'Padding' up Schitt's Creek:
How Dirty Words Get Clean

By Michael Kelly, PhD

Nine Emmys testify to the appeal of a sitcom that kept viewers engaged and laughing for six seasons. But before anyone had ever heard of Moira, Johnny, David, and Alexis, viewers were already hooked on that provocative one-in-a-million title. Who, after all, could resist at least taking a peek at a show called *Schitt's Creek*? By using the flexibility of the English spelling system to slip in a couple of extra unpronounced letters, the creators managed to say on TV one of George Carlin's *seven words you can never say on television*.

"Schitt's Creek" works so well because the creators cleverly borrowed a familiar device in English orthography that "pads" proper names with extra letters to disambiguate them from common words. Along with initial capitalization, the doubling of final letters in surnames like "Pitt" and "Penn" clearly signals in writing that they are proper names, distinguishing them from mere common words like "pit and "pen." More importantly, letter doubling helps insulate proper names from the meanings and connotations of their common-word homonyms. Ideally, surnames like "Grimm" and "Sadd" should not imply that someone is disinclined to see the bright side of life, and letter doubling erects a barrier that helps to prevent such semantic leakage.

These examples suggest a hypothesis: There should be more pressure toward padding of names with negative sentiment – to avoid connotations that might otherwise transfer via psychological "contamination" from the surname to the person. If true, we would expect more cases of padded surnames like those on the right below than those on the left. Indeed, an analysis of surnames in the 2010 US Census database showed twice as many cases of surnames like "Sadd" than "Gladd".

Examples of Padded Surnames Found in US Census			
Unpadded Version Has **Positive** Sentiment		Unpadded Version Has **Negative** Sentiment *(2x More Cases in Census)*	
Gladd	Starr	Sadd	Rott
		Crapp	Bumm
Funn	Topp	Glumm	Sinn
		Grimm	Stabb
Hugg	Winn	Robb	Warr

An alternative explanation for the imbalance in this list would be the hypothesis that there are more surnames with negative than positive sentiment overall. However, if anything, we find substantially more surnames with positive than negative sentiment in the Census database. That's because there is a bias in all languages toward words with positive sentiment – both the number of such words and the frequency with which they are used. Thus, there are more Glads and Hugs than Glums and Wars. Given that context, the substantially higher frequency count of letter-doubled negative names is a clear signal that English (and its users) want very much to "clean up" or neutralize names with negative connotations. On the other hand, nearly everyone is content to tap the positive sentiment of a cheerful-sounding name.

One last point, in case you're wondering: "Schitt," "Shitt," and "Shitte" do <u>not</u> appear in the US Census database of surnames. And neither do various padded versions of the seven other words you're not supposed to say on TV. It looks like some words simply can't be cleaned up, even with a little padding.

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Mike is a Vice President at NAXION who designs and manages major engagements for clients seeking to develop B2B and B2C business strategies based on customer insight and advanced market analytics. Leveraging his skill in devising new modeling techniques and integrating multiple data streams, Mike has helped clients in Information Technology, Energy, Consumer Electronics, and Manufacturing optimize pricing strategies, guide product bundling, sharpen targeting, and prioritize service improvements that drive customer loyalty. Mike has notable subject matter expertise in the fields of cognition and computational linguistics, where his highly regarded academic work has been a platform for innovation on behalf of clients, while building the firm's intellectual capital in advanced methodologies.

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