Can personal names be translated?

In a short story entitled 'Gogol' published in *The New Yorker*, an Anglo-American author of Bengali descent tells the story of a young couple from Calcutta recently settled in Boston.[1] Upon the birth of their first child, a boy, they are required by law to give him a name. At first their surname Ganguli is used, and 'baby Ganguli' is written on his nursery tag. But later, when a clerk demands that the baby's official given name be entered in the registry, the parents are in a quandary. Eventually the father gives him the name 'Gogol,' a pet name but one that possesses powerful personal connotations for the father.

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The parents call him Gogol at home. When he enters kindergarten the parents give him another name: Nikhil. It means 'he who is entire', while the name Gogol seems undignified and unfit for public life. But the child refuses to be named Nikhil. He thinks his name is Gogol and he does not understand the change. In a funny scene with the schoolteacher, who claims that the child does not respond to Nikhil, the parents argue with her and explain that according to their custom, Gogol is only a name used at home and that Nikhil is a 'good name'.

- 'What do you mean,' asks the schoolteacher, 'a good name? You mean a middle name? A nickname?'
- 'No, no,' protest the parents, 'a good name, a school name!'

The name Gogol prevails and the boy ends up being so named at school.

As the boy grows older he becomes dissatisfied and embarrassed by his name. The name means nothing. It is the surname of a Russian author, neither Bengali nor American. It is not a 'good name', but 'a pet name-turned-good name'. It is also a surname-turned-first name. It sounds awkward, ridiculous. He is afraid girls will make fun of him.

The boy is now a freshman at Yale. He goes to the courthouse to change his name from Gogol to Nikhil, the good Indian name that his parents chose for him in the first place. But he does not feel like Nikhil. The new name does not seem right. For eighteen years, Nikhil is new. People who knew him as Gogol now call him Nikhil, and this makes him feel ill at ease, like an impostor. Switching names also seems incorrect, awkward, like using English with his parents and not Bengali.

In the last section of the story the father explains to the boy why he called him Gogol. The reason involves a personal episode in the father's life prior to his son's birth. Lying among the dead after a train crash, the father owed his life to the fluttering pages of a book he held in his hand when he was found by a team of rescuers and saved from certain death. The book was by the Russian author Gogol. After hearing this story the young man is stunned, and feels ashamed. Suddenly, the sound of his pet name 'means something completely new'. End of story.

What's in a name?

Although not an ethnography per se, this tale illustrates the phenomenon of naming, the principles that underlie naming systems, the implications of names in people's lives and how they define people's identity. One aspect so entertainingly outlined in this story is the conflict and misunderstanding that arise between two different cultures, and, more deeply, the conflict that arises in the character's mind about the degree of 'fit' of a name in mental and emotional terms. The story shows the enormous personal value that a name has for both those who give it and those who wear it, and the conflicting aspects of what is private and what is public in a name. An anthropological theory of names should be able to take into account all these aspects.

If Jhumpa Lahiri's tale is taken seriously as an ethnographic account of a recurring pattern of behaviour, this is how an explanation might look: the name 'Gogol' does not fit the requirements of a Bengali 'real, complete name' (or autonym). This should be a 'good name'-type for public use, not a pet-name-type for private use. It does not meet the requirements for an American English autonym, which should be drawn form a 'closed list' of first or middle name types for public and private use. 'Gogol' sticks, however inadequate, until the subject changes it to meet the requirements of a good Bengali autonym. But this change is not accepted because the psychological and social process cannot be reversed or aborted. The autonym 'Gogol' is culturally wrong but still carries the subject's true identity. The origin of the name from the father's personal history eventually validates the name, still perceived as culturally wrong but personally correct.

The cultural misunderstanding arises from the confrontation of two different naming systems whose elements do not correspond. In the conversation between the teacher and the father, the teacher asks: 'Is Nikhil a first name?' The father protests: 'No, it is a good name!' They are unable to understand each other since the name types are culturally-specific. A Bengali 'good name' has no equivalent in American English, and a 'first name' has no equivalent in Bengali. Bengali has three name types: pet name, good name and surname.[2] American English has four: nickname, first name, middle name and surname. These name types do not match from Bengali to English and vice-versa, except for the Bengali pet name and the American nickname, which are roughly equivalent. If we look at the properties of the Bengali good name, we see the differences with the English first or middle name:

Bengali 'good name'	American 'first name' or 'middle name'
for public use only	for public and private use
autonym	part of the autonym
chosen by maternal great-grandmother	chosen by parents
usually given several years after birth	given at birth
belongs to a list of words in common use (is 'motivated,' in linguistic terms)	belongs to a special list of words used for names only ('not motivated')
name is not inherited, but sometimes shared	is often inherited, and always shared

Not only do name types differ in content and definition, they function differently. In English a nickname can be added to the first name (as in 'Sugar Ray') but a Bengali pet name substitutes the good name entirely, and the two are never used together. Whereas the English first (or given) name is always used together with the surname to form the complete name, the Bengali good name is self-contained and a fully autonomous label. In other words, names belong to systems, or relations between name types. Name types can differ enough to prevent exact translation, but what deepens cultural misunderstanding is the systematic way name types function together. As in kinship terminologies, personal names are organized according to predetermined cultural and linguistic combinations. Their use and meaning is subject to cognitive rules that bear on the definition of each name type, their number, and most importantly, their combination in each utterance and context. Once this is recognized, an anthropological study of personal names can begin.

But as this literary example illustrates, our insightful writer makes the reader privy to the mental and emotional consequences of naming. The main character struggles with his name because the mental and cognitive Bengali map does not fit the American English one. The name Gogol does not fit either - it does not even resemble a first name in English. In the story, the name of Gogol's sister is given as an example of a perfect fit. Not only is she named Sonali right away (a 'good name' that means 'she who is golden') but at home she is called Sonu, Sona, and Sonia. Sonia sticks because it sounds American, even European. The name is a perfect fit because it suits the Indian Bengali system, but also, through nicknaming, the American English system. The girl thus belongs to two worlds and there is no inner identity conflict.

In every language, personal names are linguistic objects and complex representations. Psychological aspects to naming are at least partly dependant on the formal rules of naming. There is another aspect to it. The name 'Gogol' is the title of Lahiri's story, but it also the title of the story of the character's father. In other words, a name is a narration. When Gogol the son hears the story of how this particular pet name came to be he is deeply moved. Something has changed in his understanding of his own inner identity. Being named Gogol now has a history and authenticity that it had previously lacked. The subject has become 'entangled' in this particular name which has become one of the many narrative strands making up his personal identity. The name binds him to his father, and binds his father to him - an interesting psychological follow-up to a functional study of personal names.[3]

Notes

1. Lahiri, J. 2003. 'Gogol', in *The New Yorker*, June 16 & 23 2003, pp. 171-187.
2. The Bengali naming system contains other name types, particularly a middle name (Dr. Prasanna Kumar Patra, personal communciation). Only name types that appear in this story are mentioned here.
3. Naudin, J., J.M. Azorin, L. Giudicelli, and D. Dassa,. 1995. 'Binswanger avec Schapp : analyse existentielle ou analyse narrative'. *L'Evolution Psychiatrique* 60:575-591.

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