On a lighter note, Tim Moore looks for linguistic patterns in the curious lexicon used by car manufacturers in the naming of their products...

One of the great challenges of modem life is to work out how to spend profitably all those long, solitary hours stuck in one's car in commuter traffic. For me, the most pleasurable diversion is to look at other cars - their colours, their shapes, the often idiosyncratic ways in which they are driven. And for anyone with an interest in language, it's difficult not to notice the infinite variety of their names. Indeed the lexicon of the highway is an intriguing phenomenon, one worthy of some dedicated linguistic research. So what patterns can be discerned? We can point to several.

One longstanding category is 'the car as important person', designed, one imagines, to make the driver feel they are likewise. There is for example the Jaguar Sovereign, Holdens Commodore, Premier, Statesman and Senator, and various brands of Executive. And lest it be thought that this category is concerned only with masculine prestige, there is for the aspiring female driver the Toyota Starlet. Closely related to the 'important person' category is one that suggests appropriately adulatory responses from lesser motorists - the Daihatsu Applause and the Holden Acclaim.

Another broad category is names related to travel - not surprisingly - including 'the car as journey' (Ford Explorer, Chrysler Voyager and Cherokee,); 'the car as vehicle' (Land Rover Discovery, Honda Odyssey, Nissan Pathfinder) and 'the car as rugged terrain' (Subaru Outback, Nissan Prairie, Suzuki Sierra). It needs to be noted however, that the chances of many of these vehicles finding themselves in such remote places is - well - quite remote. In this way, the urbanly-named Ford Metro, Kia City and Holden Suburban probably represent more accurately the driving patterns of their owners.

The concept of speed is another significant theme, with a number of cars named after things that move jolly quickly - astronomical phenomena (Ford Meteor and Comet); radioactive particles (Nissan Pulsar, Ford Laser); NASA rockets (Holden Gemini and Apollo); and fast moving fauna (Ford Falcon, Mitsubishi Colt).

Harmony is also a theme, as suggested by various types of musical composition - Honda Prelude, Hyundai Sonata and Holden Concerto.

Yet another category is the range of feelings that the motoring experience might induce in the driver - the Subaru Liberty, Honda Accord and Civic and the less benign Toyota Conquest.

A final category worth mentioning - a more esoteric one - is 'the car as something other than what it appears' (Mitsubishi Mirage, Daihatsu Charade).

All of the above examples suggest a certain logic in car naming. But arguably the most important pattern is not so much conceptual as phonological. It is an odd fact that by far the majority of models on the road these days fall loosely into a category that we might call 'the latinate tri-syllable of no particular meaning'. To name just a few - the Holden Barina, the Toyota Cressida, the Mitsubishi Verada, the Mazda Astina, the Suzuki Vitara.
Interestingly, the tri-syllable did not begin with the Italians, but with the Japanese, when in the early 1960s the emerging Toyota company first released its highly affordable - though often sneered at - *Corolla* and *Corona* on to the world market.

In time the trend was embraced by Australian car manufacturers with Holden’s abandonment of its alphabetical naming system (FJs, EHs etc) and the release of those 1970’s icons - the *Monaro* and the *Torana*. Over the last 20 years, the latinate tri-syllable has become truly *de rigueur* (or *rigoroso!*): *Toyota* Celica, Vienta, Tarago, *Paseo*; *Holden* Camira, Frontera, Lumina; *Ford* Festiva, *Mondeo*, Verona; *Nissan* Pintara, Navara, *Maxima*; *Mitsubishi* *Altera*, *Cordia*, *Solaria*; *Daewoo* *Cielo*; *Porsche* *Carrera*; *Opel* Calibra; *Renault* *Fuego* - and on and on.

It must be said however, that names in this category have not always been well chosen. *Mitsubishi*’s *Pajero* (*Pah-he-ro*) is a Spanish onanist regrettably, and *Toyota*’s disyllabic *%eca* is only one voiced consonant short of the same activity, as practised by Italians (*segà*). No less shocking, a *Berlina* to a German is not a hot and hoony Holden, nor even - as John F. Kennedy thought - a resident of Berlin, but a jiffy doughnut. And Suzuki’s new trim little hatch the *Baleno* is - to an Italian - the largest, untrimmest creature on earth - the whale.

But one has to marvel at some of the more recent coinages and what they connote - the *Subaru* Impreza is clearly designed to elicit nods of approval from one’s friends; a *Daewoo* *Nubira* is a car I’d be keen to take out on a date; the *Daitsu* *Ferox* is a car you wouldn’t want to tangle with in a road rage incident.

It’s hard to predict what the future trends in car naming might be. Examples in the previous paragraph suggest the rise of the Z-Car (see also *Daihatsu* *Pyzar*, *Daewoo* *Matiz* and *Laguna*); it’s also difficult not to notice a Cretian influence creeping in (Mazda *Eunos*, *Daewoo* *Lanos*, *Daihatsu* *Tenos* and *Sirion*). Neither of these developments is especially inspired to my mind. If I can put in a suggestion, it would be for a revival of an ancient and shortlived category - ‘the car as nice person’, epitomised by that glorious seventies’ saloon - the *Nissan* Cedric. The possibilities here are endless - the *Holden* Jeremy, the Ford Malcolm, the *Toyota* Cameron, the Land Roger, the BMW Felicity. As our roads become more congested and increasingly less hospitable, it would be reassuring to know that those long, lonely hours of commuting could be spent in such nice company.

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