I Know Your True Name

"The name is the thing, and the true name is the true thing. To speak the name is to control the thing."
— **Ursula K. Le Guin**, *The Rule of Names*

This is a version of Functional Magic that revolves around the use of "true names". A true name perfectly describes something's essential nature; knowing a true name gives one power over the owner of the name. In some portrayals, using a person's true name forces them to obey your commands. In others, a true name gives you a connection to the name's owner that allows you to work magic on them from a distance. Sometimes, a person's true name is needed if you want to work any magic on them at all.

In some stories, all creatures have true names, whereas others limit the use of true names to certain *kinds* of creatures, such as fairies, demons, or dragons. As a rule, objects do not have true names — but even that rule isn't obeyed by all universes.

A person's true name might be self-determined, or bestowed on them by someone else — possibly in a religious or magical ritual. In works which feature true names prominently, people tend to guard them jealously, and will even have a second name (or two or three or more, depending on the character's age) for everyday use.

Audiences might think that having a very long or difficult-to-pronounce true name might provide one with a shield against being enspelled, but it never occurs to characters. Demons are an exception, with names that are frequently impossible for humans to pronounce.

However ingenious this tactic is to employ, it's never always guaranteed to work and can backfire spectacularly. A person's nature may be more complex and hard-to-understand than initially taken for. They may compartmentalize or change their beliefs sporadically, thus invoking even their "True Name" is going to have very limited influence over them. Mental illnesses are also a factor to consider and be wary of. The person in question may also be so corrupt, so insane, that their True Name has no meaning or significance to them anymore. On the other hand, announcing their real name may even damage them further, rendering them useless for controlling.

Often a subtrope of The Power of Language. Contrast Speak of the Devil, where saying a name summons the named entity, but doesn't confer any power or control over it — in fact, speaking said name may actually give that entity power over YOU! Likewise, the true name of an Eldritch Abomination or similarly twisting being may prove to be extremely dangerous to mortal minds.

Compare Sympathetic Magic, where you need some other part of a person to work magic on them. Compare its related trope (and former title) Words Can Break My Bones, as well as Language of Magic. See Do Not Call Me "Paul" for the mundane, magicless version.