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The baby's called what?

Tempted to call the new arrival Blade, Spike, or Luna? These days your name is your brand, and choosing the right one could help a child into Oxbridge

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Professor Albert Mehrabian is pondering the name Princess Ti?amii over the phone from his office in California. "I don't mean to be negative but this is a stupid name," he says. "Right away you're going to see what that poor child is going to have to go through."

I tell him that Princess Ti?amii is the barely month-old offspring of a famous novelist, Jordan, and her husband, Peter Andre, and that the consensus in the British baby-name chat rooms is that calling her that was a good idea; that Andre is widely considered to be pretty much a genius for having conjured up the previously unheard of Ti?amii by fusing his mother's name, Thea, with that of Jordan's mother, Amy.

"It sounds like a foreign name," grumbles Mehrabian, "and it will label her in a way as not being British, as being an outsider. Princess implies pretentiousness and most people will assume it isn't a real title. Right away it's a name that says the person is not believable." He rolls the name Princess Tiaamii around on his tongue a couple of more times, then surmises: "People do not react well to strange things. In these days of political correctness this has been conveniently overlooked. This name is an example of something that is strange."

"Label" is the right word to use in any discussion of contemporary children's names. Mehrabian, professor emeritus of psychology at UCLA and the author of The Baby Name Report Card, is not the only expert on the subject who believes that parents are increasingly, if subconsciously, "branding" rather than simply naming their children. Pamela Satran, who co-wrote the most successful series of baby-naming books in Britain and the US, agrees. "Companies stamp their names and initials on every single item of clothing. It's very much in the air," she says. "It is an influence. A parent wants to give their child individuality and competitive advantage. People have become conscious of the power of names and they want a name that is going to stand out in a world of Williams and Elizabeths. Parents are thinking far beyond how their friends will react to their child's name."

Satran's forthcoming Brilliant Book of Baby Names: Cool Baby Names and Baby Names Now is subtitled "What's Best, What's Hot & What's Not". Humphrey is an example of a name that is about to be very hot. What parents want to know is "the image of the name", she says. "People want a name that has personal meaning. When before they wanted a name that was going to blend in, now they want something that is going to say something about their individuality. If you call your daughter Anne these days, in a way you're making a statement by notmaking a statement. You are saying, I'd rather have you dress in grey and stand in a corner. I think there is a feeling among parents that they can help their child by giving them a distinctive name."

When did the search for the unique yet meaningful baby name begin? Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that traditional names – Olivia, Thomas, Jessica, William, Emily, Daniel – dominate the top ten, but parents are, as Mehrabian puts it disapprovingly, "increasingly choosing names from a personal idiosyncratic perspective". Last year 864 Summers, 55 Autumns, six Blades, 22 Spikes and 94 Myloses were born, plus a handful of Kofis, Francos, Fds, Kikis, Brontes, Lunas and Cadences.

Mehrabian's big thing is the Name Connotation Profile, or how other people react to a name. In terms of empathy, masculinity or femininity, ethical caring, success, fun and popularity, a person called Georgia, for example, is perceived to be extremely ethically caring (80 per cent), serious but not necessarily successful (20 per cent). Parents who envisage highflying careers for their children should stick to traditional names, his research shows. Katherine, Victoria, Anne, Corrine and Elizabeth for girls; James, Charles, Thomas and Robert for boys. Under "Names Headed for Oxbridge" Satran lists Beatrice, Caroline and Martha for girls; Arthur, Alcott and Graydon for boys.

So how about Blade? "Names that are outlandish repeatedly score badly on name connotation profiles," says Mehrabian. "Blade, I would say, doesn't have much substance or stature associated with it. Maybe the parents think it's cute and unusual, but it's the same as dyeing your child's hair blue. And when he grows up! Imagine him sending out his CV with Blade on it."

Mehrabian pulls out two further studies to make his point. In the first, a group of schoolchildren were shown pictures of the same beauty queen with different names – "the women with desirable names were considered more physically attractive". In the second study, a group of teachers and older students were asked to mark the essays of schoolchildren. Unknown to the assessors, they were marking the same essay under different names. The unconventional names scored lower. He adds: "There is evidence to suggest that children with made-up names don't do well at school, they don't do so well psychologically, don't settle in."

While Satran thinks that our newfound mania for original names started at about the time that the Duchess of York named her children Beatrice and Eugenie, Mehrabian puts it down to a combination of the cult of individualism in Britain and the US, lack of government interference where baby-naming is concerned (in France the law prohibits all names except those on an approved list, while in Germany invented and androgynous names are banned) and the influence of celebrities. Last year the name Cruz (the Beckhams' youngest son) experienced a 245 per cent rise in popularity. Maddox (adopted son of Angelina Jolie) rose 88 places; Jayden (Britney Spears's youngest) rose 16 places to number 68; Lexie (Steven Gerrard's daughter) by 234 per cent; and Peaches jumped 2,948 places. For a short while last year Sienna became so popular that the people who write baby-naming books are now straight-facedly backing Vienna as a trend-bucking alternative.

Or Trinity, Musetta, Cecily, Eudora, Myrtle, Delaney, Romy or Lark – names of the medium, if not necessarily the long-term, future. Or Daisee, Deisy and Daysi (any variation of the 25th most popular girl's name provided that it has an "original" spelling). Jeff Wadley, director of the brand-naming company Nomen, cites the influence of new technology in parents' love of abbreviations and deliberate misspellings. "There's the whole text and internet culture in which spelling is unconventional. And there is a friendliness, a lack of formality, that's trickled through to the general population. Parents name their son Sam and think 'Well, he can always change it to Samuel when he grows up' – that's a real reversal."

Prospective parents in search of a baby name should bear in mind the HobNob, says Graham Hales, the executive director of the corporate branding company Interbrand. Emotionally, it's a name that conveys so much more than chocolate-covered biscuit. Interbrand invented HobNob, Prozac and the Gillette razor Mach3. "When we think up a new name the primary function is for it to stand out, and I think the same can be said for how parents view children's names," he says. "Every parent wants their children to be successful, but how do we define success? Successful in our society is the ability to stand out from the crowd. That's not saying everybody wants their children to be a celebrity, but to call your son John would be very grey. John has become the Ford Mondeo of children's names. Our Jameses, Andrews and Johns are less popular now that you can take anything down from the shelf. I think that's to be applauded."

In the US the marketing men have gone one step further. I talked to Burt Alper, one of the founders of the corporate branding company Catchword, who hosts baby-name brainstorming sessions in his spare time for friends. "As a professional in the business, people expect great advice from us," he says.

Alper called his son Becket because of “the crispness of the ck sound, like you have in Kodak”, and says his background in phonetics has helped him to identify why some words sit better with the general public than others. “Those consonances, the P and T sound, create an image or association of athletic dexterity whereas softer syllables are more emotional and sensitive – the Fs and Ss. ”

Alper encourages parents to apply the three golden rules of brand-naming to children’s names: “1. Don’t tell people about what you are thinking about calling your baby or product. 2. Choose a name for your target audience as opposed to yourself. 3. Wait till you meet the baby before you choose the name. In the corporate world it would be like naming a company before you know what personality you want to give it.” That’s all very well, says Mehrabian, but “some brand names are successes, others are terrible failures. A parent is in no position to do the profiling it takes to create a brand. Corporations have enormous resources to do that. What do parents think they are going to do? Personally educate everyone in the world that Thor is a good name with positive associations?”

Alongside the obsession with originality, the contempt for convention, the deliberate misspellings, the inventions and the abbreviations, are the sorely regretted mistakes. The Uniques. Yes, there are children in Britain called Unique. Through some universal law of irony, two eight-year-old Uniques are in the same class at a London prep school.

Does Pamela Satran regret having called her daughter Rory? “No, it has worked very well. But at least once a year I get a deranged parent on the other end of the line telling me how much they shouldn’t have picked Lily. The names that we like are the names that everybody likes. If you want to be original you have to pick something that is not so easy to like, and a lot of people are going to wrinkle their noses and say, ‘Oh, you’ve named her Florabella’.”

In the chat room at babycentre.com one woman regrets having settled on Joshua when her son was born five years ago. “It is just too damn common. Days after leaving hospital I was hearing the name everywhere! I wish I’d had the guts back then to change it. ”

She wouldn’t have had that problem with a Harley, a Vice or a Scorpio. Or, indeed, a Fox. “Is Fox cool or weird?” one British expectant mother wants to know. “Cool!” chorus most of the assembled bloggers.

“Weird,” says Mehrabian. He applies his foolproof rule of thumb to the name in question. “Imagine you’re going to meet somebody for the first time and all you know about them is that they’re male and that they’re called Fox.” He lets this thought dangle in the air while I imagine what incarnation a prospective Fox might take. In my mind’s eye I am about to meet a casualty of the Summer of Love who plays the tambourine. Isn’t it obvious that John is, in fact, the only name to call your son in 2007?

When I ask Satran about Fox she says that again parents are following the trend for “word”, “nature” and “animal” baby names. “I don’t think there is a line any more,” she says. “I think there should be.”

No Celeste, just Abby ever after

Maryanna Korwitts is a “professional nameologist”. I am an amateur about-to-be parent. My baby is not born but she has a name. But is it the right name? My partner and I find so much to worry about right now – such as the next 18 years – that it is a long time since we fretted about whether Abby, or Abigail for long, is going to suit our daughter.

Maryanna sounds shocked when I hint as much. The former teacher from Chicago who noticed that the Davids in her classes were usually studious and the Jasons a handful takes this naming business seriously – so seriously, in fact, that she even renamed herself: as Mary Ann, she says, she was a “scattered procrastinator”. “Worry,” she says. “Worry about the name you give her.”

She charges clients \$150 (£74) for leading them towards a first name for their child, and \$350 for a full set that will synchronise with a surname. The process can take as many as four telephone conversations. It is not a matter of cold-reading her clients’ personalities. She asks about their hopes for

their children's characters and suggests names that she believes will help to induce those traits. Look up a name in a book of babies' names and you'll find their "meaning" (Abigail means "father's joy").

She asks me the qualities I'd like to see in my daughter. I want her to have a sense of humour, to enjoy reading and to learn self-discipline (I should have said that I want her to be content, but that would have been dull). "So what name have you been thinking of?" she asks. I imagine I hear an intake of breath over the phone line when I tell her. It seems that the child my partner and I want and the name we want her to have are incompatible.

Maryanna gives it to me straight. "An Abigail will bring people skills but will not respect traditions. Do you have a family that respects traditions?" I tell her that we Billens respect traditions more than we pretend. Well, she says, Abigail will not do what she is told without a good reason and she will not be the type to come home and settle to her homework. She will be fun, but she will also be inclined to perform her own domestic dramas. It is funny, I say, how one can go off a name.

There are alternatives. Natalies, she says are kind and caring and have subterranean strengths: Natalie Billen would do her homework. And then there is Celeste: academically inclined, earthy, questing and questioning. Or Jemma: "Lots of good qualities: creative, intelligent, someone with balance and harmony in her life, the type to take charge in an imaginative way."

At home, Natalie or Celeste or Jemma's mother is not impressed. Oh, Abigail! What have we done? Will we forever repent picking a name because we think it sits prettily upon a doctor from ER?

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Andrew Billen

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