

SOME CARS IN INDONESIA HAVE ‘NAMES’: A LINGUISTICALLY CREATIVE USE OF REBUS

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Abstract.

The practice of name giving differs from language to language. A name can be given to a person, place or thing. Therefore, there are person names, place names, thing names. The fact, however, a person may be named after a place or even an animal name. The phenomenon discussed in this article shows another practice of name giving not to a person, place or thing, but to a car. That is a car is named after its owner. It is the implication beyond the name giving that this article intends to uncover.

Keywords: name, kinds of names, rebus, word game

Introduction

It can be arguably accepted that human beings are considered to be the most creative creatures in this universe. They keep on developing science and technology; they continue revising what they have created before; and above all, they go on creating novel things to satisfy their needs. Such creativity also happens to their every day communication. They use their language ‘to organize their experience of the real or imaginary world’ (*ideational function of language*), ‘to indicate, establish, or maintain social relationships between people’ (*interpersonal function of language*), and ‘to create written or spoken texts which cohere within themselves and which fit the particular situation in which they are used’ (*textual function of language*) (Richards, Platt, Platt, 1992: 151).

The human creativity is also seen in the way they create a secret language of their groups. One of the examples is *back slang*—words spelled backwards, *and then the new arrangement of letters is given plausible pronunciation* (Crystal, 1987: 59). Crystal shows that back slang can be found in the UK among soldiers, barrow-boys, shopkeepers, public school pupils and even among thieves. First World War examples include *kew* ‘week’, *neetrith* ‘thirteen’, *tekram* ‘market’, and *tenip* ‘pint’. Back slang also appears in Javanese, e.g. *Bocah iku dolanan asu* ‘The boy is playing with a dog’ → *hacob uki nanalod usa*.

A similar phenomenon also appears among people living in Malang, the second biggest town in East Java province. Those who have been staying in Malang for some time and integrated with the community speaking Javanese and Indonesian will often hear from them some back

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slang such as *kadit* for *tidak* 'no', *uhat* for *tahu* 'know', *isilup* for *pulisi/polisi* 'police', and *rotom* for *motor* 'motor'. They all are Indonesian words. Back slang such as *helom* for *moleh* 'go home', *ukut* for *tuku* 'buy', and *orip* for *piro* 'how much' are Javanese-rooted words. Tough back slang seems deviant from the standard form, it is widely acceptable among members of the group involved in the communication.

Another phenomenon revealing the creativity in the use of language is *word game*. Playing with words is a universal human activity. It is particularly noticeable in the way literate societies have devised word games, based largely on the written language. People delight in pulling words a part and reconstructing them in novel guise, arranging them into clever patterns, finding hidden meanings inside them, and trying to use them according to specially invented rules (Crystal, 1987: 64). One of the word games is called *rebus*. A rebus mixes letters, pictures, and logograms to make words and sentences. Often the words or sentences make sense only when read aloud in a certain way, as in this famous rebus: YY U R *Too wise you are*, YY U B *Too wise you be*, I C U *I see you are*, and YY 4 ME *Too wise for me*.

Current use of rebus appears among youths, young professionals and even higher education community, such as students and professors communicating through *SMS (Short Message Services)*, one of the menus provided by mobile phone. GBU *God bless you*, U2 *You too*, 4U *For you* are some examples of rebus. Another use of rebus can be found in the license plate of some cars in Indonesia. The rebus in the license plate is not an 'ordinary' rebus, but it is a smartly created rebus in the form of proper name such as B 3 NY read as *Beny*, N 4 FA read as *Nafa*, the name of one of Indonesian celebrities, and W 4 NG read as *Wang*, a Chinese name. This practice of using rebus in the form of proper names is worth understanding more deeply. At least, it is to know what a name in a vehicle license refers to.

Name Divisions

What is a name? Crystal (1987: 113) defines *name* as a word or phrase that identifies a specific person, place, or thing. It shows the entity as an individual, and not as a member of a class: *Everest*, for example, is unique name (a '*proper noun*'), whereas *mountain* applies to a whole class of objects (a '*common noun*'). This definition reveals that a name consists of at least one word given to a person, place or thing to show its individual entity. The science that studies names, according to Crystal, is known as *onomastics*, usually divided into the study of personal names (*anthroponomastics*), and place names (*toponomastics*). In more popular usage, however, the term *onomastics* is used for the former, and *toponymy* for the latter.

A more detailed divisions than the three kinds of names above are provided by Mill (in Martinich 2001, 266-71). He makes distinctions between *general* and *individual or singular name*, *concrete* and *abstract*

name, and *connotative* and *non-connotative*. General name is a name that is capable of being truly affirmed, in the same sense, of each of an indefinite number of things, while individual or singular name is a name that is only capable of being truly affirmed, in the same sense, of one thing. Thus, *man* is capable of being truly affirmed of John, George, Mary, and other persons without assignable limit, and it is affirmed of all of them in the same sense, for the word “man” expresses certain qualities, and when those persons are predicated, those qualities they all possess are asserted. But *John* is only capable of being truly affirmed of one single person, at least in the same sense.

Also belonging to this first distinction is the differentiating of general name from *collective name*. A general name is one that can be predicated of each individual of a multitude; a collective name cannot be predicated of each separately, but only of all taken together. “The seventy-sixth regiment of foot in the British army”, which is a collective name, for though it can be predicated of a multitude of individual soldiers taken jointly, it cannot be predicated of them severally. “The seventy-sixth regiment” is a collective name, but not a general one; “a regiment” is both a collective and a general name—general with respect to all individual regiments of each of which separately it can be affirmed, collective with respect to the individual soldiers of whom any regiment is composed.

A concrete name is a name, which stands for a thing (the name of an object), while an abstract name is a name, which stands for an *attribute*—another name for property or quality (Martinich, 2001: 261)—of a thing (the name of an attribute). *John, the sea, and this table*, for example, are names of things. *White* is also a name of a thing, or rather of things. *Whiteness*, however, is the name of a quality or attribute of those things. *Man* is a name of many things, whereas *humanity* is a name of an attribute of those things. *Old* is a name of things, but *old age* is a name of one of their attributes.

Some abstract names are certainly general names. That is names that are not of one single and definite attribute but of a class of attributes. Such is the word *color*, which is a name common to whiteness, redness, etc. Such is even the word *whiteness*, in respect of the various dimensions of space; the word *weight*, in respect of the various degrees of weight. Such also is the word *attribute* itself, the common name of all particular attributes. But when only one attribute, neither variable in degree nor in kind, is designated by the name—as visibleness, tangibleness, equality, squareness, milk-whiteness—then the name can hardly be considered general; for though it denotes an attribute of many different objects, the attribute itself is always conceived as one, not many.

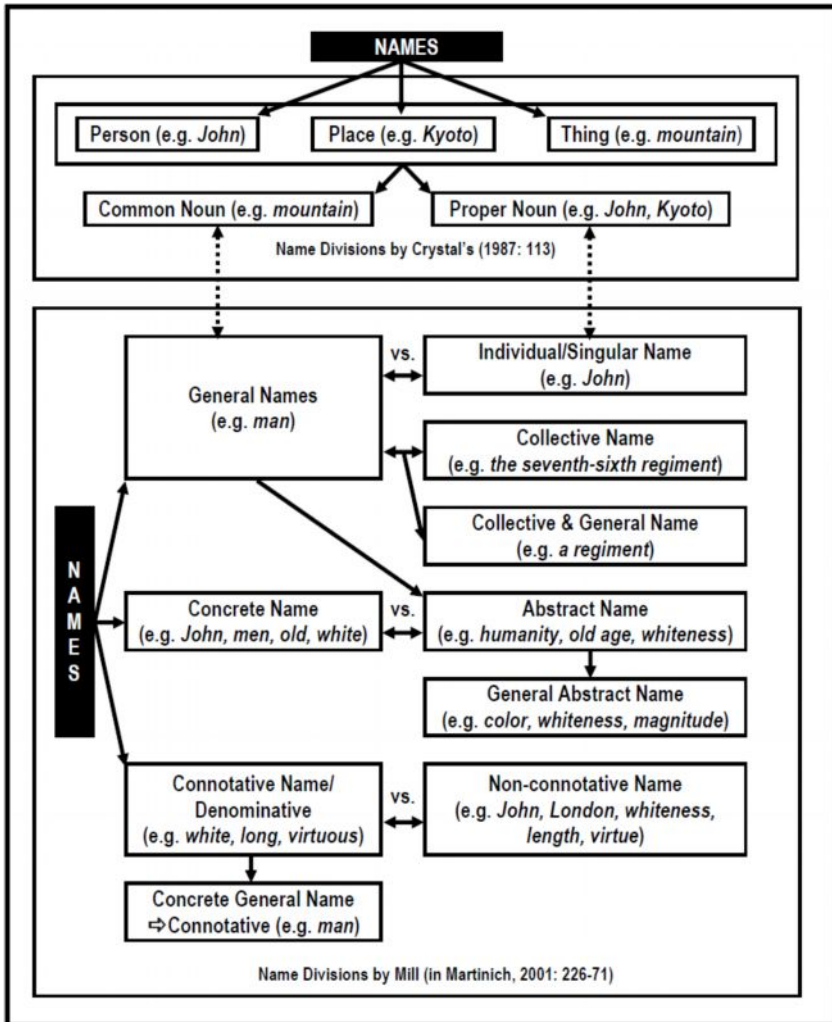
Connotative name is one that denotes a subject and implies an attribute, while non-connotative name, which is sometimes improperly called *absolute*, is one that signifies a subject only, or an attribute only. By a subject is here meant anything that possesses attributes. Thus, *John*,

or *London*, or *England* are names which signify a subject only. *Whiteness*, *length*, and *virtue*, signify an attribute only. None of these names, therefore, are connotative. But *white*, *long*, and *virtuous* are connotative. The word *white* denotes all white things, as snow, paper, the foam of the sea, etc., and implies, or in the language of the schoolmen, *connotes*, the attribute *whiteness*.

All concrete general names are connotative. The word *man*, for example denotes Peter, Jane, John, and an indefinite number of other individuals of whom, taken as a class, it is the name. But it is applied to them because they possess, and to signify that they possess, certain attributes. In other words, the word *man* signifies all these attributes and all subjects that possess these attributes. Because the name *denotes* the subjects, and implies, or involves, or indicates, or *connotes*, the attributes, it is said to signify the subjects *directly* and the attributes *indirectly*. It is a connotative name.

Connotative name has been also called *denominative* because the subject they denote is denominated by, or receives a name from, the attribute they connote. *Snow* and other objects, for instance, receive the name *white* because they possess the attribute that is called whiteness; *Peter*, *James* and others receive the names *man* because they possess the attributes that are considered to constitute humanity. The attribute, or attributes, may therefore be said to denominate those objects or to give them a common name.

In regard to those concrete names that are not general but individual, a distinction must be made. *Proper names* are not connotative, they denote the individuals who are called by them, but they do not indicate or imply any attributes as belonging to those individuals. When a child is named *Paul* or a dog *Caesar*, the names are simply marks used to enable those individuals to be made subjects of discourse. It may be said, indeed, that there are some reasons for giving these names rather any others, and it is true that once the names are given, they are independent of the reasons. A town, for example may have been named Dart-mouth because it is situated at the mouth of the Dart. If sand should choke up the mouth of the river or an earthquake change its course and remove it to a distance from the town, the name of the town would not necessarily be changed. Thus, the fact can form no part of the signification of the word; for other wise, when the fact confessedly ceased to be true, no one would any longer think of applying the name. In short, proper names are attached to the objects themselves and are not dependent on the continuance of any attribute of the object.



From the name divisions above, some conclusive points can be drawn (the figure above presents the summary of the gist of the name divisions). First, a name consists of at least one word. Second, based on their receivers of specific identity giving, names are categorized into person name, place name and thing name. Third, based on the number of the receivers of name giving (singular/individual or plural), names are divided into two: proper noun applied to an individual object (e.g. *Everest*) and common noun applied to a whole class of objects (e.g. *mountain*). Crystal's proper noun and common noun are similar to Mill's individual/singular name (e.g. *John*) and general name e.g. (*man*), respectively. Closely related to general name is collective name. They are similar because both of them can be predicated of a multitude; they are

different because general name can be predicated of each individual of a multitude, while a collective name cannot be predicated of each separately, but only of all taken together. Again, *the seventy-sixth regiment of foot in the British army* or *the seventy-sixth regiment* is a collective name, but not a general one. *A regiment*, however, is both a collective and a general name. Fourth, on the basis of what they signify, names are classified into concrete name, which stands for a thing (the name of an object, e.g. *John, the sea, white, man, white, old* and *this table*) and abstract name, which stands for an attribute (the name of an attribute, e.g. *humanity, whiteness* and *old age*). Fifth, it should be noticed that some abstract names are certainly general names (e.g. *color, whiteness, magnitude, weight* and *attribute*). Sixth, on the basis of what a name denotes and/or implies, names are divided into connotative name (also called *denominative*), which denotes a subject and implies an attribute (e.g. *white, long, and virtuous*), and non-connotative name, which signifies a subject only (e.g. *John, London, and England*), or an attribute only (*whiteness, length, and virtue*). Lastly, it is also important to remember that all concrete general names are connotative (e.g. *man*) and that proper names (e.g. *John*) are not connotative and are independent of the reasons.

Personal Names

It has been cited that a name consists of at least one word. Most personal names, however, consist of more than one word. If a personal name contains two words, each of the words serves as the first and last name, respectively. Some people have their middle names, but some others do not. In Europe, middle name names are less common, unless acquired at a special occasion (such as the Catholic ceremony of Confirmation). In most European languages, the *family name* or the *surname*, which is often referred to as *last name*, follows the *given name*, which is often referred to *first name* (or 'Christian name'). In Hungarian and Chinese, however, the case is the reverse. It is acceptable then that the practices of name giving differ greatly from language to language (Crystal, 1987: 112).

Besides differences, there are also some similarities in name giving practices. Crystal mentions two terms: *patronymics* and *teknonymy*. Patronymics refers to the practice of name giving by deriving from the father's given name. In Russian, for example, *Ivan's* son would be known as *Ivanovich* and his daughter as *Ivanovna*. The patronymic in Russian is placed between the child's given and family name. In Icelandic, the patronymic serves as the surname, which then changes with each generation. In English, patronymic prefixes and suffixes are used only in family name (e.g. *Robertson*), and this is common throughout Europe (e.g. 'son of' appears in Scots *Mac/Mc-*, Irish *O'*, Welsh *Ap*, Polish *-ski*, Greek *-poulos*). A frequent practice of using patronymics also appears in Indonesian family by attaching the father's name to the

son or daughter's name. The daughter's name *Sisca Amelia* would be known as *Sisca Amelia Harjono* or *Sisca Amelia Harjono Putri*; Harjono is the father's son, and *Putri* means daughter. The son's name *Guruh* would be known as *Guruh Soekarno Putra*; *Soekarno* is the father's name, and *Putra* means son.

Teknonymy is less common than patronymics, but it is commonly used in the Arab world, for example where a parent is often called 'father of' or 'mother of' the eldest son. Similarly, although it has been very rarely used, once in a while the writer still finds his Javanese siblings using teknonymy. Instead of calling his/her own name, an elder sister calls her younger sister *Ibune Wawan* (mother of *Wawan*) or her younger brother *Bapake Iwan* (father of *Iwan*).

In addition to the use of patronymics and teknonymy, there are still some other ways of giving a name to an individual. A child may be named after saints, events, places, omens, personal traits, and even animals such as *Little Bear* given to a north American Indian child. Divine names or 'theophoric' names such as Arabic *Abd Allah* 'slave of Allah' and Greek *Herodotus* 'given by Hera' are also found in use.

The Proper Names in Cars' License Plate

For the sake of the statistical data management and regular safety monitoring on vehicle identification and legal ownership, Indonesia applies a statute on traffics and land transportation (UU No. 22/2009) in which every vehicle in Indonesia has to be officially registered and identified by the Indonesian police. The vehicle registration and identification include the issuing of the book for vehicle owners, the letter of vehicle license plate, and the license plate (article 65).

A license plate, a piece of square plate made of aluminum, contains initial letter or letters, 4 figures (0 to 9; 0 is never an initial figure) in the middle, and usually two terminal letters. The initial letter refers to the area code of the city or town where the car's initial owner lives or where a car is administratively recorded for the first time. The four figures in the middle refer to statistical numbers of the cars. The last letter refers to the sub-district code of the concerned town. Because the cars can be used privately (for private transportation), publicly (for public transportation), or institutionally (for formal duty purposes), the vehicle license plate are colored differently, that is black, red and yellow, respectively. To mention few, the standard vehicle license plate is written as shown in the following table.

<p style="text-align: center;">AG 4455 GH</p>	<p>⇒ A license plate with black background and white letters and figures refers to a private car in Kediri, East Java Province.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">DK 9856 DC</p>	<p>⇒ a license plate with red background and white letters and figures refers to a state car for a an important position holder in a state department or institution in Denpasar, Bali.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">H 9856 DC</p>	<p>⇒ a license plate with yellow background and black letters and figures refers to a car for public transportation running in Semarang, Central Java Province.</p>

The cars provided by the government to the state position holders state higher position holders and the like have special numbering system. *INDONESIA 1*, for example, refers to the state car for the President of the Republic of Indonesia, and *INDONESIA 2* refers to the state car for the Vice President, and *L 1* refers to the state car for the East Java governor. There is no terminal letters in this type of license plate. The absence of the terminal letters also appear in the car's police number plate of the armed forces personnel holding an important position. Besides, the armed forces' vehicles institutionally used for formal duties are identified with their license plate colored differently other than black, red and yellow. To identify the state cars provided to other state position holders in a department or an institution, the initial figure *9* is used. *W 9944 SR*, for example, refers to the state car for a position holder in a local government department/institution in Sidoarjo, East Java.

The standard numbering system also applies to motorcycles. The only difference is that a police number plate of a motorcycle must contain four figures in the middle. For a car, however, the figures in the middle may be less than four figures. Yet, it does not mean that an owner of motorcycle has no choice. Though the formal procedure gives the right to the police, not to the owner's motorcycle, to determine the police number, the police still offer some special numbers called *beautiful license plate* that can be obtained by some additional payment. By beautiful numbers here means the *license plate* that are easily remembered and thus identified by the owner such as *L 1234 FC*, which contain figures in a immediate order, *D 2000 SR*, which refers to the year 2000, *S 4444 RC*, which contains the four same figures.

Similar offers are also addressed to cars' owners to choose available beautiful license plate through personal order with additional payment too. The number of figures in the middle may be one, two, three or four at the most. The less the number of the figures, the higher the additional payment will be. Such open choices invite the cars' owners to

create much more beautiful police number for their vehicles. Their creativities result in license plates as follow:

1. *B 3 AR*, which is read as *bear*, is used to refer to an animal's name; the initial letter *B* is the area code of Jakarta.
2. *B 10 LA*, which is read as *biola*, is used to refer to a musical instrument of which the car owner may be a musician.
3. *D 3 AR*, which is read as *dear*, is used to refer to an English word *loved* or a term of address to an intimate mate; the initial letter *D* is the area code of Bandung.
4. *E 55 Y*, or *E 5 SY*, which is read as *Essy*, is used to refer to a person name or the car owner's name, *E* is the area code of Cirebon and its surrounding regions.
5. *L 14 R*, or *L 1 AR*, which is read as *liar*, is used to refer to an English word, or an Indonesian word meaning 'wild', or a person name *Lia R.*; the initial letter *L* is the area code of Surabaya.
6. *M 4 YA*, which is read as *Maya*, is also used to refer to a person name; *M* is the area code of Madura and its surrounding regions.
7. *S 15 KA*, which is read as *Siska*, also refers to an owner's name; *S* is the area code of Bojonegoro and its surrounding regions.
8. *W 45 IS*, which is read as *Wasis*, refers to the name of the vehicle owner who lives in Sidoarjo or Gresik; *W* is the area code of Sidoarjo or Gresik.
9. *AA 6 YM*, which is read as *AA Gym*, a person name of an Islamic religious scholar; *AA* refers to the area code of Kedu (Central Java) and its surrounding regions.

Those are the examples of the creative making of words in the Indonesian cars' license plate to be readable words called names. There are still many others to mention or to create. For the examples of this paper, they are considered enough.

What a Name in a Car's License Plate Refers to

The examples of name giving to cars reveal that the forms of the names deviate linguistically from their standard forms. As words, the names contain both figures and letters; such cases have never appeared in formal forms. It is reasonable then that they belong to word game or word play. Moreover, the figures in the names are not treated as they should be. Instead, they are treated as letters and read in the way letters are read as physically they are considered to have 'similar' form to letters. Figure *1* is like and performs like the letter *I* or *i*, *2* like *Z*, *3* like *E*, *4* like *A*, *5* like *S*, *6* like *G*, *7* like *J*, *8* like *B*, and *9* like the small letter *g*.

Referring back to the notion of rebus as explained by Crystal (1987: 64) that rebus mixes letters, pictures, and logograms to make words and sentences and that rebus makes sense only when read aloud in a certain way such as in *I C U R I see you are*, and *YY 4 ME Too wise for me*, it is reasonable to classify the names in the vehicle license plate into rebuses. The first reason is that the names have similar form to the one of

the categories; *B 3 NY* is similar in form to *YY 4 ME*. Second, though 3 in *B 3 NY* is treated in the same way as the letter E and read in Indonesian as /e/ as in *bed*, while 4 in *YY 4 ME* is read in the way it is read as a figure: /fɔːr | for/, *B 3 NY* and the other names in the license plates can be included into rebuses because they are read in a certain way. As one form of the word games, they contain puzzle of how to read them. By those who do not know how to read them, the police number plates will not be read and understood as names. Instead, they will be read in a usual way. *B 3 NY*, for example: will be read /bi:/ /θri:/ /en/ /wai/.

What do the names refer to? The names in the license plates contain the features of several name categories as described by Mill: individual/singular names, concrete names, proper nouns and non-connnotative one. They signify subjects only. Because the names in the license plates are consciously created by the cars' owners, or they are of the owners' choice, not the police's, it is certainly reasonable to judge that they are created on the basis of certain purposes. First, they are made to show their owners' profession. *B 10 LA*, for instance, reflects that the owner is musician. It was once heard that *B 10 LA* is the license plate of Idris Sardi's exclusive car. He is an Indonesian outstanding violist. A similar case is shown by Crystal (1998) in Wijana (2003: 75): *IOPER8*, which is read as *I Operate*, showing that the owner is a surgeon; *2THDR*, which is read as *Tooth Doctor*, reflecting that the owner is a dentist; and, *5EXY*, which is read as *sexy* to reveal that the owner is sexy. These examples are different from the ones provided by the writer due to the difference of the license plate system.

Second, the names in the license plates are created to show the names of the cars' owners. *R 14 DI* for Riadi, *F 4154 LM* for Faisal M., *G 4 BY* for Gaby, a short name of Gabriel, and *AA 7154 KA* for A. Ajisaka, etc. are person names. The car owners do it intently to show something specific, unique and exclusive in their cars. Without such an intention, they will not willfully spend some additional payments for such license plates which may be considered as spending a lot of money in vain by the car owners.

The cars that are named so are usually exclusive ones. An exclusive BMW car named *G 4 BY* will sound more exclusive, unique, and thus prestigious than if it is named, for instance, *D 7195 GK*, which cannot be read as a name. It is thus reasonable to judge that by naming their cars after their own names or their profession the car's owners intend to reflect the values of exclusiveness, uniqueness, and prestige in their cars. Their being creative in such a personal branding is unique and exclusive, indeed.

Conclusion

Linguistically speaking, the practice of name giving to cars is, in one side, against the formal rules of forming words. A word is never morphologically constructed by mixing figures and letters. In the other

side, this phenomenal practice shows how creative the language users exploit the language are. Rather than blaming the cars' owners doing such creativity, giving them appreciation for their creative use of language is more meaningful. Besides, this phenomenon is fruitful and inspiring for researchers to conduct studies on it. The number of related references and studies on rebus or other word games are still scarce.

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