



# What's in a name?

**John Sprague** considers the power of naming, in reference to the recent Paris attacks and the Syrian refugee crisis

In the November issue of *IB REVIEW* (Vol. 2, No. 2) David McIntyre explores the names and titles used by the characters in Ishiguro's 1989 novel *Remains of the Day*, considering how they tell a story about social stratification and power structures in early twentieth-century Britain. He argues that

cliché or not, the aphorism 'language is power' is compelling. It is often in the most everyday social acts such as naming that language establishes, negotiates, and reflects relationships of power.

McIntyre's point is not just interesting as a tool of

literary analysis. Extending his thesis to the 'real world' McIntyre's insight stands: he asks readers to think about the names they are called and what this reveals about their relationship with the namer.

In a more everyday way, we can think of how women have traditionally taken the name of their new husband's family as a sign of integration into a new family unit. In their 2005 book *Freakonomics*, Stephen Dubner and Steven Levitt explore the marked differences in the life outcomes of children with names common in various social groups.

## Conferring legitimacy?

While not quite extending to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which argues that our use of a particular language in some sense dictates our ability to know or think certain thoughts, it's clear that naming has important real-world implications. The recent attacks in Paris illustrate a new aspect to McIntyre's point: the debate about what to call those who have claimed responsibility. The group is already known as either ISIS ('Islamic State of Iraq and Syria') or ISIL ('Islamic State of Iraq and Levant'), but a new name has surfaced, one that is a direct political statement against the group rather than a 'simple' identifier of the group.

Using the name 'Islamic State', it is claimed, implies a sort of legitimacy for the terrorists and their cause. David Cameron pointed out this summer that the group is 'neither...Islamic or a state.' This position is supported by a coalition of imams in the UK, and had been gaining traction even before the bombings and shootings in Paris.

The alternative being considered is 'Daesh'. It is still an acronym of the group's Arabic title but it avoids conveying certain beliefs about them. The term alters our relationship with them by reminding us that they do not represent Islam and are not a legitimate state. It also has quality of genuine satire, being only a letter away from 'daes', meaning someone or something that crumples or tramples. As an added bonus, most accounts claim that the use of the term is infuriating to the group.

## Migrants or refugees?

This issue of naming has surfaced recently in another context. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that there are over 4.2 million Syrian refugees, with over 600,000 seeking asylum in Europe ([www.tinyurl.com/7hgo7zy](http://www.tinyurl.com/7hgo7zy)). There were debates over the summer about whether to refer to these displaced people as 'refugees' or 'migrants', words with distinct meanings that, as the *Guardian* puts it, 'carr[y] different international obligations and consequences' ([www.tinyurl.com/q9rvbtc](http://www.tinyurl.com/q9rvbtc)).

The argument is that, by calling them 'migrants' we suggest that they have made *choices* and imply that these are freely made. Refugees, on the other hand, in virtue of their great need and *lack* of genuine choice, place a particular sort of responsibility on others. As the inscription on the Statue of Liberty says, 'Send these, the homeless, tempest tost to me,/ I lift my lamp beside the golden door.' Some people in the West do not wish to accept this responsibility. The terms we use to describe people on the move from Syria may signal which type of person we are and which stance we take.

## Activities

- 1 Research the terms 'refugee' and 'migrant'. List other names you've heard applied to the displaced peoples. What differences do you think the terms mean when used to describe these individuals? What general ideas can you extract about how our language choices help or hinder our construction of knowledge?
- 2 What decontextualised questions about the construction or passing on of *knowledge* can you take from this real-life situation?

## Weblinks to follow up

*Guardian* article about Cameron's statement:  
[www.tinyurl.com/pogoh4b](http://www.tinyurl.com/pogoh4b)

An interesting explanation of the meaning of the word 'Daesh' and its recent use in the media:  
[www.tinyurl.com/pmhyu5t](http://www.tinyurl.com/pmhyu5t)

The UNCHR's own discussion of 'refugee' vs 'migrant': [www.unhcr.org/55df0e556.html](http://www.unhcr.org/55df0e556.html)

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