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Ten Theses on Proper Names

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A name (here and below = a proper name) is a linguistic sign, normally consisting of a word[1] but sometimes of a syntagm, the use of which is so conventionalized that it functions as a word. If you accept the Saussurean dichotomy, this means that a name is a Janus head equipped with two faces: the external form—a sequence of phonemes or graphemes—and the internal contents—a set of semantic features.

For syntactic as well as morphologic reasons, names should be classified as nouns.[2] Syntactically, names can be found in all the nodes where the symbol NP can appear: as subjects, as direct and indirect objects, as genitival or appositional attributes, etc. Morphologically, names are inflected in the same way as non-onomastic nouns, although with some obvious restrictions in number and definiteness. Normally, we have no choice as to the first category: some, and most, names are always in the singular *(England)* and some, considerably fewer, names are always in the plural *(the United States of America)*. In regard to definiteness, names in two interdependent ways behave in a manner of their own: mostly, a name either always has a definite article *(the Thames)*, or it always lacks one *(London)*; and in all phrases where you can have either only a noun in the definite or only a noun in the indefinite, names occur in phrases where only a definite noun is permitted.[3] That the definite article has been so

[1] The Anglo-Saxon way of opposing words and names is, I am sorry to have to say, a terminological disaster. I don't know who is the first offender, but E. Partridge's well-known *Names into Words. Proper Names That Have Become Common Property* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949), must have done much to spread the misuse. For a misuse it is, since it deprives us of the only acceptable term for those linguistic units which are in print separated by space.

[2] This is, of course, the way most grammarians handle names, but if names are not words (nee note 1), they can't very well be nouns.

[3] Some proofs of this well-known fact are given in B. Pamp, "Names and Meanings. A Mentalistic Approach," *Proc. of 13th Int. Congress of Onom. Sciences*, p. 234.

stereotyped in names is due to the fact that names are always in the definite. (The variation between a definite and an indefinite form which you can find in, for example, German personal names—*Hans ∿der Hans*—is a stylistic variation, not a variation between definiteness and indefiniteness.)

The constant definiteness of names suggests a similarity between names and certain pronouns which also always behave as definite nouns. The personal pronouns seem to be the closest relatives, but it should be noted that names have a deictic quality[4] which can lead the thoughts to demonstrative pronouns in their substantival function as well. The differences between those kinds of pronouns and names are, however, more important than the similarities: the pronouns are "shifters,"[5] which means that their semantic contents vary according to the context, whereas the meanings of names (which will be discussed more thoroughly later on) are even more independent of the context than those of non-onomastic nouns. A name refers to an individual, and once the meaning of the name has been established, a context cannot normally change very much of it. A non-onomastic counterpart like an appellative in the definite will take the lexical meaning of the word as an appellative from the lexicon, and the contextual meaning of the word as a definite noun in a text from the previous context.[6] From a semantic point of view, appellatives are really more akin than names to pronouns.

That names are always in the definite is closely related to the fact that they are always monoreferential: they refer to only one phenomenon *(John Johnson)* or one set of phenomena *(the Rocky Mountains)*. This means that a name always indicates that the referent is in some way unique in the world. If you refer to something with the help of a noun in the indefinite, you suggest at the same time that there exist other things which can also be designated by the noun you use. *A fish* presupposes the existence of other fish, *a pebble* the existence of other pebbles. A name in its real function as a name can hence not be in the indefinite, and you cannot put

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[4] W. Van Langendonck, "On the Theory of Proper Names," *Proc. of 13th Int. Congress of Onom. Sciences,* pp. 68-69. That I don't agree with the author on the semantics of names will be apparent.

[5] O. Jespersen, *Language, Its Nature, Development and Origin* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1922), p. 123.

[6] B. Pamp, *op. cit,* p. 233. The situation above reflects a state where the lexical meaning of an appellative is so firmly established in the lexicon of an individual that the contextual meaning can add nothing to it. See also point 5 below.

an indefinite article before it without in some important ways changing its nature as a name. In *a John Johnson wants to see you,* the name phrase means *a man who says his name is John Johnson,* and in *I now experienced a John Johnson I had never seen before,* it means *a side of the personality of John Johnson.*

The relation between definiteness and monoreferentiality may be illustrated by the fact that there is a considerable degree of monoreferentiality in all definite nouns, be they onomastic or not. In its typical use the definite article of a non-onomastic noun denotes that the NP which it is part of is known to the receiver, the contextual meaning of the definite NP being copied from a previous real or presupposed phrase.[7] A definite appellative noun like *the man* is typically preceded by a phrase like *I saw a man in the street.* The fact that in its context the definite noun is identical with a previously mentioned or presupposed indefinite noun of course makes the definite noun in some respects monoreferential, quite unequivocally so when it is a noun in the singular, and in a collective sort of way (resembling the vague plurality of a plural name) when it is in the plural.[8]

It has been maintained[9] that the difference in this respect between names and other nouns in the definite is that while definite non-onomastic nouns can be derived from almost any kind of a preceding phrase with the noun in question in the indefinite, names are derived only from phrases like *somebody or something is called X.* The analysis doesn't seem convincing. It entails a metalinguistic element[10] which circumvents but doesn't solve the problems. It appears that here, as always, the important thing is that a name is always monoreferential and hence always in the definite. The difference in derivation between names and non-onomastic nouns in the definite would then be that non-onomastic nouns get their definiteness through a derivation from an indefinite equivalent, while names exist as definite NPs, or have something corresponding to definiteness, from the beginning; they need no derivations to become definite, as their definiteness is marked even in the deep structure.

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[7] U. Teleman, *Definita och indefinita attribut i nusvenskan* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1969), pp. 62-64.

[8] Cf. Van Langendonck, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

[9] U. Teleman, *op. cit.*, p. 67; cf. Van Langendonck, *op. cit.*, p. 75, for further references.

[10] Van Langendonck, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

Some monoreferential NPs exist in a twilight zone where the border lines between names and non-onomastic nouns are hard to see and impossible to fix. A theory of names must take into account not only clearcut examples like *John* and *London* but also this blurred category. Good illustrating examples can be found in names originating in appellatives or non-onomastic syntagms. The first kind can be exemplified with a place name like *Thorne,* its original meaning being "(the) thorn-bush."[11] The present habitation must have started with (a place with a) thorn-bush which had some outstanding quality (the only one of its kind? unusually big? the object of pagan rites? One can only guess). The first person who referred to the place as *(the) thorn-bush* cannot possibly have created a name at the same moment; he must have used the phrase in the same way as he used phrases like (in modern English) *the river, the oak, the village* (of course, all those phrases can turn into place names, too). The character of a name,[12] a real place name, must have evolved gradually. It is not unreasonable to suppose that one individual could at one time use the phrase as a name and at another time as a non-onomastic noun, and it is more than probable that there was a time when the phrase was comprehended as a name by some people and as a non-onomastic noun by others. In much the same way the inhabitants of a church village of today may refer to their church as *the Church,* the phrase having all the qualities of a name, while a tourist visiting the village may interpret and use the phrase as *the church,* referring to one church of many known to him and present in his mind.

The case where the origin is a non-onomastic syntagm can be exemplified by another English place name, *Dunthrop,* "Dunna's thorp, Dunna's outlying farmstead."[13] If the name has not been formed stereotypically on the pattern of older names ending in *-thorp* (in which case I could only have chosen one of those names instead to prove my point), this syntagm cannot possibly have been

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[11] E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (London: Oxford University Press, 4th ed., 1960), p. 467.

[12] In this connection it will suffice to define a name as a monoreferential NP, the use of which has become so conventionalised that in a speech community of two or more persons it is the normal expression used to designate a referent. The definition allows for the gliding transition from a non-onomastic NP to a name which I have tried to illustrate here.

[13] E. Ekwall, *op. cit.,* p. 154.

turned into a name by the first person who referred to the farmstead as *Dunna's thorp.* It stands to reason that he used the phrase in the same way as he used phrases like *Dunna's hat, Dunna's horse* or *Dunna's wife.* But after Dunna's hat turned into dust, his horse was slaughtered and his wife and he himself died, the farmstead lived on as a habitation, and with the fading away of the memory of Dunna, a place name came into being. To those who remembered Dunna it could still at times be only a non-onomastic description of the place, not a real name, while to others, who had no idea of Dunna's existence, *Dunna's thorp* was a place name, with all the semantic contents of an onomastic noun.

As opposed to place names, the other important category of names, personal names, only seldom start as non-onomastic designations of the bearer of the name. We can find few exceptions to this in the chief group of personal names, the so-called Christian names, which need of course not be Christian at all and which are given, it seems, in all cultures to the child just a short time after its birth. Small babies seldom differ so much from each other that it is posible to give them names where the morpheme(s) can meaningfully describe the inner or outer characteristics of the name bearer. There are many other ways of choosing or creating a name, ways which vary from culture to culture. It is very common to give the child a name indicating that it will be strong, wealthy, beautiful or virtuous. Sometimes the naming here may have an element of magic, which is certainly the case when the opposite kind of names, names with negative connotations, are given with the intention of frightening away evil spirits. The name can refer to a tribal token, to an incident at the time of the birth of the child or during the pregnancy of its mother, and it can quite soberly just give the child its ordinal number *(Quintus).* In modern Western culture most names are given after a person whom the parents feel should be commemorated or whom they admire (a relative, a movie or pop star, etc.), or, which is perhaps most often the case, a name is chosen just because the parents find it beautiful. Since fashions in names vary just as much as fashions in clothes, it makes many personal names easy to date. (In Sweden, for example, pro-American and pro-English feelings after the Second World War made Anglo-Saxon names fashionable. If you meet a Swede called *Benny, Conny* or *Kenneth*, it is a pretty safe bet that he was born in the late forties or in the fifties.

If we turn from Christian names to bynames, however, it will not be difficult to show that personal names, too, can have a prehistory as non-onomastic nouns. Occupational bynames, patronyms (for

the sake of convenience, I include non-onomastic words and syntagms in the term), words for inhabitants, to mention just a few categories, can exemplify this. In *John Smith/smith,* the second word may be an appellative or a name. If the person indicated by the phrase has been a smith but has now another occupation, the word *smith* will gradually turn from an appellative to a name. In *John Johnson/John's son,* the patronym is certainly a name if John's father is called *Peter Johnson,* but it may be a name even if the name of the father is *John Peterson.*[14] And in *Grimolfus Danus* "Grimolfus the Dane,"[15] it is theoretically as well as practically impossible to determine whether *Danus* is a name or not.

The lexical competence of an individual is mirrored in his lexicon, where words (and possibly some word formation elements) are stored, together with information on, among other things, the semantic features of the different items. If two or more communicators are to understand each other, the items in their lexica have to be so alike that, *inter alia,* the semantic parts are, if not quite identical, at least to a great extent overlapping. Two persons can't talk about foxes without some considerable agreement as to the meaning of the word *fox.*

It seems reasonable to suppose that the same goes for names. People talking about a person by using his name must have some agreement on the meaning of that name, must draw upon a common knowledge of those characteristics of the name bearer which are necessary for the identification of him, and which must, consequently, be linguistically relevant. This appears to hint at some sturdy descriptive qualities of the semantic features of a name item in the lexicon. To look at the problem from another angle: in a conversation between two persons, X uses the monoreferential NP *the man I saw you with yesterday.* It is hard to deny that this NP has a descriptive meaning. But if the two persons, after X has been informed that the man's name is *John Johnson,* go on talking about him by using his name, is it reasonable to maintain that the name, being virtually synonymous with *the man I saw you with yesterday,* is devoid of descriptive meaning?

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[14] Even nowadays the onomastic status of a patronym is not always clear. This is instructively illustrated by the distinction in modern Icelandic between the Christian name and the patronymic surname: *Baldur Jónsson* "is called" *(heitir) Baldur* but "is" (er) Jónsson.

[15] G. Tengvik, *Old English Bynames* Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1938), p. 135.

Such an assertion could at least be described as mentalistically unrealistic.

But if there is a descriptive meaning in names, how can it be that individuals bearing the name *John* have practically nothing in common except their name (and maleness), while all individuals called *fox* share quite a lot of important characteristics? I think the answer is that the question uses the words *John* and *fox* on two different levels. If we claim, for example, that *foxes generally have tails,* we use the word *fox* as an ordinary appellative, but if we refrain from using *John* as referring to an individual, we can't use the word as an ordinary name and are restricted to use it in phrases like *John is the Anglo-Saxon form of the Hebrew name Jōchānān,* that is, we have to use the name as an autonym, as a metaword. If we accept that names have a (descriptive) meaning and that a word, including a name, is a combination of an external form and an internal semantic content, then we must also accept (as has often been done) that there are as many words *John* as there are individuals called *John,* that the different "names" *John* are just homonyms and that there is as little reason to expect any common characteristics in the various persons called *John* as there is to expect that *bear* "carry" and *bear* "Ursus" should have anything but the external forms of the words for the two concepts in common.

We may be born with some general concepts engraved in our brains, or in any case with the ability to quickly form those concepts, but of course most items in our mental lexica get their semantic contents from our experiences of the referents (I take the word *experience* in its widest sense possible, from observing a referent directly to hearing about it or learning about it in handbooks and dictionaries). It is not too difficult to imagine how the semantic features of an item concerning a non-onomastic noun are formed: if the word is an appellative like *fox*, you try to find out what is common to all the individuals you encounter which are designated by the noun, and if it is a material noun like *gold,* you try to find out what is common to the material designated by the noun wherever you experience it. But it is a contradiction in terms to talk about the common characteristics of an individual: you can experience him many times, but there will never be more than one specimen to observe, and in many places, but he will never be in more than one place at a time. Our John Johnson may be quite unknown outside his own small circle, but like every other man he plays many parts in his life: son, brother, school comrade, lover, husband, father, friend, subordinate, principal, and so on. In the lexica of those who know him, the semantic features of the item *John Johnson* consist of those characteristics of

the person bearing the name which the user has found essential. Different people may have different concepts (yes, I do think this term should be used) of him, so different that sometimes communications break down: X talks about the John who is the manager of his firm, and Y doesn't know that he refers to the John she once kissed in her father's orchard; but this doesn't mean, of course, that names have no meanings, only that the meaning of a name is more individually conditioned and hence more susceptible to misunderstandings than the meaning of a non-onomastic noun. And the normal thing is, fortunately, that the names in our private mental lexica have so many semantic features in common with the lexica of other people that we can converse meaningfully not only about men, women, dogs, foxes, villages, and mountains in general but also about those individuals to whom or to which we can refer most conveniently by using their names.

Conclusion

The above is necessarily sketchy and should have needed a firmer theoretical-methodological basis, but if I were to point out some points in it which I think should be taken into account in the construction of a comprehensive theory of proper names, it would be:

a) that the semantic similarities and differences between names and non-onomastic nouns in the definite should be investigated more thoroughly than has been done hitherto;
b) that the gradual transition from monoreferential non-onomastic nouns to names must be integrated into the theory; and
c) that the investigations should start not with a general grammar and a general lexicon but with the grammars and the lexica of individual people. A name is a name even if used by two persons only. It is in the mental processes and in the means of communications in this minimal speech community that the attempts to unravel the mysteries of proper names should begin.

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