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When I use a word . . . Medical patronymics, metronymics, and papponymics

Many family names are patronymics, surnames derived from fathers' first names, or more generally from those of some forebears. Metronymics, or matronymics, are similarly derived, but from the first name of a mother, and papponymics from the name of a grandfather. Different languages have different forms that denote patronymics. Typical patronymics are either derived directly from a given name (e.g. Andrews, Evans, Jones, Williams) or by adding a suffix, such as *-son* and variants or *-ovich* and variants, or a prefix, such as *Mac*, *Mc*, and *M'* (Scottish and Irish), *Ap* (Welsh), *Fitz* (English and Irish, from Norman French), and *Ben* or *Bar* (Jewish). *O'* denotes an Irish papponymic. There are many medical examples of all of these.

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Family names

Have you ever wondered what your surname means? The chances are that it's derived from a nickname, an occupation, or a place. Or, like mine, it's a patronymic.

As I discussed last week,¹ the word patronymic comes from two Greek words, *πατήρ*, a father, and *ὄνομα*, a name; in Hellenistic Greek the two were combined into a single word, *πατρώνυμος*, with the adjectival form *πατρωνυμικός*. So a patronymic is a surname that is derived from the first name of your father, or more generally from that of a male forebear. A metronymic or matronymic is similarly derived, but from the name of your mother or a female forebear (Greek *μήτηρ*, a mother; Hellenistic Greek *μητρωνυμικός*). A name derived from that of a grandfather is called a papponymic (Greek *πάππος*, a grandfather).

Very occasionally a name comes from a more general term for a relative. One such is Cushing, of the disease and syndrome, from "cousin," which originally meant any relative or kinsman.

Patronymics, metronymics, and papponymics

In its simplest form, a patronymic surname is merely the ancestor's first name itself or some simple derivative. In some places, for example Tajikistan, people are called by their first name followed by their father's first name, a true patronymic; in Hungary the order is reversed. Elsewhere, the original first name of an ancestor has become a family name, handed down from generation to generation. For example, families descended from someone called Paul may have a surname such as Paul, Powell, or Pauli. Another simple way of using a first name as a surname is to add a possessive, such as *-s* (as in the English and Welsh names Andrews, Evans, Jones, and Williams), *-ing* (as in the German names Benning and Janning), and *-escu* (as in the Rumanian names Ceausescu and Ionescu).

Medical examples of this type of patronymic, of which there are many, include Albright's syndrome (Albert), Bartter's syndrome (Bertram), Benedict's solution, Franklin's disease, Gilbert's syndrome, Howell-Jolly

bodies (Hywel), the angle of Louis, Ludwig's angina, and Tietze's syndrome (Terry).

There are several metronymic Jewish names, such as Baskin (after Basya), Dworkin (Deborah, Hebrew D'vora), Rifkin or Rifkind (Rifka), and Süsskind (Ziska); in each of these the suffix *-kin* or *-kind* is from the German word *kind*, a child. Some patronymics also end in *-kin*; Raskin, for example, is from a short version of Erasmus.

The suffix *-son* and variants

A common patronymic in English speaking, Scandinavian, and Teutonic countries is the suffix *-son*, spelt *-sen* in Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands, and *-sohn* in Germany. In most countries once a surname of this type is established it persists through the family line and becomes a hereditary surname rather than a true patronymic. For example, if Peter, son of John came to be called Peter Johnson, Peter's son Timothy would not be called Timothy Peterson, but rather Timothy Johnson. However, in Iceland the true patronymic is still used. If Leifur has a son Eirik he is called Eirik Leifsson, but Eirik's son Harald is called Harald Eiriksson and so on. Daughters are also called after their fathers, but with the suffix *-dottir* instead of *-son* (for example Gudrun Haraldsdottir), and women retain their surname after marriage. Icelanders are called by their first name or by their first name plus the patronymic, never by the patronymic alone.

The many medical examples of this type of patronymic include Addison's disease (from Adam), Andersen's disease (Andrew), Waterhouse-Friderichsen syndrome, Hansen's disease (Johannes), Jacksonian epilepsy, Mendelson's syndrome, Nelson's syndrome (Neil), Thomsen's disease, and Wilson's disease. Parkinson of the disease is a double patronym, since Parkin comes from Peterkin. Stevens-Johnson syndrome is two patronymics in one syndrome.

The suffix *-ovich* and variants

These indicate "son of" in Slavonic languages; the feminine form is *-ovna*. Russian names are complex, with a first name, a patronymic, and a surname. The

author we know as Leo Tolstoy was properly called Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy. Struggling to understand the *dramatis personae* in a Russian novel can be quite hard going for Western readers, because the characters are often called by several different names: the surname, the first name plus the surname, the first name plus the patronymic, or a diminutive pet name (such as Kolya, from Nikolai); furthermore, the patronymic can be shortened (for example, from Ivanovich to Ivanich). Take the famous mathematician, Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky, satirized in a song by Tom Lehrer; he might be called Nikolai, Nikolai Ivanovich, Nikolai Lobachevsky, Kolya, or Kolya Ivanich.

There are different forms of this patronymic in other tongues, such as *-owicz* (Polish) and *-ović* (Croatian), and similar derivatives in non-Slavonic languages, such as *-weit* in German.

Medical instances include Wladislaus Onufrowicz, who gave his name to the Onuf nucleus in the ventral spinal horn at S2, Casimir Filipovich, whose sign is yellow discoloration of the palms and soles in typhoid, and Eli Moschowitz (from Moses), whose syndrome is better known as thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura.

Sometimes the *-ovich* form is shortened to *-ov* or *-ich*. Thus, Korotkov of the sounds got his name from someone called Kortoyga (Russian for “Shorty”), Korsakov of the psychosis from a Korsak (“Foxy”), and Pavlov of the conditioned reflex from a Paul. And Ivan Illich, author of the famous diatribe *Medical Nemesis* and inventor of the concept of medicalisation, was probably descended from someone called Ilya (Elias).

The Russian word for an old woman is *baba*, which gives the metronymic *Babich*. *Babinski*, of the reflex, is formed from *Babich* plus *-inski*, a common Slavonic suffix that denotes a place. So the original *Babinski* was born in the place where an old woman (perhaps his mother or grandmother) lived.

The prefixes *Mac*, *Mc*, and *M'*

These are Scots and Irish patronymics, as in *MacWilliam*, *McDonald*, and *M'Callum*. *Mac* is sometimes prefixed to other words to indicate Scottish origin; for example, BBC Scotland has occasionally been called *MacBeeb*. When Ray Kroc founded the McDonald Hamburger company he called his main product *Big Mac* and later introduced other *Mc* derivatives, such as *McNuggets* and *McMuffin*; this in turn has led to the pejorative use of the prefix *Mc* to describe something that you think is cheap and nasty, such as *McWar*, applied to the burger war, which was defined in *The Independent* in 1991 as “a fast, cheap, well-packed conflict that makes you feel good and doesn't cause indigestion.” The introduction of Macintosh computers (Mac an Taoiseach, Gaelic, =son of the chief) led to other uses of *Mac*, including the names for pieces of software such as *MacWrite* and *MacPaint*.

In the Isle of Man, names that once began with *Mac* have been shortened to begin with *C*, *K*, or *Q*. For example, the *Manx* name *Qualtrough* is a shortened form of *MacWalter*.

Medical *Macs* include *McArdle's disease*, *McBurney's point*, *McCarthy's reflexes*, and *McGoon's technique*. The *M'Naghten* rules govern criminal responsibility in mental illness. And the *Milroy* of *Milroy's disease* is a corruption of *McIlroy*, from *Mac Giolla Rua* (Irish Gaelic), son of a red haired boy.

The prefix *O'*

This is an Irish patronymic, or more precisely a papponymic, standing for grandson or descendant of, as in *O'Brien*, *O'Connell*, and *O'Murphy*. Medical examples include *O'Beirne's sphincter*, *O'Dwyer's tube*, and *O'Hara's forceps*.

The prefix *Ap* and variants

This is a Welsh patronymic, son of, as in *Price (ap Rhys)*, *Probert (ap Robert)*, and *Pugh (ap Huw)*; *Bowen (ap Owen)* and *Beddoes (ap Meredith)*; and *Upjohn* and *Uprichard*.

The *Price-Jones curve* is a distribution curve of erythrocyte diameters and *Bowen's disease* is intraepidermal carcinoma.

The prefix *Fitz*

The bastard sons of English and Irish nobles have sometimes been given this patronymic, from the Norman French, reflected in the modern French word *fils*, a son (Latin *filius*). Thus, *Fitzgerald*, *Fitzherbert*, *Fitzroy*, *Fitzwilliam*. Some Italian patronymics begin with *Fi* and some Hungarian ones end with it. But the Hungarian suffix comes from *fia*, meaning son of, which has nothing to do with *filius*; the Finno-Ugric languages are not Indo-European.

Medical *Fitzes* include *Fitzgerald-Gardner syndrome* (congenital polyposis coli) and *Fitzhugh-Curtis syndrome* (gonococcal peritonitis). *Fibonacci*, whose numbers are found in many natural phenomena, comes from the nickname *Bonacci*, meaning an excessively pious or hypocritical person. The name of the pharmaceutical company *Sanofi* means son of Alexander.

The prefixes *Ben* and *Bar*, *Bin* and *Ibn*

Ben and *Bar* are Hebrew and Aramaic patronymics, son of, and I discussed some medical examples last week, including the *Benjamin syndrome*, *St Bartholomew's Hospital*, and *Baruj Benacerraf*.

Bin and *Ibn* are Arabic equivalents of *Ben*. In many Arab countries names are formed from the individual's first name, followed by the father's name, followed by the family (tribal) name; sometimes the grandfather's name is also inserted. The “son of” form can also be included, as in *Osama bin Laden*.

Conclusions

This is just a brief review of some common patronymics, metronymics, and papponymics. It isn't meant to be comprehensive. In many countries other than those to which I have referred patronymics of different forms are widely used.

If your name isn't formed in this way it is probably formed from the name of a forebear's occupation, from a place with which they were somehow associated, or from the name of a patron. I shall describe these on another occasion.

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¹ Aronson JK Clinical pharmacologist. When I use a word. . . St Bartholomew-onomastics and reputation. *BMJ* 2022;376:o370. doi: 10.1136/bmj.o370 pmid: 35149550