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How not to name your baby: Social engineering and the structure of names in memory

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Abstract: Human languages can be seen as socially evolved systems that have been structured to optimize information flow in communication. In particular, it appears that communication proceeds both more efficiently and more smoothly when information is distributed evenly across the linguistic signal. In previous work (Ramscar et al. 2013), we used tools from information theory to examine how naming systems evolved to meet this requirement historically, and how, over the past several hundred years, social legislation and rapid population growth have disrupted naming practices in the West, making names ever harder to process and remember. In support of these observations, we present findings from four empirical studies, including tests of name fluency, recognition, and recall, and an artificial learning experiment. These results provide converging evidence for an optimal solution to name design, and offer a more nuanced understanding of how social engineering has impaired the structure of names in memory.