

## **Romanian first names in America: a synchronic perspective**

### **Prenomes romenos na América: uma perspectiva sincrônica**

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**Abstract:** This article deals with a topic which has not been researched extensively. It refers to first names of children born over the last decades in North America and aims to show how Romanian immigrants chose for their children various types of first names: traditional, international, adapted to the language used across the Atlantic, or specific to the adoptive country. A simple four-question survey was drawn up and applied to 56 Romanians who have settled in Canada, the USA, and Martinique over the last decades. It reveals that the integration into the host country is achieved on the social, professional, and educational levels, as well as on the linguistic and onomastic ones. Thus, we can state that first names chosen for children born across the Atlantic are socio- and psycholinguistic markers not only of the attachment to family, cultural, and religious values, but also of the wish to integrate seamlessly into the adoptive society. The reasons behind the anthroponymic choices are related to the parents' level of education, the size of the community of immigrants, the connection with certain religious, cultural, and educational institutions which can influence the parents' onomastic decisions. At the same time, ethnic prestige, on the macrosocial level, and self-esteem, on the microsocial level, determine the choice of first names for newborns.

**Keywords:** anthroponymy, Romanian first names, contemporary Romanian immigration in America.

**Resumo:** Este artigo trata de um tema que não tem sido amplamente pesquisado. Refere-se a prenomes de crianças nascidas nas últimas décadas na América do Norte e tem como objetivo mostrar como os imigrantes romenos escolheram, para seus filhos, vários tipos de prenomes: tradicionais, internacionais, adaptados à língua usada do outro lado do Atlântico, ou específicos para o país adotivo. Uma enquête simples, com quatro perguntas, foi elaborada e aplicada a 56 romenos que se estabeleceram no Canadá, nos EUA e na Martinica nas últimas décadas. Os resultados de pesquisa revelam que a integração no país de acolhimento se dá nos níveis social, profissional, educacional, linguístico e onomástico. Assim, podemos afirmar que os nomes próprios escolhidos para as crianças nascidas do outro lado do Atlântico são marcadores socio e psicolinguísticos não apenas do apego aos valores familiares, culturais e religiosos, mas também do desejo de se integrar perfeitamente à sociedade adotiva. As razões por trás das escolhas antroponímicas estão relacionadas com o nível de escolaridade dos pais, o tamanho da comunidade de imigrantes, a conexão com certas instituições religiosas, culturais e educacionais que podem influenciar as decisões onomásticas dos pais. Além disso, o prestígio étnico, no nível macrossocial, e a autoestima, no nível microssocial, determinam a escolha dos nomes próprios dos recém-nascidos.

**Palavras-chave:** antroponímia, prenomes romenos, imigração romena contemporânea na América

## **Introduction**

European onomastics in America is a reality resulting from the relatively late discovery of land on the other side of the Atlantic. Many Europeans who reached those shores found it normal to call the new territories using names from the “old continent”. Anthroponymically, one can notice that the Europeans migrated together with their names, which were specific to their countries of origin and which were perpetuated in the communities where they settled. This phenomenon drew the attention of researchers worldwide, which led to several books and studies being published on this topic: *Names, identity, and self* (Dion 1983: 245-257), *An anthropology of names and naming* (Bodenhorn & Vom Bruck, 2006), *Identità e voci dell'emigrazione italiana nell'America Latina* [Identity and voices of Italian emigration to Latin America] (Rossebastiano, 2012), *Being CBC: The ambivalent identities and belonging of Canadian-born children of immigrants* (Kobayashi, Preston 2014: 234-242), *Diasporic families: Cultures of relatedness in migration* (Long 2014: 243-252), *Migration. An introduction* (Wright 2014: 223-224), *Cognomi italiani in Brasile. Il caso di una parrocchia di Caxias do Sul* [Italian family names in Brazil. The case of a parish of Caxias do Sul] (Frosi, 2015: 125-134), *La diffusione dei cognomi italiani in alcuni Paesi stranieri. I. Cognomi italiani negli Stati Uniti: provenienza e diffusione* [The spread of Italian surnames in foreign countries. 1. Italian family names in the United States: Origin and spread] (Caffarelli, 2015: 277-292), *Onomastica italiana in Brasile: il contributo degli immigrati piemontese nello Stato de Espírito Santo (secunda metà sec. XIX)* [Italian onomastics in Brazil: The role of Piemontese immigrants in Espírito Santo (second half of 19th century)] (Rossebastiano, 2015: 203-229), *From Patrick to John F.: Ethnic names and occupational success in the last era of mass migration* (Goldstein & Stecklov, 2016: 85-106), *Names, name changes, and identity in the context of migration* (Tummala-Narra, 2016), *Black names, immigrant names: Navigating race and ethnicity through personal names* (Girma 2020: 16-36), and *Riflessi onomastici dell'emigrazione italiana in Argentina: contatti interlinguistici e rifondazione identitaria* [Onomastic reflections

of Italian emigration to Argentina: Interlinguistic contacts and identity reestablishment] (Papa, 2022: 253-265).

This paper deals with a subject that has not been investigated extensively. It refers to first names of Romanian children born over the last decades in North America. To the best of our knowledge, this topic has not been explored before, at least not in relation to the North American continent. Emilia Aldrin (2016: 388) confirmed this state of affairs but with reference to the overall context: “name changes among recent immigrants [...], as well as their consequences for cultural identity, have attained very little scientific attention. Many immigrants do change their own names on arrival in the new country, or later”. This situation extends to the immigrants’ children born in the adoptive countries. The *Dictionary of American family names* (Hanks, Lenarčič & McClure, 2022), published by Oxford University Press, has only got a few pages on Romanian surnames. Domnița Tomescu, the author of that chapter, did not cover first names<sup>1</sup>, as they did not make up the research topic of the dictionary, which “contains more than 80,000 of the most commonly occurring surnames in the United States, reflecting better than ever the unique diversity of the American population” (<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/dictionary-of-american-family-names-2nd-edition-9780190245115?cc=ro&lang=en&#>).

As regards the methodology, we drew up a simple survey consisting of four questions. The survey was distributed online (via Google Forms) and in person (with the help of acquaintances in the USA)<sup>2</sup> to 56 Romanian respondents who have emigrated over the last thirty years<sup>3</sup> to settle in the USA (Michigan), Canada (Toronto and Montreal), and Martinique. The official languages in the areas under investigation are English and/or French. Most of the 56

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<sup>1</sup> Her introduction refers to *Romanian family names* (2023 I: CXXXVII-CXLI).

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Ramona Dana Andrei (USA), Veronica Sinkulics (Canada), and Florin Dodea (Martinique) for their help on this matter.

<sup>3</sup> Many respondents left Romania from the 1990s until the 2010s, as they were dissatisfied with the socio-economic and political context in the country. Only four respondents emigrated during the communist period, namely before the Revolution of 1989.

participants in the survey are university graduates (doctors, engineers, economists, teachers), and their children were born in the adoptive countries. Although the respondents are not numerous, they make up a representative sample for present-day migration. As a result of the survey, 104 first names were collected and analysed in this paper. Some of them are indicative of anthroponymic conservativeness<sup>4</sup>, while others testify to the attempt to integrate in the name patterns of the adoptive countries.

### **Romanians on the American Continent: A Diachronic Overview**

The first historical record of a Romanian in America dates from the second half of the eighteenth century. More numerous groups emigrated after the Revolution of 1848 to avoid the oppressions carried out by the Habsburg Empire. The uninterrupted presence of Romanians on the North American continent can be noticed at the end of the nineteenth century. The migrants came from Transylvania, Bucovina, and the Banat (which at the time pertained to the Austro-Hungarian Empire), and they chose to leave mostly for economic reasons. The emigration process continued well into the twentieth century (especially for political reasons), and it also takes place nowadays, when it involves individuals with a university degree in fields like IT, medicine, education, etc. In the American census of 2000-2001, “367.000 Americans claimed that they were of Romanian descent”, which “by American standards represents an average ethnic group” (<https://washington.mae.ro/node/286>, orig. Romanian). Unofficially, it is estimated that about 1 million Romanians live in the USA, some of whom are yet to become American citizens (see Străjeri, 2014: 103). Most of these individuals reside in New York, California, and the Midwest (in Michigan). Among the notable figures, one can mention Mircea Eliade (writer and historian of religions), George Emil Palade (Nobel Prize laureate in

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<sup>4</sup> *Anthroponymic conservativeness* refers to the preservation of onomastic models from one’s country of origin, although they may not be congruous with the anthroponymic landscape of the adoptive country.

Physiology or Medicine in 1974), Nadia Comăneci (Olympic gold-winning gymnast), Alexandra Nechita (contemporary painter), and Sebastian Stan (contemporary actor).

The history of Romanians in Canada is, broadly speaking, similar to that of Romanians in the USA. The first Romanians reached Canadian soil at the end of the nineteenth century. After the establishment of the communist regime in Romania, immigration to Canada was moderate but steady, accounted for by economic and political reasons. According to the Romanian Embassy in Canada, in the 2016 census over 238.000 people “identified as Romanian” (Străjeri, 2020: 115, orig. Romanian; see also <https://ottawa.mae.ro/node/286>). Most of them resided in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec<sup>5</sup>.

In Martinique, a Caribbean island and overseas department of France in the Caribbean Sea, Romanian immigrants arrived via France after the year 2000. Like in the case of recent migration to other North American countries, most Romanian emigrants to Martinique have earned a university degree. They were attracted by the high wages and the benefits offered by the French government to those who settled in the overseas departments and regions outside of metropolitan France.

### **The Disadvantage of Having a “Foreign” Name**

Certain tragic historical events, such as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 (see Saavedra, 2021), the New York terrorist attack of 11 September 2001, and the Covid-19 pandemic, have established the grounds for the stigmatisation of ethnic groups which are racially delineated by virtue of their skin colour, religious orientation, language, and implicitly the names they bear (see Nagel, 2002: 971-987). Recent studies have shown that foreign name bearers have lower chances “to have higher occupational achievement” (Goldstein & Stecklov, 2016: 1). Based on data recorded over the first three decades of the twentieth century, Carneiro,

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<sup>5</sup> “The most numerous groups of Romanian Canadians are in the Toronto area (about 75.000 people) and in the Montreal area (about 40.000 people)” (Străjeri, 2020: 115, orig. Romanian).

Lee, and Reis (2020: 1) pointed out that “the adoption of American sounding first names led to substantial improvements in labour market outcomes of first and second generation immigrants. Their conjecture is that this is due to a more successful assimilation process by those with American names”. This tallies with what Frank Nuessel (2021: 13) noticed: in the past, an immigrant “might seek to have an ‘Americanised’ name in order to obtain a job, especially during the era when discrimination against some foreigners was not uncommon”. Immigrants are aware that having American names increases their chances of integrating into the society and of getting better jobs, so it is not surprising that they choose such first names for the children born in the USA. Upon discussing “American names among second-generation immigrants”, Carneiro, Lee, and Reis (2020: 1) highlighted that “87% of boys born of immigrant males with American names also have American names. When we look at children of immigrants with non-American names, the proportion with American names is lower, but it is still substantial, at 79%”. The social pressure of bearing an American first name can be seen in extreme situations: the bearers of foreign names benefit of less help in case of accidents. The conclusion drawn by Zhao and Biernat (2018: 9) is that “the results suggest that name Anglicization as a cultural assimilation practice may reduce intergroup bias”.

On the other hand, we should also take into consideration the specific spelling, using diacritics, of certain languages from the Indo-European family or from other linguistic groups. This is why many parents stated that they had chosen to name their children using international first names, which are written and pronounced identically or very much alike in Romanian and English. Some people “sought to simplify their names because they were long or used unusual combinations of consonants not found in American English” (Nuessel, 2021: 13). Thus, the inside and outside perspectives of identity have positive connotations for all the users of a first name: name giver, name bearer, relatives, or friends. The perception of the community is not

altered in any way: the first name is not “stained”/pronounced wrongly or considered to have an inappropriate sonority.

The internationalisation of first names given to children born in the families of certain American immigrants is not specific to Romanians. Katharina Leibring (2016: 211) claimed that “a contemporary but contrasting trend shows an increased usage of more international names”. Just like a person’s identity can be gauged from one’s use of language, first names are differentiating sociolinguistic factors as long as they are marked ethnically or religiously. International anthroponyms eliminate any potential damage caused by bearing an ethnic name and underpin the development of self-esteem. Emilia Aldrin (2016: 386) explained that “As identity is created in relation to others, the perception of names may also be of importance for identity formation [...]. Names influence interpersonal treatment, which in turn influences the identity formation and self-esteem of the name-bearer”.

### **Data Discussion/Interpretation**

The analysis of the anthroponymic material reveals a complex situation which allows for a detailed analysis. As regards the structure of the first names, most of the 104 onyms recorded are double names (69: *Alexander Victor*, *Ana Gafia*, *Marc Nicolas*, *Sabrina Ioana*, etc.), followed by simple first names (31: *Alexa*, *Eric*, *Gabriel*, *Selena*, etc.), and juxtaposed given names consisting of three lexical units (4: *Ann-Marie Simoné*, *Patrick Nicholas Ștefan*, *Philip Christian Maximilian*). The choice of double first names can be accounted for by several factors. Although the Romanian onomastic tradition used to require that a newborn should be given a single first name<sup>6</sup>, “nowadays the most common structure of mixed names includes two

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<sup>6</sup> Some ultra-Orthodox priests/monks still claim that double first names are against church regulations and recommend that parents give their children simple first names.

first names” (ELR, 2001: 49, orig. Romanian). The trend of double first names has been around for a few decades, and it seems to be observed even by the Romanians living abroad.

Nevertheless, there are extralinguistic reasons that can be conjured to explain this onomastic practice. For instance, in some cases, one of the onymic constituents is chosen by both parents willingly and mirrors their preference, whereas the other name is religiously connoted (it may be a saint’s name): *Ana Călina*, *Bianca Ioana*, *Dan Constantin*, *Gloria Elena*, *Jake Michael*. Similarly, there are situations in which one of the first names is Romanian, and the other is foreign, usually borrowed from the anthroponymic stock of the adoptive country (the order of the onymic elements is random): *Isabella Anamaria*, *Nicholas Bogdan*, *Sandra Maria*, *Sophia Maria*. It is frequently the case that one of the first names is related to the family’s tradition, as it is also borne by one of the parents (*Călin* < the father’s first name, *Ciprian* < the father’s first name, *Gabriel* < from the mother’s first name, *Gabriela*, *Ioana* < from the father’s first name), maternal/paternal grandparents (*Anamaria* < the grandmother’s first name, *Constantin* < the grandfather’s first name, *Gafia* < the grandmother’s first name), or even one of the great-grandparents, aunts, uncles, or siblings-in-law (*Elena* < the first name of an aunt).

In Romania, especially in the more traditionalistic rural areas, there is the tradition of preserving ancestors’ first names and give them to the descendants. Thus, there are instances in which three or four family members from different generations bear the same first name. The only changes refer to the form of the given name, which may be modernised (*George* instead of *Gheorghe*; *Mihai* instead of *Mihail*). This process does not only refer to the form of the first name within the scope of the Romanian language, but also to the adaptation of the first name to the language of the adoptive country. Thus, we have come across the following examples: *Alexander* < the father’s given name (*Alexandru*), *Joanna* < the mother’s given name (*Ioana*), *Michael* < the given name of an uncle (*Mihai*), *Nicholas* < the father’s given name



(*Nicolae/Neculai*), *Thomas* < the grandfather's given name (*Toma*). As Emilia Aldrin (2016: 387) noted, "first names may also create or express social identity. This may occur when children are named after relatives or are given names to express the cultural background of the family". On rare occasions, the first names may be inspired by godparents' given names (*Gabriela* < the godmother's first name). This phenomenon is found in certain parts of Romania, but it has "migrated" across the Atlantic as well. In certain situations, the desire to maintain the onomastic tradition of the family may lead to interpretation inaccuracies: *Andrew* is not based on *Adrian*, as the parents stated, but on *Andrei*; *Patrick* is not derived from *Petru*, the given name of an uncle, as the parents claimed (etymologically, the name is linked to *Patricius/Patrice*). Such imprecisions are understandable in the case of people who are not specialists in the field and did not turn to reliable books or websites for support. M. Seide (2021: 200-222, 2022: 144-164) has advanced the concept of *onomastic knowledge*, which should be considered in relation to the real/ideal speaker and their competence to utter linguistically accurate sentences.

Worth noting are the anthroponymic combinations in mixed families in which one of the parents is Romanian and the other is Czech (*Iakub Alexander*), Indian (*Shantanu*, *Cosmin*, *Maya*), Peruvian (*Marcelo Ioan*), or Macedonian (*Anastasia Giana*, *Maksim Koce*). Naturally, the most numerous combinations were recorded in Romanian-American mixed families: *Jaquelin Marie*, *Jodi Anne* (the father is Romanian), *Royce Alexander*, *Roman Oliver* (the mother is Romanian and wished that both her sons would have first names beginning with the initial letter of their father's given name). According to Emilia Aldrin (2016: 388), "The naming of children among immigrants and couples of mixed cultural backgrounds is often handled through mixing names (or name components) from different cultural spheres in order to create a complex and flexible identity, or through the use of international names".

Based on the meaning conveyed by the form, some anthroponyms are motivated. In this case, the form is borrowed from a lexeme with a common meaning in Romanian, but the name is not transparent in English (*Laura* < *laurus nobilis* “Mediterranean shrub”). However, there are also unmotivated anthroponyms, whose form does not convey any meaning for the users, although it can be linked to meaning in the language of origin: e.g., *Bogdan* (a Slavic theophoric name, the counterpart of Greek *Theodoros*), *Cristian*, and *Cristina* are indicative of Christianity.

According to their function and sociocultural meaning, anthroponyms are religious or secular/profane. The former are predominant in the Romanian community in North America. Most parents who participated in the survey stated that they had wished for their children to bear religious names to preserve their family’s traditions and the cultural values of their home country. The Christian names recorded are written in agreement with the rules of Romanian (*Andrei, Ioan, Ștefan*), English (*Andrew, Nicholas*), or French orthography (*Nicolas*). Nonetheless, international spelling variants are frequently employed by those who find it difficult to choose a certain orthographic form over another, as many first names have identical forms in all the languages considered in this article: *Ana, Gabriel(a), Maria, Paul*. Several families declared their preference for religious first names borrowed from the Old Testament (*David, Eva*) or from the New Testament, but the names are spelled according to the language of the adoptive country (*Andrew, Timothy*), although the parents’ sources of inspiration were saints of the Orthodox church<sup>7</sup>. Some parents stated that the choice of Christian first names is linked to the date of the children’s birth, the feast of the saint considered to be the newborn’s

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<sup>7</sup> Most Romanians are followers of this religious faith (the data of the 2021 census show that 85.3 per cent of the Romanian population is Orthodox). Implicitly, the Romanians who emigrated to the other side of the Atlantic share this religious orientation. At the same time, it should be noted that “Romania is the seventh state in the world and the first in the European Union with respect to religiousness, as 89 per cent of the population claims to be religious” (Felecan, 2020: 1).

patron, or a day nearby this date: *Andreea* (“she was born on the day of Saint Andrew”), *Gabriela* (“she was born on the feast of the Saints Michael and Gabriel”).

The secular first names include Romanian anthroponyms (*Călina, Cosmin, Daria, Darius, Laura Veronica, Sorina*), English given names (*Brian, Edward, Rose, Selena, William*), and international ones (*Bianca, Carina, Claudia, Eric, Iris, Isabella/Izabela, Robert, Sabrina*). Etymologically, some of the aforementioned given names are of Latin or Germanic origin, but by virtue of frequent use, they have expanded to numerous languages, to the extent that some speakers cannot establish the language of origin. An eloquent example was provided by a respondent from the USA, who stated that he had chosen for his son a Romanian first name (*Philip*), “one which can also be used in the USA”. In reality, *Philip* is derived from Greek *Philippos* and is based on the root *\*phil* ‘loving, caring’ and the noun *hippos* ‘horse’.

According to their form, the anthroponyms analysed are either standard forms or secondary ones. The former category includes Romanian first names (*Adrian Laurențiu, Alexandra Gabriela, Laura Veronica*) and mixed given names (*Alexander Victor, Andrew Constantin, Sophia Maria*), as well as English and French names or those of other origins: *Jaquelin Marie, Jayden Andrew, Robert Nicholas*. Secondary forms refer to hypocoristics, which are not very numerous and may be derived from the parents’ first names: *Alexa, Hailey Ella, Jake Michael, Jodi Anne, Luc Edward* (the father’s given name is *Lucian*), *Mia Theodora*. This tallies with what Nicolas Guéguen (2008: 21) pointed out in *Psychologie des prénoms* [Psychology of first names]: “Over time, parents tend to use shorter first names more often than in the past” (orig. French). From the perspective of multiculturalism, hypocoristics can be associated more easily with different idioms. For instance, they can be considered as being adapted to Romance and Germanic languages alike. They are frequently spelled and pronounced without any difficulties, as they lack the characters specific to the Romanian language. The preservation of traditional Romanian given names for children of Romanian

immigrants in America could be the cause of various drawbacks such as “misspellings, mispronunciations, or discrimination based on the name” (Aldrin, 2016: 388). These can exist in society virtually, but they can also become acute, depending on extraordinary events or the sociopolitical context at a particular time. For instance, in the context of the Russian aggression against Ukraine (which began in February 2022), the bearers of Russian names may face stigmatisation by association with the war crimes and horrors carried out by the “Red Army” of the twenty-first century.

The American and Canadian societies consist mainly of older or newer immigrants from all around the world. However, several decades/generations after reaching North America, the migrants’ ethnic and cultural identity is lost. Family names specific to European languages, testifying to the ancestors’ home countries, are seldom kept. Most of the times, uniformization is not achieved suddenly, beginning with the first generation, but over time, facilitated by factors like mixed marriages, the educational system, and the labour market. As Emilia Aldrin (2016: 391) noted, “During interaction, the choice of name is closely linked to choice of identity, both in terms of how we want to be perceived in a certain situated context, and in terms of how others perceive us”.

As regards the motivation underlying the choice of first names, most respondents stated that the preservation of national or family traditions was the main reason that determined their onomastic decision. This explains why most first names recorded pertain to the Romanian anthroponymic stock. However, this situation is characteristic of first-generation immigrants, who still feel deeply rooted in their family and homeland (see the etymological meaning of the Romanian noun *patrie* ‘homeland’, ‘the place where ancestors are buried’). Those who opted for American first names argued that such anthroponyms would guarantee an easier integration into the society, as they are “easily pronounced by school peers”, “easily pronounced by Romanians and Americans alike/in Romanian and English”, especially since all the respondents

claimed they wanted to raise their children in America. One of mothers who participated in the survey mentioned that the choice of an English first name had been made to prevent the child from having to be faced with any shortcomings due to the spelling of the name: “so the child would not have any misspellings in official documents (I always have to correct my first name to *Ioana*, as it is mostly recorded in writing as *Loana*)”.

In some cases, the reasons why certain first names were given are different from those listed above: *Andrei* < from *Andri Popa*, the name of a famous character in a Romanian hit song of the 1970s; *Emma* < inspired by a book; *Rose* < as a child, the name giver’s mother used to call her a “rose bud”; *Maximilian* < inspired by the name of a surgeon who saved the father’s life. Such examples complete the psychological portrait of Romanian emigrants across the Atlantic and reveal the subjective reasons underlying the choice of first names for their children.

## **Conclusion**

The survey has been applied to 56 Romanians who have settled in Canada, the USA, and Martinique over the last decades. It depicts the anthroponymic preferences of individuals who have left their home countries to start a new life thousands of kilometres away. The integration into the host country is achieved on the social, professional, and educational levels, as well as on the linguistic and onomastic ones. Starting from this observation, we can state that first names chosen for children born across the Atlantic are socio- and psycholinguistic markers of the attachment to family, cultural, and religious values, on the one hand, and the wish to integrate seamlessly into the adoptive society, on the other. The reasons behind the anthroponymic choices are related to the parents’ level of education, the size of the community of immigrants, the connection with certain religious, cultural, and educational institutions which can influence the parents’ onomastic decisions. At the same time, ethnic prestige, on the macrosocial level, and self-esteem, on the microsocial level, determine the choice of first names

for newborns. A statistical approach reveals that of the 176 name forms analysed in this paper, 52 per cent are Romanian. This testifies to the strong connection between first-generation emigrants and the traditions in the country of origin, including the corresponding anthroponymic stock.

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