

Choosing a Name = Choosing Identity? Towards a Theoretical Framework

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Abstract

This article presents a theoretical framework for applying an identity approach to personal naming. It also presents some results from a doctoral thesis project in which this framework has been applied in an analysis of parents' choices of first names for their children. Questions discussed in this article include: To what extent do choices of first names function as acts of identity? Which aspects of first names are used as resources for identity creation? Which kinds of identities are created? To what extent are traditional sociolinguistic variables (such as age, education, etc.) able to account for the social variation of naming today? To what extent is the identity creation of naming negotiated from moment to moment? The discussion is based on results from two component studies: a written survey (with 621 participants) and group discussions (with 23 participants) conducted in Göteborg, Sweden 2007–2009.

1. Introduction

Within onomastic research, it is a common perception that names and identity are closely intertwined (e.g. Andersson et al. 1998, and conference papers in *Rapport frå konferansen "Namn og identitet" Blindern 16. November 2007* [Report from the conference "Names and identity" held at Blindern 16 November 2007] and *Rapport frå konferansen "Names and identities II" Blindern 21. November 2008* [Report from the conference "Names and identities II" held at Blindern 21 November 2008]). However, there exist few theoretical frameworks explaining this relationship and few analytical tools have been developed in order to enable observations of the relationship in empirical onomastic data. This article will present a theoretical framework that attempts to explain how parents' choice of a first name for their child can be interpreted as a way of explicitly acting out and manifesting different social identities (both for themselves and for the child). It combines a socio-cultural and linguistic approach to identity with a focus on naming, grounded in onomastic theory and research. The article will also present results from a doctoral thesis project (Aldrin, 2011) in which such an analysis is applied.

The article will be structured along the lines of the following research questions:

1. To what extent and for what benefit might an identity-theoretical framework be applied to contexts of personal naming?
2. How can first names be used as resources for identity creation and which of all the many potentially meaningful parts of a name are actually used by parents in this way?
3. What kinds of identities are created through choices of first names?
4. What is the significance of traditional sociolinguistic variables (such as age, education, etc.)?
5. What is the significance of interactional aspects?

2. The concept of identity

The starting point for a perspective on names and naming as part of identity creation is evidently the assumption of the concept *identity* and its importance for human activity. This complex concept has been widely used within different fields and in several ways within each

field, and is therefore quite important to define. In this article I suggest a socio-cultural linguistic approach to identity inspired by Bucholtz & Hall (2005). This approach uses research results from sociolinguistics and interactional linguistics, as well as linguistic anthropology. Within this approach, identity is perceived to be a person's process of using action, interaction and creation of images of self and others in order to explore who he or she is or who he or she wants to be in a certain context of the world. Keywords within the approach are *actively created*, *interactional*, *flexible*, *process* and *existing on different levels*.

According to the socio-cultural linguistic view, identity is something that people actively do, rather than something that exists a priori or can be easily derived from certain social factors (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, 587; cf. Widdicombe, 1998, 191). Hence, it is only possible to study identity through actions, such as the act of naming. Identity is also seen as something that is created in cooperation and negotiation with all participants in a certain context (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, 598; cf. Ochs, 1993, 290; Van de Mierop, 2008, 492). Individuals can create images of themselves, but they can also be ascribed images by others. Every created image is always created in relation to other images in the environment and given meaning by their relation to these others. Following this perspective, a study of names and identity must consider not only the relationship between name and self, but also the relationship between name and others, as well as the relationship between self and others. Moreover, identity is seen as a flexible process, rather than something fixed and stable (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, 605–606; cf. de Fina et al., 2006, 2). It is constantly changing throughout a person's life, through different contexts and potentially also within the same context. An individual may even act out several different identities simultaneously. The identity of an individual is therefore never “completed” and accordingly it can never be observed or analyzed as a whole. A study of identity can therefore only be a study of the fragments of identity that are put forward and made significant in a certain context.

Furthermore, identity is seen as a process existing on several levels simultaneously (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, 592; cf. Zimmerman, 1998). On a micro-level, individuals create small-scale, rather fluid identities that only persist during a particular interaction and that may very well vary even during the same interaction. Such identities may include, for example, speaker/listener, agreeing/disagreeing, being engaged/being distanced, etc. On a local level individuals create somewhat more prolonged identities that may persist not only during an entire interaction but also during several different interactions. Local identities, however, are only relevant within a certain field (cf. Bourdieu, 1984), such as the field of naming, the field of clothing, the field of leisure, etc. This situation means that whenever engaging in or talking about names or clothes or leisure, the same local identities may be recreated and reinforced. Individuals are often more aware of their creation of these local identities than they are of micro-level identities. On a macro-level, finally, individuals create identities that are even more prolonged than the local ones. These macro identities can be relevant in several interactions as well as within different fields. They are often related to macro-societal structures or lifestyles. Such identities may include, for example, female/male, mother/daughter, young/old, educated/non-educated, labourer/clerk, etc. Any or all of these identity levels (micro, local, macro) may be given relevance at a given point in a certain context. They may also influence one another, so that acts which contribute to identity creation on one level will have an impact on how identities are created on other levels.

Finally, the process of identity creation is seen as being made up of several individual acts. Drawing on Davies & Harré (1990) these acts can be described as *social positionings*. Social positionings are made when tangible resources are used – these may be linguistic resources or others – that in some way position individuals socially through a creation of stances, attitudes or affiliations. In this way, the use of a particular resource, such as the choice of a specific name, may index – albeit in an indirect and complex way – a certain social position.

Taking on a certain social position means seeing the world from a particular viewpoint and changing social position enables a person to view the world from a different perspective.

3. The concept of naming

The concept of naming must also be defined. I argue that naming should be seen not as a single, simple, performative act that can be easily studied through given names, but as a process in itself. Drawing on my own research and results concerning parents' choices of first names in Sweden, I argue that personal naming can be described as a range of actions during several phases. This is also illustrated in Chart 1. The phases of personal naming are (at least) the following: a phase of inspiration when parents more or less consciously search for or notice possible names; a phase of comparison when parents more or less consciously compare and evaluate different possibilities; a phase of testing when parents test how well the name suits the child or explore others' reactions to the name; a phase of decision making when parents actually decide what to name the child; and a phase of formalization when parents formalize the name choice through announcing the name to family and friends and to the authorities. Finally, I also suggest a narrative phase which occurs after the name is actually chosen, during which parents are given the opportunity to describe the name choice to the child itself or to others, and in so doing also have the opportunity to recreate the meaning of the name choice. These phases imply that naming becomes a potentially never-ending process. It may begin long before the child is born (some Swedish parents report that they started thinking about names for their future children even when they were themselves children) and it may last a very long time and may potentially be resumed several times during a parent's lifetime. It should also be noted that, as the arrows in the chart indicate, the phases of naming may occur in different orders, they may be differently extended and all name-giving parents might not go through all phases. There may also be more or less significant cultural differences. However, the main point is that, seen together, personal naming constitutes a complex process that develops over time and through interaction between several parties.

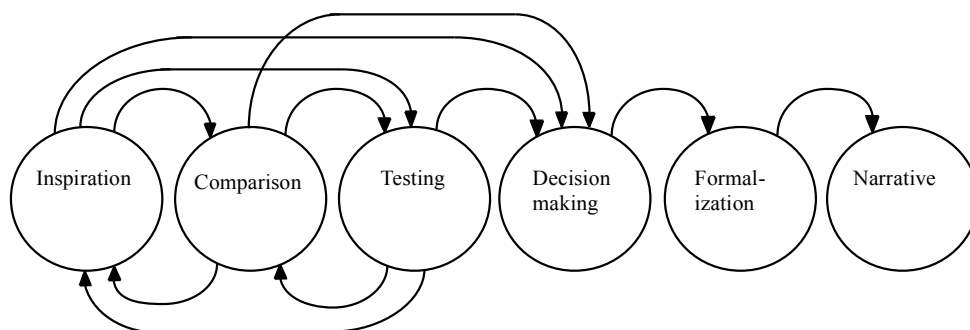


Chart 1. The process of personal naming.

4. A theoretical framework of naming and identity

With these theoretical starting points in mind, I will now consider how personal naming can be seen as a setting for the creation and negotiation of social meaning and identity. It has already been implied that each phase of the naming process includes several different possibilities and choices to be made. I argue that these choices can furthermore be seen as social positionings. When searching for inspiration, comparing various names, finally deciding on a name and telling others about the chosen name, parents will, more or less consciously, always take up different social stances in some way. In fact, any name and any chosen action during the process of naming could potentially become associated with certain

social attributes, values, groups and, therefore, social positions in relation to which parents will then have to orient themselves. Choosing a certain name then, or choosing to act in a certain way during the process of naming, implies choosing which social attributes, values, groups and positions one wishes to be associated with and which ones one wishes to be dissociated from. This theoretical framework can be summarized in a chart (Chart 2).

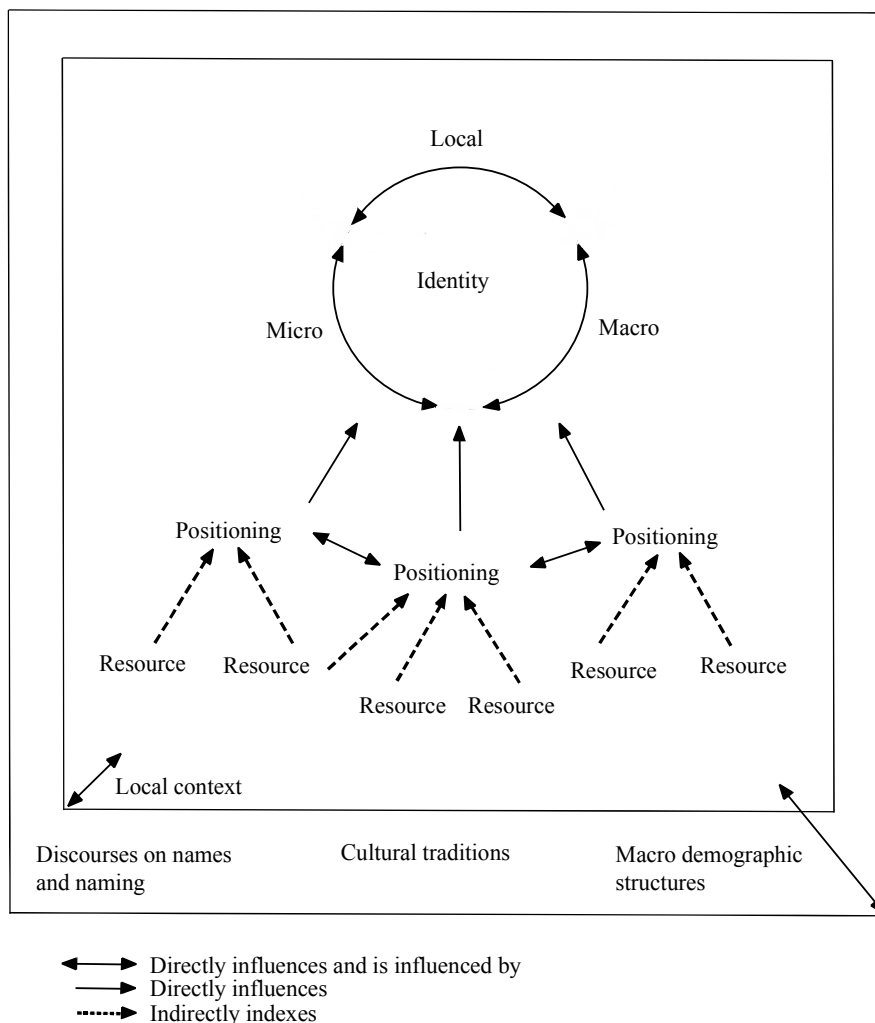


Chart 2. Identity creation through naming.

The concept of identity is noted at the top of the chart, as well as the three identity levels (micro, local, macro). As indicated by the two-way arrows these levels all influence one another. The circular form indicates that we are dealing with a flexible process, rather than a fixed result. The chart illustrates how identity is constructed through several social positionings, which in the case of naming are constituted by the different choices made during the process of naming. Two-way arrows indicate how each individual social positioning influences every other one, so that every single choice influences what is possible and desirable to choose to do next. If parents choose a particular source of inspiration, then certain names will be available to be chosen, whereas others will not. In a similar way, if parents choose to use certain name criteria, this decision will influence what kind of names will be desirable to choose.

When positioning oneself, an individual uses some sort of tangible resources. In the case of naming these may be, for example, certain sources of inspiration, traditions, input from others, name criteria, name types, individual names, name spellings, or ways of describing

the chosen name to others. The use of such resources may be seen as potentially socially positioning the parents. However, the relationship between the use of a particular resource and the social position this indicates is never simple and direct. Rather, it is indexical and indirect, as indicated by the dashed arrows in the chart (cf. Ochs, 1992, 342; Eckert, 2008). This situation means that it is not easy for a researcher to understand which social positioning is created through the use of a particular resource, such as a certain name. To understand the social meaning of a specific resource the researcher needs rich information on the parents' ways of describing, using or relating to this resource.

Identity is also always embedded in a certain context, indicated in the chart by the frames (cf. Fairclough, 1992, 73). The immediate local context (where people are, who they are with, why they are there, etc.) will always have an impact on how identities are created, on which phases or individual acts within the naming process will become socially important and which will not, as well as on what kind of social positions will be available to take on. Larger discourses (how names and naming are described and related to in a particular society or its media), cultural traditions (how people are accustomed to name children in a certain culture) and macro-societal structures (how people are expected to name children and talk about names depending on such things as gender, age, education, etc.) will also influence this. Thus, I argue that naming can never be a completely free choice, regardless of any absence of naming regulations or name laws. Naming will always be embedded in and framed by other practices, and naming will both be influenced by these other practices and have an impact on them (cf. Giddens, 1984; Jaworski & Coupland, 1999, 12).

5. Applying the theory to empirical data

The presented theoretical framework was developed and applied in my doctoral thesis project on personal naming in Sweden. This project contained two component studies. Firstly, a written postal survey was conducted, with 621 participants, all with children born in the Swedish town of Göteborg during a few spring months in 2007. The survey contained 20 questions on how and why the parents chose the names for the child, as well as some questions on the parents' socio-cultural background. The response rate was 61% and the social distribution of participants was fairly broad. Some groups were overrepresented though, namely mothers, well-educated parents and parents over the age of 30. Secondly, interviews were conducted in the form of group discussions with a further 23 participants. These participants had also recently become parents and their children were born in Göteborg in 2008. They were interviewed in groups of 3 to 6 and the discussions were recorded and later roughly transcribed. During the interviews participants were asked to discuss their views on themes such as naming procedure, sources of inspiration, name criteria and the importance of the name for the future of the child. The data were analyzed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The postal survey was primarily analyzed with quantitative methods (statistical correlation analysis and measures of association), but the open-ended questions of the survey were analyzed more qualitatively. The interviews were analyzed exclusively with qualitative methods using a combination of thematic analysis, interactional sociolinguistic analysis (Gumpertz, 1999), categorization analysis (Hester & Eglin, 1997) and analysis inspired by conversation analysis (CA) (Wooffitt & Widdicombe, 2006). Through this combination of several kinds of data and several analytic methods it was possible to study naming and identity from different perspectives. The analysis included both how names can relate to large, macro-societal structures and how the meaning of a name can be negotiated from moment to moment by parents during interaction.

6. First names as resources for identity creation

Following the presented theoretical framework, not only names themselves but also ways of naming can become socially significant and a resource for positioning. A combination of these aspects was analyzed in my doctoral thesis project. However, in this article I will focus solely on first names as resources and consider which aspects of first names are used as resources for identity creation among the Swedish parents. Results from the survey and the interviews show that some formal aspects of first names were often ascribed social significance by the Swedish parents. The *frequency* of the name (among other children or in the Swedish population as a whole) was used to index a position as more or less “common” vs. “unique”, or “conformist” vs. “creative”. The *spelling* of the name was used to index social values connected to being “common” vs. “unique”, being more or less “Swedish”, “foreign” or “international”, or being more or less “practical” vs. “aesthetic”. The *sound and sonority* of the name seemed also to be used as a resource to index social values connected to images of being “tuff” and “cool” or “sweet” and “soft”. The *etymology* of names was rarely considered among the Swedish parents, but was sometimes used to index a certain religious position or a particular lifestyle which was then indicated by the theme of the etymological meaning. Finally, the Swedish parents very often made use of the *associations* that they themselves get from the name and that they believe others get as well. It was in these cases mostly a matter of associations to certain individuals (such as a relative or celebrity), social groups (such as trendy people or working-class people), time periods (such as the name being perceived as old-fashioned or modern) and cultural spheres (such as Swedish culture, Old Norse culture or American culture).

By combining several of these aspects in one name, parents were able to create rather complex and nuanced social positionings through the name choice. However, in many cases the same name, the same spelling, or another aspect of the name could be used to index different social values by different parents. This situation resulted in a very indirect relationship between names and social positions in the Swedish data. As a rule, I found that resources used by parents other than the name also need to be taken into consideration to create the possibility of understanding which social position(s) a certain name indexes at a particular instance. The chosen name really seems to be only one way of creating identity through naming.

7. Some local identity types created through choices of first names

The theoretical framework suggests that identity is created on several levels simultaneously (micro, local, macro). The doctoral thesis project considered all of these levels in its analysis, but focused mostly on local identities. The social positions most commonly taken up by the Swedish parents on this level can be summarized as four scales, each with at least two opposite poles: Traditional or modern? Common or unique? Practical or aesthetic? Swedish-oriented, internationally-oriented or oriented to a certain foreign culture? This is also illustrated in Chart 3. The scales represent those social positions towards which the Swedish parents most often oriented themselves when describing how they had chosen the name for their child and what kind of name they wanted and did not want. Hence, the scales tell something about Swedish society, namely, what kind of values are seen there as desirable or beneficial and which kind of values are given social meaning. A study of naming in another culture would probably create a more or less different model with other poles being important. The poles of the scales should not be interpreted in terms of “either/or” – rather they must be seen as continuous scales. The Swedish parents often created intermediate positions in various ways and they also often combined different positions on different scales.

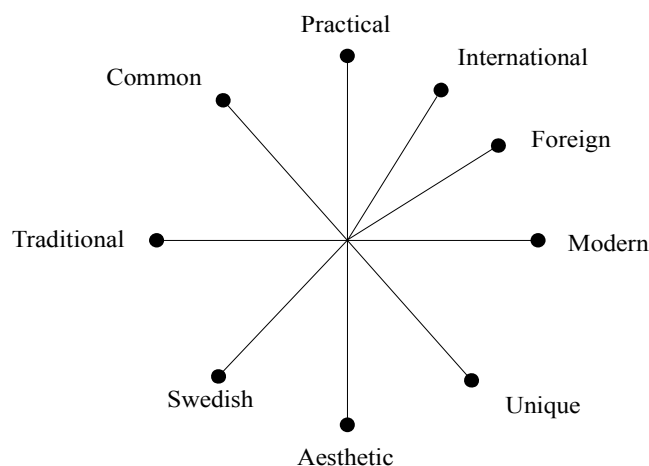


Chart 3. Local level identity types

8. The significance of traditional sociolinguistic macro-societal variables

My doctoral thesis project also included statistical tests and measurements of correlation between the creation of local identities and some traditional sociolinguistic macro-societal variables. More precisely, parents’ age, education, choice of housing, language background and the sex of the child were considered. The results did show some correlations, but in general these variables seemed to have only limited importance for the kind of local identities created by the Swedish parents. The differences between groups drawn from the variables were generally quite small. Greatest importance seemed to be given to parents’ age and education.

For example, older parents more often than younger parents positioned themselves as “traditional”. This positioning could be created through an emphasis on the name being traditional or old-fashioned as name criteria or through choosing names from the family tradition. As Table 1 shows, these acts were used more commonly in relation to a higher age of the mother. 27% of mothers positioned themselves in this way among mothers under the age of 26, compared to 30% among mothers 26–30 years, 39% among mothers 31–35 years, and 49% among mothers over the age of 35. Hence while the pattern seems to be clear, it is still only a minority of parents who have positioned themselves in this way in all age groups. Even among the oldest mothers, only half of them have created a traditional positioning.

Table 1. Positioning oneself as “traditional”, seen in relation to the age of the mother

	≤25 years		26–30 years		31–35 years		≥36 years	
“Traditional”	27%	11	30%	52	39%	105	49%	64
Total	100%	41	100%	172	100%	270	100%	130

χ^2 -analysis: p 0.003, DF 3, χ^2 13.642. Cramers V 0.022

Younger parents, on the other hand, were more concerned than the older parents about the aesthetic quality of the name and they more often positioned themselves as “aesthetic”. Table 2 shows that younger mothers found it more important that the name should be sonorous and sound well than did older mothers. A large majority (77%) among mothers under 26 years found this to be “very important”, compared to 59% among mothers 26–30 years, 54% among mothers 31–35 years, and 46% among mothers over 35 years. The differences between age groups are rather large, with a difference of 30% between the youngest and the oldest mothers. Still, a large proportion of mothers in every age group have positioned themselves in this way, indicating that doing so cannot be exclusively a matter of acting young.

Table 2. Valuation of the name quality “being sonorous”, seen in relation to the age of the mother

	≤25 years		26–30 years		31–35 years		≥36 years	
Very important	77%	23	59%	75	54%	119	46%	51
Important	20%	6	36%	46	37%	81	43%	48
Less important	3%	1	3%	4	4%	8	5%	5
Indifferent/did not consider this	0%	0	2%	2	5%	11	5%	5
Did not wish this	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0
Uncertain	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	2%	2
Total	100%	30	100%	127	100%	220	100%	111

Kruskal-Wallis test: p 0.020, DF 3, H 9.87 (rank sums from left are: 190, 231, 246, 264). Spearmans rho 0.131

Regarding parents’ education, results showed that well-educated parents positioned themselves as “common” and conformist more often than did less-educated parents. A positioning as “common” could be created through the choice of a name which is very common in Sweden or through an emphasis on the importance of the name being well established or proper. Table 3 shows that these actions were more common among mothers with university education. 23% of mothers without any university degree positioned themselves in this way, compared to 31% among mothers with a lower university degree and 39% among mothers with a higher university degree. Again, we can clearly see a pattern, but the differences between groups are small, and even among mothers with the highest university degree only a minority have created a “common” positioning.

Table 3. Positioning oneself as “common”, seen in relation to the education of the mother

	No univ. degree		Lower univ. degree		Higher univ. degree	
“Common”	23%	38	31%	22	39%	139
Total	100%	167	100%	71	100%	357

χ^2 -analysis: p 0.001, DF 2, χ^2 13.602. Cramers V 0.023

The less-educated parents often even dissociated themselves from a position as “common”, describing this position as equal to being “boring” or “mediocre”. They, on the other hand, more often positioned themselves as “foreign-oriented” in the form of an orientation towards Anglo-American culture. Table 4 shows that 30% of mothers without any university degree positioned themselves in this way, in comparison to 19% among mothers with a lower university degree, and 15% among mothers with a higher university degree. Yet again, the differences between the groups are limited and only a small share in all of the groups has positioned themselves in this way.

Table 4. Positioning oneself as “foreign-oriented”, seen in relation to the education of the mother

	No univ.		1–2 years univ.		≥3 years univ.	
“Foreign-oriented”	30%	34	19%	10	15%	46
Total	100%	115	100%	54	100%	305

χ^2 -analysis: p 0.003, DF 2, χ^2 11.397. Cramers V 0.024

One may conclude from these results that traditional sociolinguistic macro-societal variables such as age and education do have some significance, but seem far from sufficient to explain the variation of naming and the local positionings made by the Swedish parents in this study.

It must be suspected that other variables are in action at this level and that an investigation of these would be of greater importance.

9. The significance of interactional aspects

Finally, my doctoral thesis project also included qualitative analyses of parents' ways of creating social positionings through interaction with other parents during a group interview. The results from this study show that parents often positioned themselves in many different and sometimes contradictory ways during the course of an interview. The topic seemed to be of importance for the ways parents chose to position themselves, as well as matters of affiliation ("we") and dissociation ("them"), along with parents' attitudes toward social categories which they connected with certain topics, particular names and certain ways of talking about names. How other participants positioned themselves in the interaction was also important. Parents usually avoided conflicts with or divergence from others in the group and active negotiation of different views was quite rare. This result strengthens the presented view on identity as being something rather flexible and changeable that is recreated from moment to moment. It also supports the notion that identity creation is embedded in a certain context and constructed in relation to the identities of others.

10. Conclusion

This article has presented a theoretical framework of naming and identity creation. It has been shown that personal naming *can* be seen as a range of acts of identity and that an identity theoretical approach can be quite beneficial for onomastic analysis. Chosen names, as well as several aspects of the chosen names, can be seen as resources that parents may use to create social positionings – and, in effect, different identities. The article has also shown how the presented theory can be applied in an onomastic study and has given examples of what kind of identities can be created through personal naming. However, as was the case in the presented data, the researcher might need access to information about the parents and information about their view on the chosen name in order to enable an understanding of which social positionings parents are making through the name choice. The name itself is only one resource that parents gain access to during the process of naming, and looking at names alone may not be sufficient for the analysis. Furthermore, the article has shown that parents' social positionings in the narrative phase may change from moment to moment within interaction depending on factors such as thematic context and the positionings of others. Finally, it has been indicated that traditional sociolinguistic variables (such as age and education) may no longer be the most useful approach to macro-level identities. In the presented data, these variables had only limited significance for parents' social positionings, suggesting that there may be other more important variables at work on this level which need to be considered.

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