

## **Cars, bands, films: Three very short essays on the linguistics of product naming in popular culture**

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### ***Cars:***

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One of the great challenges of modern life is to work out how to spend profitably all those long, solitary hours stuck in one's car in commuter traffic. For me, the most pleasurable diversion is to look at other cars - their colours, their shapes, the often idiosyncratic ways in which they are driven. And for anyone with an interest in language, it's difficult not to notice the infinite variety of their *names*. Indeed the lexicon of the highway is an intriguing phenomenon, one worthy of some dedicated linguistic research. So what patterns can be discerned? We can point to several.

One longstanding category is 'the car as important person', designed, one imagines, to make the driver feel they are likewise. There is for example the Jaguar *Sovereign*, Holdens *Commodore*, *Premier*, *Statesman* and *Senator*, and various brands of *Executive*. And lest it be thought that this category is concerned only with masculine prestige, there is for the aspiring female driver the Toyota *Starlet*.

Another broad category is names related to travel - not surprisingly - including 'the car as traveller' (Ford *Explorer*, Chrysler *Voyager*, Nissan *Nomad*); 'the car as journey' (Land Rover *Discovery*, Honda *Odyssey*, Nissan *Patrol*) and 'the car as rugged terrain' (Subaru *Outback*, Nissan *Prairie*, Suzuki *Sierra*). It needs to be noted however, that the chances of many of these vehicles finding themselves in such remote places is - well - quite remote. In this way, the urbanly-named Ford *Metro*, Kia *City* and Holden *Suburban* probably represent more accurately the driving patterns of their owners.

The concept of speed is another significant theme, with a number of cars named after things that move jolly quickly - astronomical phenomena (Ford *Meteor* and *Comet*); radioactive particles (Nissan *Pulsar*, Ford *Laser*); NASA rockets (Holden *Gemini* and *Apollo*); and fast moving fauna (Ford *Falcon*, Mitsubishi *Colt*). Harmony is also a theme, as suggested by various types of musical composition - Honda *Prelude*, Hyundai *Sonata* and Holden *Concerto*. Yet another category is the range of feelings that the motoring experience might induce in the driver - the Subaru *Liberty*, Honda *Accord* and *Civic* and the less benign Toyota *Conquest*. A final category worth mentioning - a more esoteric one - is 'the car as something other than what it appears' (Mitsubishi *Mirage*, Daihatsu *Charade*).

All of the above examples suggest a certain logic in car naming. But arguably the most important pattern is not so much conceptual as phonological. It is an odd fact that by far the majority of models on the road these days fall loosely into a category that we might call 'the latinate tri-syllable of no particular meaning'. To name just a

few - the Holden *Barina*, the Toyota *Cressida*, the Mitsubishi *Verada*, the Mazda *Astina*, the Suzuki *Vitara*.

Interestingly, the tri-syllable did not begin with the Italians, but arguably with the Japanese, when in the early 1960s the emerging Toyota company first released its highly affordable - though often sneered at - *Corolla* and *Corona* on to the world market. In time the trend was embraced by Australian car manufacturers with Holden's abandonment of its alphabetical naming system (FJs, EHs etc) and the release of those 1970's icons - the *Monaro* and the *Torana*. Over the last 20 years, the latinate tri-syllable has become truly *de rigueur* (or *rigoro!*) - Toyota *Celica*, *Vienta*, *Tarago*, *Paseo*; Holden *Camira*, *Frontera*, *Lumina*; Ford *Festiva*, *Mondeo*, *Verona*; Nissan *Pintara*, *Navara*, *Maxima*; Mitsubishi *Altera*, *Cordia*, *Solara*; Daewoo *Cielo*; Porsche *Carrera*; Opel *Calibra*; Renault *Fuego* - and on and on.

It must be said however, that names in this category have not always been well chosen. Mitsubishi's *Pajero* (Pah-he-ro) is a Spanish onanist regrettably, and Toyota's disyllabic *Seca* is only one voiced consonant short of the same activity, as practised by Italians (*sega*). No less shocking, a *Berlina* to a German is not a hot and hoony Holden, nor even - as John F. Kennedy thought - a resident of Berlin, but a jiffy doughnut. And Suzuki's new trim little hatch the *Baleno* is - to an Italian - the largest, untrimmest creature on earth - the whale.

But one has to marvel at some of the more recent coinages and what they connote - the Subaru *Impreza* is clearly designed to elicit nods of approval from one's friends; a Daewoo *Nubira* is a car I'd be keen to take out on a date; the Daihatsu *Feroza* is a car you wouldn't want to tangle with in a road rage incident.

It's hard to predict what the future trends in car naming might be. The recent examples cited above suggest the rise of the Z-Car (see also Daihatsu *Pyzar*, Daewoo *Matiz* and *Leganza*); it's also difficult not to notice a Grecian influence creeping in (Mazda *Eunos*, Daewoo *Lanos*, Daihatsu *Terios* and *Sirion*). Neither of these developments is especially inspired to my mind. If I can put in a suggestion, it would be for a revival of an ancient and shortlived category - 'the car as nice person', epitomised by that glorious seventies' saloon - the Nissan *Cedric*. The possibilities here are endless - the Holden *Jeremy*, the Ford *Malcolm*, the Toyota *Cameron*, the Land *Roger*, the BMW *Felicity*. As our roads become more congested and increasingly inhospitable, it would be reassuring to know that those long, lonely hours of commuting could be spent in such nice company.

## ***Bands:***

First published as 'The definitive history of rock' (*The Age* 5/1/02)

In a long forgotten punk magazine from the 1970s - *Sniffing Glue* - there is a succinct 'how-to manual' for those who fancy a career in the music and entertainment industry. It reads: '*Heres an E chord* (with diagram), *here's an A chord*, *here's a B chord* - *now form a band*'. Whilst this neat set of instructions pretty much tells the tale of most of the great bands in history, alas they leave out the most important step in the process: *think of a name and make sure it's a killer one*. Those three chords are going to be a

little bit important in a band's career, but arguably it's the name that will make the real difference – between registering as a momentary blip on the cultural landscape, or becoming a permanent and defining feature of it. Some bands starting out have understood well this order of priorities. For example *The Sex Pistols* and *The Stooges* didn't spend too much time on the chords; some bands however, like *Supertramp*, or *A Flock of Seagulls*, clearly did.

So what advice can be given to young hopefuls who seek this kind of entry into the cultural lexicon. For guidance here, we need to look to the annals of rock and the changing patterns of b(r)andnaming. It is an intriguing fact of our cultural heritage that so many of the shifts in musical styles and taste over the last 40 odd years seem to have revolved around a small, and inconsequential grammatical item - the definite article (*the*). Whereas musicologists would argue that rock began with the *E* chord, linguists would say it really began with the '*the*'. Suddenly, around the mid fifties, music stars ceased to be just individual singers (*Frank Sinatra, Johnny Rae, Fats Domino*), and became singers with their backing bands, the latter invariably a *definite article plus a noun* - *Bill Haley and the Comets, Buddy Holly and the Crickets* etc. In time, *the* bands became more important than the front men, and thus was ushered in the 'great-definite-article-age' of rock. Conceptually bands could be just about anything: people (*The Beach Boys, The Mothers of Invention*); fauna (*The Beatles, The Byrds, The Animals*); objects, both inanimate and animate (*The Doors, The Rolling Stones*); abstractions (*The Temptations, The Move*).

After about a decade of '*definite article- noun*', a period that produced much of what has become the rock canon, the signs were there towards the end of the sixties that the genre was getting a little stale. We can point to two developments - one was that the definite article was becoming increasingly less definite about what it was specifying (*The Band, The Group, The Who*); the other was that it was beginning to specify particularly wacky things (*The Velvet Underground, The Electric Prunes*). These developments are partly attributable to the interesting interface that existed at the time between English language use and the widespread use of certain recreational substances.

I may be wrong on this score, but the momentous linguistic shift appears to have happened around 1968, when one notorious user of recreational substances - Syd Barrett - and his friends came up with a name for their new band - *Pink Floyd*. The definite article had finally been dropped, and was for the next ten years to be virtually banished from the rock lexis. This loosening of the grammar led to a certain 'creativity' in naming practices, the key to which seemed to be to combine two completely incongruous words to create a concept that was at once obscure and highly 'meaningful'. Thus the period produced such legendary nonsense as *Led Zeppelin, King Crimson, Tangerine Dream, Iron Butterfly, Black Sabbath, Hawk Wind, Steely Dan*, and the aforementioned *Supertramp*. *Skyhooks*, the great Aussie band of the period, were a part of this linguistic phenomenon, as was *Concrete Overcoat* a little known outfit I used to love hearing, pimply faced and underage, at the local suburban beerbarn.

By the mid-seventies, rock music, it is widely thought, had become flabby, indulgent and in urgent need of reform. It may be drawing a long bow to suggest that this decline was a direct outcome of the long-term absence of the definite article. One

thing is certain though - this unassuming item of syntax became an indispensable part of the renaissance that was to follow with - *The Sex Pistols, The Clash, The Ramones, The Jam, The Fall, The Specials, The Cramps, The Smiths, The Birthday Party* and more. The hallmark of this new puritanism was that music had become 'definite' again - no more concept albums with 45 minute guitar solos and accompanying orchestras - only skins and strings, and songs that lasted no longer than three minutes. The British singer Matt Johnson had some notion of the part grammar had played in this revival when he named his band *The The*. And fading local stars *Sherbet* figured there was a bandwagon to try to leap upon here when they renamed themselves - somewhat tragically - *The Sherbs*.

Punk, it is often said, was killed off by the fancy-dress of the new romantic movement in the early 1980s - and quite unsurprisingly the first thing to be dispensed with, along with the safety pins, was the definite article. The new fashion in names was names you would expect to find on items of fashion: *Depeche Mode; Style Council; Culture Club; Classix Nouveau, Spandau Ballet* et al. and with this came a music that for some was a tad too tailored. The period is also notable for producing what is possibly the only band in history to employ in its name, not the 'definite article', but the 'indefinite article' - the aforementioned *A Flock of Seagulls*.

Over the last 10 years, the linguistic patterns have been rather harder to identify. This may have something to do with the explosion of new and hybrid musical genres that have characterised the age - rap, hip hop, trip hop, thrash, death metal, acid jazz, house, trance, deep trance, chill out - and all the permutations and combinations of same. If any trend is to be discerned it is what might be called an abandonment of the discernible - that is many names have tended to have an anonymous quality about them, relying on obscure acronyms (*KLF, US3, Def FX*); obscure numbers (*808 State, System 7*); and obscure words (e.g. *Autechre, Ultramate, Djum Djum, Chumbawumba*). Another trend has been the abandonment of language altogether - a move pioneered by the-artist-formerly-known-as-Prince. And a final trend is what might be called 'the glee club' genre created for those splendidly orthodontic outfits like *Back Street Boys, Spice Girls, Venga Boys, S Club 7* etc.

People talk a lot about the sad state of rock music in the present era - and what might be at the heart of this decline. Some point to the loss of venues, others to the rise of dance culture, with its elevation of the turntable over the guitar. Yet others point to the McDonalds-isation of musical culture by the all-powerful corporations. Those of an iconoclastic mind go so far as to suggest that the genre has had its day - that in the early twenty-first century, the archetypal four piece is fast going the way of the home-cooked meal and the honest bank. Whilst it is difficult to know whether such pronouncements of rock's passing are exaggerated, clearly '*the band*' has in recent times been stricken by an identity crisis - a lack of 'definiteness', as it were. But if it is to rise again - and it would seem to be a minor tragedy for youth if it didn't - we can be sure that, as in previous eras, the definite article will have a role to play. So what would be a good name for a band in the modern era - I would suggest *The Articles of Faith*, and then don't spend too much time on the chords.

## ***Films:***

First published as 'Show us your gerunds' (*The Age* 24/5/00)

Filmgoers will be excused for not remembering an only mildly popular spoof from several years ago - *Fatal Instinct*. It is not difficult to recognise which films this piece had in its satirical sights - the two rompingly successful bent-sex thrillers *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct*. However, if the little remembered *Fatal Instinct* really wanted to send up the genre, it would have done better to call itself *Adjective-Noun*.

Indeed just as there are identifiable film genres - the stuff of university cinema studies courses - there are equally identifiable 'film title' genres worthy of the same academic attention. Other titles in the rompingly successful *Adjective-Noun* genre are *Indecent Proposal*, *Mortal Thoughts* and *Final Analysis*. *Adjective-Noun* clearly hit a peak in the early 90s. Now in the new century, the signs of genre obsolescence are unmistakably there. *Cruel Intentions* and *Disturbing Behaviour*, several limp examples from last year, made little impression on the box office and have arrived in the video stores a good deal earlier than their backers would probably have wanted.

In the last few years, the once ubiquitous *Adjective-Noun* has been supplanted by a more syntactically ambitious genre - this is *Gerundive-Proper Noun*. The origins of this category can be traced back to Madonna's first vehicle in the 1980s, the quirky and quirkily-named *Desperately Seeking Susan*. Reappearing in the mid 90s, minus the adverb, the genre continued initially in the same arthouse vein with *Chasing Amy*, *Raising Arizona*, *Boxing Helena*, *Killing Zoe*, *Feeling Minnesota*. Recently *Gerundive-Proper Noun* has gone decidedly mainstream and serious with the success of *Leaving Las Vegas*, and *Saving Private Ryan*. The genre's arthouse origins are difficult to shake however with the release last year of one of the more offbeat titles in the history of cinema - *Being John Malkovich*.

Grammatically-related, but not thematically-related to *Gerundive-Proper Noun* is *Definite Article-Gerundive*. This, one of the scarier title genres, first rose to prominence about 20 years ago with *The Shining*, *The Howling* and others, and has been revived recently with *The Vanishing*.

An interesting lesser genre in the past decade has been *Definite Article-Impossibly Obscure Proper Noun-Common Noun*. Films here include *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Hudsucker Proxy*, remembered as much as anything for the difficulty one has remembering their titles. Not surprisingly, nouns are the pivotal syntactic element in the names of most films. Another heavily nominal category is *Noun-of-Noun*, or to be more precise *Spatial/Temporal Noun-of-Nice Gooney Abstract Noun*. Examples here are the mainly gooney *City of Joy*, *Field of Dreams*, *Days of Heaven*, *Land of Hope* and *Sea of Love*.

Of all the film title genres - and the above are just a few - my favourite is what is best described as the *Long String of Common but Slightly Incongruous Nouns* genre. This one has been around for a while, and crops up only occasionally. When it works

though, the title seems to enter the collective imagination just about as profoundly as a Shakespearean bon mot or a horribly catchy advertising jingle. Iconic examples here are the totally indelible *Sex, Lies and Videotape* and *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*.

There is one final genre worth mentioning - this is the *Defies All Grammatical Analysis* genre. The main thing to be said about titles in this category is that they are invariably pretty bad. A few horrors that spring to mind are *A River Runs Through It*, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistlestop Cafe* and the ancient and obscure, but never forgotten, *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man in the Moon Marigolds*.

This final category aside, it is interesting to speculate about why certain syntactic combinations are so favoured by filmmakers and embraced so enthusiastically by the filmgoing public. Marketers would say that it is simply a case of 'product emulation' - that is, a film with a particular style of title becomes highly successful and then everyone jumps on the bandwagon.

Linguists however, especially those reared in the Chomskyan tradition, would say that the appeal is considerably more fundamental than this. In his linguistic theory, Noam Chomsky wanted to account for an intriguing phenomenon observed in young children - that they are capable of coming out with certain phrases, sentences and other bits of language, that in all likelihood they have never previously heard. In explaining this creative capacity, Chomsky rejected the orthodoxy of the time, the behaviourist 'imitative' view of language acquisition, and postulated the existence of certain linguistic structures that are hard-wired into the human brain. The appeal of certain film title genres like *Adjective-Noun* and *Gerundive-Proprietary Noun* and even *Long String of Common but Slightly Incongruous Nouns* can therefore be related to what Chomsky calls 'deep structures of the mind'. Now there's a film just crying out to be made.