

**The name letter effect:
Attachment to self or primacy of own name writing?**

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Abstract

Bulgarian students who first learned to write in the Cyrillic alphabet prefer own name letters in the Cyrillic but also in the Roman alphabet, with which they became acquainted only many years later. These findings which are intra-individually correlated, support Nuttin's interpretation of the Name Letter Effect in terms of attachment to self and contradict a 'primacy of own name writing' explanation.

INTRODUCTION

Nuttin (1984, 1985) discovered the 'Name Letter Effect' (NLE), an unconscious preference for letters occurring in the own name (NLs) as compared to not-own name letters (NNLs). As the own name can be considered a salient attribute of the self-concept (e.g. Snyder and Fromkin, 1980; Markus and Sentis, 1982; Dion, 1983), Nuttin interpreted the phenomenon as the first experimental demonstration that 'mere belongingness to self' is a sufficient condition for the enhancement of the attractiveness of isolated stimulus elements. However appealing, Nuttin's studies show some limitations. With the single exception of the Greek alphabet, up to now the NLE has

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always been demonstrated with letters of the Roman alphabet as used in 11 different languages (Nuttin, 1987). In addition, and more important, Nuttin's research was not designed to systematically clarify the mechanism underlying the NLE, or to explore alternative hypotheses. Thus, while eliminating artefactual explanations for the NLE, it did not permit a firm conclusion as to its determinants.

One alternative explanation might be that the own first and family name (letters) usually are the very first words (and letters) children learn to read and write. This achievement could be accompanied by such an amount of positive 'mastering' affect, that the letters associated with the experience remain the favourite letters throughout the following years. Of course, after mastering the essential writing skills during primary school, learning to write the own name in another alphabet would not carry the same affective consequences. Indeed, besides the subjects' pre-existing writing experience, rendering the 'new' writing ability incomparably less thrilling, people usually don't start the study of a second writing system by practising their own name. Therefore the 'primacy hypothesis' can be tested by comparing the NLE in subjects knowing two alphabets, one being their elementary school alphabet and another one learned at a later age.

In this paper, a name letter preference study is reported with Bulgarian students who first learned the Cyrillic alphabet and who were made familiar with the Roman alphabet only at their courses of foreign languages (see also Nuttin, 1989). Therefore, when tested both with the Cyrillic and the Roman alphabet, and if the NLE primarily depends on the primacy mechanism, it should only appear in their first, Cyrillic, alphabet. If the NLE depends on mere belongingness to self, however, subjects should show a NLE both in the first and in the second alphabet. Moreover, the two effects, if obtained, should be correlated, as individual differences in attachment to self can be expected to manifest themselves over measurements. If the primacy hypothesis is correct, however, the effect should only appear in the Cyrillic alphabet.

METHOD

Forty-one male and 59 female Bulgarian economy students between 19 and 31 years old (mean age 21) were collectively administered a NLE test. They were familiar with the Roman alphabet from studies in one of the Western languages (German, French, English or Spanish). Instructions and stimulus materials were the same as in Nuttin (1987), except that both a random presentation of the letters of the Cyrillic and the Roman alphabet were included. Half of the subjects first chose the six most preferred letters out of the Roman alphabet, the other half started with the Cyrillic alphabet. After the completion of the task, they wrote down their full name, both in Cyrillic and in Roman letters. It should be noted that the two alphabets use six letters with identical visual appearance and pronunciation, *viz.* A, E, K, M, O, T. Six or seven (B, M, P, C, X, Y, and, in handwriting, also U) are identical in visual appearance but different in pronunciation.

RESULTS

Data were treated in the same way as in Nuttin's (1987) cross-lingual study. In each alphabet one letter never occurred as a NL and was excluded for analysis (in Cyrillic **Л**

Table 1. Mean percentage of name letters and non-name letters chosen among the six most preferred letters of the Cyrillic and the Roman alphabet

	Alphabet					
	NL	Cyrillic NNL	<i>p</i> *	NL	Roman NNL	<i>p</i> *
Analysis						
Full name	34.04	18.09	0.001	30.55	21.05	0.001
First name	44.81	18.51	0.001	38.99	20.96	0.001
Family name	27.53	18.22	0.006	25.51	21.41	0.135
Initials	57.45	20.82	0.001	46.03	21.30	0.001
Non-initials	24.63	18.97	0.058	25.17	21.67	0.133

*The *p*-values associated with the differences between name and non-name letters are obtained with a randomization test for matched pairs with 2000 permutations, as described in Nuttin (1987).

and in Roman Q). For all analyses we used the names as they were written by the subjects themselves. Indeed, there are no unambiguous rules for translating a Cyrillic name into the Roman alphabet. Such a transcription depends, among others, on the orthographic rules of the specific Western language known by the subjects.

A randomization test over letters on the percentages by which each letter was chosen among the six most preferred letters of the alphabet as a NL versus as a NNL (Table 1), showed the mean percentage to be significantly larger for NLs than for NNLs when considering full names, first names and initials alone, and marginally significant for NLs without initials. Family name letters show a significant NLE in the Cyrillic alphabet and a marginally significant effect in Roman letters. There is no evidence for an effect of presentation order on the size of the effect, nor for an interaction of this factor with the alphabets.

The NLE seemed stronger in the Cyrillic than in the Roman alphabet. The mean number of NLs chosen among the six most preferred letters per subject was 3.10 for the Cyrillic (chance expectation¹ 1.77) and 2.53 for the Roman alphabet (chance expectation 2.03). An ANCOVA with the number of different NLs for each name in each alphabet as a covariate, proved this difference to be significant ($F=19.09$; $df=1,97$; $p<0.0001$).

There was a significant Pearson correlation of 0.45 ($p<0.0001$) between the number of NLs chosen in both alphabets. This correlation did not depend on the overlap of the highly frequent vowels between alphabets. Indeed, the difference between the proportion by which each letter is chosen among the six most favourite letters as a NL versus as a NNL, is in the predicted direction for 11 out of 13 (or 10 out of 12) Roman letters visually not occurring in Cyrillic (D, F, G, I, J, N, R, V, W, Z and eventually U), for four out of six (or five out of seven) Roman signs figuring in Cyrillic with a different pronunciation (B, C, F, P, Y and eventually U), and for five out of six letters common to both alphabets (A, E, K, M, T).

¹The chance expectation number of NL to be chosen is estimated as follows:

$$\frac{6 \times \text{Mean number of different NLs}}{\text{Number of letters in the alphabet (30 in Cyrillic and 26 in Roman)}}$$

DISCUSSION

Our data, yielding a NLE in the Cyrillic alphabet, clearly show that the phenomenon is not restricted to the Roman or Greek alphabet. More important however, own NLEs are more often chosen among the most preferred letters both in the first alphabet subjects ever learned and in a second alphabet, learned at a much later age. Thus, the NLE cannot be essentially due to a temporal primacy of writing the NLEs as compared to NNLEs. In addition, the significant correlation between the effects of both alphabets, which cannot be ascribed to the overlap between Cyrillic and Roman, supports Nuttin's explanation of the NLE in terms of attachment to self.

One explanation for the stronger NLE in the first alphabet than in the second one could be the lack of relevant experiences mediated by the second alphabet. For instance, on official and non-official documents one's name is written in the first alphabet rather than in a second one. Another possibility is that primacy of name writing ability does indeed play a role in the genesis of the NLE, while not being its principal determinant.

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RÉSUMÉ

Des étudiants bulgares, qui en général ont d'abord appris à écrire en alphabet cyrillique, préfèrent les lettres de leurs noms propres en cyrillique mais aussi en caractères romains, qu'ils n'ont appris que des années plus tard. Ces résultats, qui sont en corrélation statistique intra-individuelle, renforcent l'interprétation que Nuttin donne à l'Effect Lettre du Nom Propre en termes d'auto-attachement et sont en contradiction avec la principe de la 'primauté' de l'écriture du nom propre.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Bulgarische Studenten, die anfänglich im cyrillischen Alphabet schreiben lernten, bevorzugten eigenen-Namen-Buchstaben im cyrillischen aber auch im römischen Alphabet, damit sie nur viele Jahre später vertraut wurden. Diese Befunde, die intra-individuell korrelieren, unterstützen Nuttins Interpretation des Namen-Buchstaben-Effekts in Worten als 'Bindung zum Selbst' und widersprechen ein 'Primat des eigenen Names Schreiben' Erklärung.

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