probably gained thousands of peers when Manning's Colts won the Super Bowl in February.

The loosening of sex roles may have freed parents to choose neutral-sounding names like Riley and Jaden (or Jayden), but other factors bolstered ambiguous names, too. Herbert Barry — co-author of the paper “Feminization of Unisex Names From 1960 to 1990” — found that between 1900 and 1910, 27 boys' names and 26 girls' names accounted for half of all names. Between 1990 and 2000 it was 60 and 90 names, respectively. The upshot is that parents are less likely to encounter any child named Devin, say, and are therefore less likely to associate that name with either sex.

Albert Mehrabian, a psychology professor at U.C.L.A., has studied people's blink reactions to unisex names. Take Casey. People classify male Caseys as more feminine than Johns or Jacobs and female Caseys as more masculine than Sarahs or Susans. That's not all bad: masculine names are often associated with success, for instance, which might explain why parents historically chose androgynous names for girls. As for boys, Mehrabian says that today “some traditionally feminine characteristics may be seen as desirable in men, like caring and giving.” Given the desirability of those traits, at least for some, parents may be less shy about naming a boy Brooke, Taylor or Morgan than in previous decades, when the “feminine” connotations of those names might have come at a social cost — the potential loss of status, jobs or friends.

Or as Nilsen, the Names Society co-president, puts it, “It's not a disgrace to be a girl anymore.” Still, she notes traditions haven't died. In third-world countries strict gender hierarchies still predominate. Even in the liberalized West, the pull of gender-specific names can be strong for governments wishing to keep traditions alive. Finland, for instance, maintains strict, nonoverlapping rolls of official boys'

and girls' names and will not recognize births unless parents select a name from the appropriate list.

And then there's the so-called playground effect, to which even Nilsen's own family succumbed. Until age 4, her son was happy to be called Kelly. Then he went to preschool, "where there was a 'Kelly Girl' and a 'Kelly Boy,'" she says. After a day of teasing, he came home, crying. "Forever after," she says, "he insisted on being called Kelvin."

Sam Kean is a writer in Washington.

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