

We are surrounded by onymies: relations among names, name-types, and terminological categories

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Abstract

It is normal in onomastics to use elaborate Greek-derived labels such as *zoonymy*, *chrematonymy*, *oronymy* and *anthroponymy* for the name-stocks and naming practices associated with different human activities and perceptions. Of course, it makes sense of some kind to identify and study naming practices associated with categories of entity, where the entity-types are defined anthropologically (i.e. by local common sense). But from a linguistic point of view, it makes less sense. There is an asymmetry between such name-stocks. Anthroponyms and toponyms (understood broadly) are more basic, and the names of other entities are frequently reapplications (second-order uses) of names in the basic categories, though in many instances with significant adaptations. The implications of this state of affairs for the theoretical status of onomastic terminology are considered with relation to at least British railway locomotives and fishing-boats, Western European racehorses, Californian inhabited places, Antarctic landforms and Austrian cows.

It is normal in onomastics to use elaborate Greek-derived labels such as *anthroponymy*, *zoonymy*, *chrematonymy*, and *oronymy* for the name-stocks and naming practices associated with different human perceptions and activities. Of course, it makes sense of some kind to identify and study naming practices associated with categories of entity, where the entity-types are defined anthropologically (by which I mean ‘defined by local common sense’). Most of us, with our local common sense, are content with the notions of *personal name* (*anthroponym*), *place-name* (*toponym*), and other less basic categories. But from a purely theoretical point of view, such terms are problematic in a way I shall develop. It has often been remarked that there is an asymmetry between such name-stocks. Anthroponyms and toponyms (understood broadly) are more basic, and the names of other entities are frequently reapplications (what we might call *second-order uses*) of names in the basic categories, though in many instances with significant adaptations. Chief among the controversial points I shall raise are these two. Firstly, the reapplication of names across categories makes the whole notion of “somethingonyms” difficult to sustain as theoretical categories, though of course they are valid as terms which apply to and group together simple lists of names. Some name-form (token) may equally be a toponym and an anthroponym and a zoonym, and be categorized accordingly in three sets. Secondly, that that means that the notion of *proprial lemma* (or onomastic type; Van Langendonck 2007) is incompatible with the notion of *onomastic category* if proprial lemmas are supposed to entail categorial class-membership, e.g. that *Richard* is an *anthroponym* in the subcategory (*English*) *given-name*, and *Coates* an *anthroponym* in the subcategory (*English*) *surname*, for simple reasons that I shall explain. Onomastic categories deal with tokens, not types, and are therefore of no theoretical interest whatever, and I should feel slightly embarrassed about presenting a paper on this topic to ICOS-24’s section on Terminology! In this paper, the theoretical status of the onomastic terminology of categorization is considered with relation to Western European racehorses, Austrian cows, British railway locomotives and fishing-boats, Californian inhabited places, and scattered examples of different sorts.

Let's start with the most banal observation ever spoken at an onomastics conference. Many individual things have proper names (PNs). But not every thing. The probability of an individual thing having a PN in some category varies to some degree from culture to culture. The probability of a person having an individual given-name is 100% in all cultures, even in those which are secretive about actual names. An exception can be made for individuals in fantasy literature:

“None of the Grebulons had names, largely because they couldn't think of any.” --- Douglas Adams, *Mostly harmless* (1992)

The probability of having an inherited family name varies between, say, Britain (approaching 100%), Iceland (approaching 0%), and Indonesia (variable). In a recent paper, A.B. Rakhimzhanova (2011) asserts that “Kazakhs did not give [the] names to cows, goats, sheep and cats”, unlike the English. A further hint of the type of case I have in mind is provided by Linnaean binomial designations of species of living things, if you believe as some do that these are proper names: *Dandelions grow in my lawn/ Taraxacum officinale grows in my lawn*. Cultures which do not deal in Linnaean binomials do not give living things proper names in comparable ways. Many odd single things have names in some cultures without the class of things to which they belong being routinely named, for example in English culture: railway locomotives, cars, bells, musical instruments, trees, chairs, and dishwashers (cf. Coates 2006: 315-316). It is routinely claimed that things are more likely to bear names the more central they are to human perceptions, needs and emotions, and no doubt that is right. But the notion of centrality may not embrace exactly the same things everywhere, as is suggested by the Kazakh example just mentioned.

One of the most persistent general questions in onomastics concerns the extent to which names can, or should, be assembled into categories on the basis of their linguistic, or any other, characteristics. The Terminology Committee of ICOS, under Milan Harvalík, has spent many hours, some joyful, some painful, in trying to agree a set of standard terms, many of which depend on a positive answer to this question. We have established terms in three languages for e.g. the study of mountain-names (*oronymy*), divine names (*theonymy*), organizational names (*chrematonymy*), and so forth (see ICOS web-site for a discussion and an agreed set: www.icosweb.net/index.php/terminology.html). But agreement on these matters masks an important technical and philosophical problem.

Let me start with basics, and please forgive me for starting in first gear. *Athens* is no doubt a place-name; I can show you a place called *Athens*. *Richard* is no doubt a male given-name; I can show you a suitably-qualified bearer. *Jupiter* is no doubt a divine name; I can show you all sorts of Roman and post-Roman literary evidence supporting this. In fact, I can show you that *Athens* is the name of multiple places, and of course that *Richard* is the given-name of many male individuals, which strengthens their status as a place-name and a male given-name respectively. We might therefore conclude, using Willy Van Langendonck's terminology, that the toponym ATHENS and anthroponym RICHARD are (English) proprial lemmas. But *Jupiter* provides a warning of what is to come. It is the name of at least two individuals: a god and a planet. These individuals, unlike those mentioned called *Athens* and *Richard*, do not share the same category.¹

¹ I am aware of a pre-scientific or astrological world-view under whose terms you could equate the god and the planet. But certainly in the 21st century, for most people they will be distinct entities, one a cultural fiction and the other a piece of celestial geology and meteorology.

But even the easy cases are not quite so simple. *Athens* is also the (legally protected) name of an access and identity management service based in the United Kingdom, supplied by the non-profit company Eduserv to provide a single sign-on to a range of protected electronic resources. *Richard* was briefly also the proper name of a syntactic operation proposed in the early days of Transformational Grammar (Rogers 1971), believe it or not. *Jupiter* is also the name of a vast range of other things from a Mozart symphony, an early locomotive of the (British) Great Western Railway, an 18th-century English thoroughbred racehorse, and a resort on the Black Sea in Romania. We already have to be careful about categorizing these names. Do we say: *Jupiter* is inherently a divine name which has been applied (extended) to individuals in other categories and therefore remains, fundamentally, a divine name? That may well appear a natural thing to say, and of course it is historically accurate. But it is dependent on encyclopedic knowledge which the name-user may not possess. If the only *Jupiter* I know is the resort in Romania, then as far as relevant categorization is concerned it is a place-name, not a divine-name-used-as-a-place-name. Its etymology is of no significance to me when I use it as a place-name, i.e. to pick out (refer to) a particular location on the world's surface.

This raises the question: to what extent is it appropriate to say that a name is an entity that can be categorized, a *somethingonym*? Clearly, as long as we confine ourselves to the names of unique individuals, no problem will arise. Athens in Greece is a place; so *Athens* is a place-name. Jupiter is a Roman god; so *Jupiter* is a god-name. Jupiter is a Romanian place; so *Jupiter* is a place-name that from the synchronic perspective happens to be homonymous with the god-name. If that is the limit of our terminological ambitions, we can stop here and go for our evening *caminata* now. Toponymy is a collection of individual place-names, and toponomastics is the study of such individual names; similarly for anthroponymy and anthroponomastics. But most of us do not want to stop there. Some of us, especially those coming from a background in philosophy, believe that some names are inherently subcategorized: that names have an essence independent of their individual bearers, and that that essence is categorial. More than one individual bears the name *Richard*, and they are male: therefore *Richard* is categorized as a male personal name. As for places, Bill Nicolaisen (1978) has taught us that certain repeated toponyms seem ready-made, fit for application for places of the same type. Some hill-names, like the frequent English *Beacon Hill* or the Scandinavian (Old Norse) *Sandvík*, speak their etymology in a transparent way, and therefore, we might wish to say, they express the category to which they belong, whether hills or more specifically hills with beacons, and (sandy) bays. As regards semantics, the consequence of arguments of this sort is that we glimpse, and probably desire, the possibility of making logically secure deductions from names. Accordingly, if it is true that *Richard is speaking*, then it is (must be) also true that *A male human being is speaking*. And the truth is necessary rather than contingent (accidental) because it depends on *Richard* being a type not a token, and logically dependent on the truth of the proposition *All Richards are male*. If I say *Beacon Hill is a hill* that is a tautology; and *Beacon Hill is not a hill* is self-contradictory. Surely that must be right? No, unfortunately for our desires, it isn't. There is no such logical security.

A girl called *Richard* is a cultural oddity, not a linguistic or logical one. On 8 August 2011, I did a GoogleTM search on “girl called Richard” and got six independent hits along with 20 or

so for “girl named Richard”, though in some of these there may be archival transcription errors involved.²

Beacon Hill is also the name of suburbs, streets, country parks, schools, and so on, which might (or might not) be more formally named with an explicit classifier (*Beacon Hill Country Park*, etc.) but may generally be referred to using the base expression alone (“*We spent the day at Beacon Hill.*”), which relies on the hearer’s *encyclopedic* knowledge to supply the type of place it is, or to disambiguate, not on their *linguistic* knowledge.

Names with or without classifiers, I suggest, do not allow the deduction of class-membership, i.e. in logical terms class-membership is not entailed. What such names do allow is a probabilistic inference in which the probability may change over time, i.e. a conveyed meaning, or something more like an implicature, or even a stereotype/prototype. In 1849, most English-speakers would have categorized *Shirley* as a (rather rare) male given-name (and before that as a place-name and surname), if they knew it at all. By 1938, it was a very popular female given-name, thanks first to Charlotte Brontë’s novel with that title (1849), and then to the 1930s Hollywood sensation of Shirley Temple. English anthroponymy is littered with cases, over a range of centuries and countries, of surnames which have become given-names. Where it has become a local custom to use a family name as a baptismal name, how does that affect the categorization of the name in question in the following generation? Even names with explicit classifiers do not allow categorial certainty. In London, Isleworth Polytechnic continued to exist with that name as a school or college even after the term *polytechnic* had come into use (between the 1960s and 1976) for a category of British higher education institution that did not include the one in Isleworth. I know of an object named *Peak’s Tunnel* which was not a tunnel but a bridge identical to several others, a place called *Isle of Thorns* which has never been an island, and an object beloved of philosophers called *The Morning Star* which is not a star. *The Morning Star is not a star* is not self-contradictory. None of these names appears to be metaphorical or to have an extended sense of any sort in the perceptions of their users, so far as my intuitions go, though one could of course advance historical arguments that these are the outcomes of various kinds of denotational extension, or lexical exploitation in the sense introduced by Hanks (1994).

The consequence of these observations is that that the onymic categories which onomasticians set up – toponymy, anthroponymy and so on – have no rigid permanent membership, if by that we mean a membership consisting of expressions which represent a semantic type, because the membership of such categories is fluid. Even those names containing explicit classifying terms have no guaranteed logical relation to the apparently relevant onymic category. And the act of commemoration, that is naming some thing after some other thing, need not respect any categorial boundary at all. On 4 August 2011, I collected and analysed the names of all the racehorses running at six British racecourses on that day. I could not etymologize them all, but of those I understood I found that 90 out of 309 (about 29%) carried names which were historically the proper name of some other thing: a person, a place, a mountain, an artistic work, and so on; or had a form that clearly suggested that they were created to conform to a stereotype of one of these categories (e.g. *Miss Excel*).

² Notably and most interestingly archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/SOG-UK/2000-12/0978203057 (accessed 8 August 2011).

This suggests the existence of cultural rules such as:

Human personal names may be bestowed on horses; or, The form of human personal names is suitable for the names of horses.

By means of such permissive rules we might preserve the notion that certain names and even names in particular categories are truly representative of particular categories and can be applied to other categories without becoming indices of the new category; accordingly, that would mean that *Miss Excel* is not in itself a hipponym or horse-name but, structurally at least, remains a female personal name, like *Miss Holly Golightly*, who ran at a different meeting.

But this theoretical tactic has a terrible cost. If we concentrate for a moment on hipponymy, or at any rate the actually-recorded names of horses, we will notice that absolutely any linguistic material can serve as a horse-name. In the same day's proceedings we find:

Classy Strike (unsurprising noun phrase (N-bar); many others of the same structure)

Accumulate (verb)

Vertueux, Patriotic, Jewelled (adjective)

Oh So Spicy, Chilledtothebone (adjective phrase)

Ex Oriente, Beyond Conceit, Avec Moi (prepositional phrase)

My Body is a Cage, Iphi intombi [Zulu, 'Where is the girl?'] (full sentence)

Ain't Talkin' (verb phrase)

Act Your Shoe Size [actually 3 August!], *Reset to Fit* (both (probably) subjectless sentence serving as an imperative)

Hip Hip Hooray, Diddums (exclamation)

Only You Maggie, Humor Me Rene (readers are invited to supply their own analysis for these complex cases)

The category of hipponyms is therefore, in principle, the same as the category *linguistic expression*; indeed, it may even be broader, as there is no requirement on a name consisting of a string of words to be grammatical (*Poyle Todream*) or even to be in etymologically the same language throughout (*Fleurie Lover*). The system of British racehorse names is one of total onymic freedom, and there are no hipponymic proprial lemmata or types. But it need not be this way. Michael Reichmayr presents a fascinating study of the proper names of cattle in present-day Austria (2005), in which he draws attention, amongst many other things, to the existence of what are understood to be traditional names, sometimes without a transparent etymology, for cows of a particular appearance. That is, there is a set of names which codes for some aspect of the appearance of cows, e.g. colour. Such names licence inferences which appear to be strong enough to count as entailments. *Sivka gives lots of milk.* > *Some particular grey cow gives lots of milk.* These are surely cow-names (*boönyms?*), and they can be categorized because they are traditional, or to the extent that they are traditional and not *ad hoc* (or *ad bovem*) inventions. From my perspective, however, it is not clear that they are proper names. True, they serve some of the functions of proper names, but the critical difference lies in whether any inferences which can be made from them are true entailments. They resemble the traditional but probably obsolete items which were bestowed on English men with particular surnames, such as *Tug* (Wilson), *Nobby* (Clark), *Dusty* (Miller), *Bunny* (Warren). Perhaps one could legitimately infer that if *Tug bought me a drink* is true, then

Wilson bought me a drink must be too.³ Such instances as these are truly difficult to place in relation to properhood.

As I have argued in another paper at this Congress (Coates, 2014), in the Theory section, the act of name-creation, whether by bestowal or by evolution, deprives an expression of all intralinguistic content (sense). It is that fact which makes it easy for any name to be applied as the name of an individual in other categories.

Why should this be of any interest to a body of onomasticians whose interest is precisely in the classification of names, i.e. to those attending this Section? I have just suggested to you that names do not, of their linguistic selves, fall into categories. Their bearers fall into categories, of course – inhabited places, rivers, institutions, divinities, and so on. And if all we mean by *name-categories* is ‘sets of similar or related things that bear names’, then that is all there is to say. If we study river-names or *potamonyms*, then we study the names of rivers, for which a list can be drawn up. It only begins to get linguistically interesting if we allocate individual names to *proprial lemmas*: that is, names as types rather than as tokens; as multidenotational linguistic entities where the entities belong to the same category. But I want to suggest that any inferences that are made from such proprial lemmas or types are probabilistic inferences, not entailments or logically secure deductions, and subject to variation over time.

As a result of empirical work that I have time to present only briefly, I have assembled evidence, if it were needed, that names transcend categorial boundaries and that name-types therefore only *suggest* rather than *express* (still less *entail*) the category of their bearers. Let us look at four such sets of evidence.

1. British railway locomotives

Many railway locomotives have, since their creation in the early 1800s, borne names (Coates 2009). As tokens, these are of course, trivially, locomotive-names. But it is hard to find a single one that, as a proper name, is exclusively that of a locomotive. The best candidates may appear to be those consisting of onymized lexical words for meteorological or astronomical phenomena (*Hurricane, Planet*), or for animal species (*Lion, Springbok*), which are not spectacularly convincing in that one would find it easy to imagine their application to other nameables. But it is clear that most of the recorded names of locomotives are second-order names, which are commemorative in the sense that the name is copied from another named individual, such as a real person, a literary character, a racehorse, an army regiment or air force squadron, a real place, or a castle (often including the category-word *Castle*). These are names which of themselves clearly do not entail category membership, whilst some implicate (suggest) category membership in the most misleading way. In the relevant application, *Chun Castle* is not a castle but a locomotive. Conversely, I have not met a single locomotive in the whole of British railway history whose name includes the words *locomotive* or *engine*.

³ Though I actually doubt it. There is nothing to stop a man with a different surname being called *Tug*, and not every *Wilson* was in fact a *Tug* even if he might have been in principle; just as not every relevant person bears the better-known traditional English nicknames. Although named *Richard*, I have never been called or responded to the traditional corresponding hypocorism *Dick*, and it is not a name of mine.

2. Grimsby fishing trawlers

The names of trawlers fishing out of my home town in its glory days (1880-1980) were very often second-order, commemorative, names: e.g. those of persons, places, football clubs and constellations, with some ethnonyms (like *Canadian*), whose onymic status we might debate. Others were onymized lexical items, such as words for birds and flowers (though strangely, rarely fish). There were also some true trawleronyms, mostly following the type [keyword from the name of the owning company + lexical word], e.g. *Ross Revenge*, *Boston Coronet*, *Saxon Onward*. Truly unique were those of the firm all of whose ships bore a name following the orthographic formula <Re ... o>, e.g. *Remillo*, where the inserted material was not necessarily a lexical word (*Revigo*). Whilst some names in this set are undoubtedly trawler names and not reapplied examples from some other category, again we can observe that no names include the categorial term *trawler*, or even *ship* or *boat*. (It is true that there is much medieval and early-modern evidence for the use of *ship* or *boat*, such as the famous *The White Ship*, in which the heir to the English throne died in 1120.) None of the trawler-names we have been examining therefore allow the inference that the bearer is a trawler, or a ship of any description. The fact that they are trawler-names is a matter of encyclopedic, not semantic, knowledge.

3. Californian inhabited places

Briefly, I can mention the vast number of second-order place-names which are reapplications of saints' names (or more strictly from the names of their feast-days, which are arguably not proper names): *San Diego*, *San Francisco*, *Santa Barbara*, and so on.

What these examples show, taken all together, is that names of categorized things can be grouped together as names belonging to that category, and that some names are repeated for things in that category. Such repetition does not, however, mean that there is a stable, permanent, or logically secure relationship between any name understood as a type or proprial lemma and the category which it may appear to represent. We cannot therefore construct a defensible synchronic lexicon of (e.g.) personal names or zoonyms. All we can say is that name-types are typically or prototypically (at the strongest, perhaps: etymologically) associated with a particular category. If I tell you my name is *Richard* /'ritʃəd/, you might infer (without inspection) that I am probably a male human being and English or English-speaking, but nothing more secure. If I tell you that my name is *I left my heart in the highest mountains*, be careful: I might be a racehorse.

To sum up: (individual) proper names can be grouped on the basis of their referential properties into denotation sets which may be anthropologically significant. Proprial lemmas or name-types cannot. The relation between categorization, terminology, and propriality therefore remains problematic.

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