

What's in a Name?

A rose by any other name - "tulip", for instance, just doesn't draw the same mental image, does it? Words are the most powerful drugs known to man, or so Kipling wrote. So, what's in a name, and how does that relate to Aikido?

Language creates reality - or at least perception, which is 99% of reality. And, Aikido is full of language - mostly un-standardized mispronunciations of dated colloquial foreign language (unless you happen to be in Japan). But, the structure of language is more important than the individual words - in much the way that the movement of Aikido is more important than the twist-of-the-wrist that often punctuates that movement.

The names we give things - and names unspoken - all affect our perception of the things, and the relationship of those things to other things. In Aikido, there is a naming convention that goes something like [attack]-[technique]-(form). As far as I can tell, this is the most common structure world-wide.

Some questions come to mind about this:

1. What does this convention infer?
2. What are the results of using this convention?
3. What other possibilities are there?
4. What other results would be created by using other possibilities?

What does this convention infer?

Inference is a subtle thing, and what isn't said may be more important than what is said. The result of inference also depends somewhat upon the indigenous goo in the noggin, and how the new material stirs or mixes with it...

The existing convention is somewhat Spartan, with a short-hand of only two components, and a full-length of three or at most four components (attack, technique, form, and stance). Such a short name, infers that the parts of the name must represent the most relevant and important components of what we call "a technique".

My second-guess could be that they would be the least relevant and most obscure components, just to keep the real technique a secret. That would be a Japanese way of doing things.

However, a paying student whose instructor is taking money in exchange for "teaching", will likely and reasonably, not infer that. Therefore, we can expect that the components of the name must be the most relevant and important parts of the technique.

“The technique” also insinuates a count of ONE - the atomic unit of Aikido - one technique. So, we can infer that when we observe, learn, store, and recall what has been labeled as “a technique” (one), we must store and retrieve it in chunks of that size (one), and associate all of that big bite with the given unique stimulus.

So, we’ve got ONE technique. As an example let’s use (ai-hanmi) [jodan-tsuki]-[kotegaeshi]- (ura form). From this, I infer that:

- I’m to search my environment, looking for someone standing in roughly ai-hanmi (in English, this means they’ve got the same foot forward as I do, or what many American martial artists curiously enough call “matched stance”).
- At the time I notice things happening, the attacker will punch at my head with their leading hand.
- I’ll grab their wrist and twist their hand away from their body because “kotegaeshi” means “twist their wrist out” - or something roughly translating to that, according to my Sensei/Master/Guru/Priest. When I do this, the attacker will fall down (the falling-down is inferred by watching previous things called “kotegaeshi” resulting in people falling down).
- At the time of twisting the wrist, I’ll have somehow transported myself to a location roughly behind the attacker. How I’m to do that isn’t specified in the naming convention.

So, the important things to know are: same stance; face punch; wrist twist; and be behind them.

FIRST it’s apparently vital to notice the stance of a potential attacker. And, if they attack, one identifies their stance and their specific attack right away. This is obvious, because these things come first in the name, and because they obviously determine the nature of the antecedent “technique”.

SECOND, one identifies the particular way in which one wants to throw the attacker to the floor. This is obviously the proper order of operations - partly because it comes next in the naming convention, and partly because the transport-to-the-rear part is really unimportant. And, that’s obvious because it isn’t really mentioned in the name other than (maybe) with a vague “around behind” sort of word.

LASTLY, one figures out how to transport oneself to the location “around behind” to the place where the wrist-twisting should occur. Again, this isn’t specified within the naming convention.

So attempting to be a good Aikidoka, following the patterns of thought that have been installed by inference through ancient cultural ritualistic wordings, and massive repeated sayings of [attack]-[technique] - I set off down the block.

As I walk down the street, I take careful note of each person's stance relative to mine. It's difficult because as I take a step, the relationship changes, and as they take a step the relationship changes. It's constantly changing and shifting - and we're all just walking at a normal pace - not even fighting or moving quickly. From this I infer that Aikido masters must have some way to keep from mumbling constantly: "ai-gyaku-ai-gyaku-gyaku-no-ai..." (translation = "same-opposite-same-opposite-opposite-NO-same...") I infer from this that the commonly-held idea of Aikido "taking a long time to learn" must be right.

I alternately consider quitting - and resigning myself to being unable to reasonably defend myself anytime within the next 29 years - while shopping for a shrink to help with the mumbling and the fixation on everyone's feet...

What are the results of using this convention?

I think there's plenty of inference in the above sarcasm...

In my 2000 thesis, I opined that the things we commonly call "Aikido techniques", such as Kotegaeshi, Sankyo, Shihonage, etc. - are not "Aikido" at all, but are found in many other, older arts, including the forms from which Aikido was derived. I also opined that the part that's uniquely Aikido has to do with the footwork or body-movement. (The spirit of blending with an attacker's power also pre-dates Aikido.)

So, the creative and strategic genius of O'Sensei is contained in and expressed primarily through body-movement. Yet, the naming convention ignores the founder's genius, mentioning instead (mostly irrelevant) attacks, and finishing techniques that are hijacked from other, older arts. In American culture, we'd point to the important part, and probably name those pieces for the founder's favorite basset hound or dessert dish.

I'm wondering again if the naming convention was designed to obfuscate the essence of the system. Of course, the existing naming convention accomplishes just that - confusion born of obfuscation of the most relevant part - while drawing the focus elsewhere. It's either very poor communication, or skillful verbal legerdemain. And, in either case the outcome is a confused student; a slow learning curve; and a naming standard that confounds even highly-experienced practitioners from communicating clearly about the art!

What other possibilities are there?

In the previous section, I inferred that one could consider naming something based on the most important or relevant part - the part that's unique and that credits the creative genius of the originator.

In my thesis from 2000, I opined that the attack - even the stance of the attacker - are largely irrelevant, and are most likely to be unnoticed anyway, especially in the dark where most physical self-defense takes place.

I also mentioned that the "borrowed" terminating technique (e.g. kotegaeshi) isn't relevant until REAL AIKIDO (movement) has provided both safe escape and suitable position from which to prosecute the finish.

We could organize Aikido in any number of ways, each of which would have inferential results in the beliefs and cognitive processing strategies of students. We could organize Aikido based on any component, sub-component, or theoretical component that is observable or imaginable.

I believe that Aikido should be examined and organized using each of these strategies. I have personally found the resulting perspectives and perceptions of that exercise to be invaluable. Here are a few of the ways that I've organized Aikido as a study, prior to settling on the naming convention that I use in my school. Keep in mind that the naming convention will become the basis for the cognitive map used to communicate about the system. It will also become the basis for the cognitive processing strategy used to recall what is needed during time of emergency. It is important that both of those purposes be well-served...

- Attack
- Angle-of-attack (sector)
- Evasive movement
- Direction of movement
- Direction of finish relative to Uke
- Direction of finish relative to Nage
- Finish

What results would be created by using other possibilities?

- Attack: Allows us to notice those relationships, but infers (installs a strategy of) positively identifying the attack prior to taking any action. That's slow.
- Angle-of-attack (sector): Some other systems use this, and it is proven to be quite logical and effective, especially for generalizing movement responses.
- Evasive movement: Honors the founder's genius and permits very fast processing, but also reduces "optimum efficiency" under a percentage of circumstances.
- Direction of movement: Similar to sector-based system, and strong for tactical considerations.
- Direction of finish relative to Uke: Leaves out how to get there, but classifies terminating techniques logically.
- Direction of finish relative to Nage: Leaves out what comes before that, but classifies terminating techniques logically.
- Finish based: Leaves out how to get there, and organizes terminating techniques – alphabetically?

The convention I settled on for my school was body-movement-based, because it offers very fast processing; it facilitates preprogramming; it is fast and easy to learn and build from; it is very concise in description; it is descriptive of what is taking place; it infers importance, keeping students focused on movement and energy rather than distracting threat or premature visions of wrist-twist; and it points to the Aikido portion of the activity.

We still use names for attacks and for termination techniques. In fact, we've added quite a few for techniques we've adopted or to define existing ones more clearly. However, neither the attack name nor the termination name are used in any short-hand to describe "an Aikido technique". Only body movement qualifies for that honored label.

I'm not saying this is the best possible thing. I'm saying it was built based on scientific research regarding performance under stress; motor skills training; and cognitive sciences. I'm saying it infers importance and attention where those things belong. I'm saying it was built from scratch with the intent of concise communication and the fastest possible learning by people from 21st American culture.

We're in a new era of development in sports, in cognitive sciences, and in martial arts. All around us, great strides are being made in these things. "Preserving tradition" is not a value. It is not a goal. It is not what O'Sensei did. "Preserving tradition" for tradition's sake is in fact dogma - and the antithesis of what O'Sensei did.

Which honors the man and his vision more - dogma or development?