Names Forum

Comments on Two Papers on the Semantics of Proper Names

Lena Peterson

Abstract

In September 1985, papers on the semantics of proper names, by Bengt Pamp and Vibeke Dalberg, appeared in *Names*. Both authors discuss the question whether there are "semi-appellatival" proper names, arriving at different answers, depending on their different views on the kind of meaning of proper names. Pamp uses the term *semantic feature* in an unconventional way, referring to the individual speaker's associations awakened by the name. Dalberg fails to hit a point, namely that one can talk about names that possess appellatival (descriptive) meaning, but only in the case the speaker in question is already informed of the properties of the denotatum. Dalberg is correct in saying that, theoretically, there is a demarcation line between appellatives and proper names. The essential criterion of a proper name is that it lacks classifying properties (generalizing power) and reference conditions.

*****

In the September 1985 number of *Names*, in a special issue on theory about names, Bengt Pamp and Vibeke Dalberg, in separate articles, put forward their views on the semantics of proper names. The discussion about the semantics of proper names has been going on for a long time now, and the literature on the subject has gotten to be rather extensive. Nevertheless, I venture to make a few comments on these two relatively recent contributions to the debate.

I will start with Pamp, whose article is called "Ten Theses on Proper Names," and jump on his sixth thesis (114-15). He says that some monoreferential nominal phrases "exist in a twilight zone where the border lines between names and non-onomastic nouns are hard to see and

83

impossible to fix" (114). The question he raises is whether there are "semi-appellatival" proper names, a question which is discussed at large in Dalberg's article, which I discuss below. Here I only want to point at a few details in Pamp's exposition.

Pamp gives as an example the placename *Thorne* (originally "[the] thorn bush"). Its character as a proper name must have grown gradually, he says. And it is possible that one speaker can use the word as a proper name and another as an appellative, or that one and the same speaker can use the word sometimes as a name and sometimes as an appellative. You can reason in the same way about *the Church* for example, he says.

Another of Pamp's examples is *Dunthrop,* which developed from *Dunna's thorp.* Pamp says: "It stands to reason that he [the first person who referred to the farmstead] 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" (115).

I myself cannot see that there is any difference, founded on principle, between *Thorne* and *the Church* on the one hand, and *Dunna's thorp* on the other. They are all three monoreferential nominal phrases, and it cannot be Dunna's death and vanishing into oblivion that constitute the status of proper name in *Dunna's thorp.* The individuality criterion is not a very effective way to distinguish proper names from appellatives. In a footnote Pamp defines proper names in the following way: "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." In short, individuality is no criterion.

I will return to this matter later on.

In his seventh thesis (115-16) Pamp states that personal names differ from placenames in that they seldom start as non-onomastic designations of the bearer of the name. This is valid for forenames. An interesting item in this paragraph is the following: "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.)" (115)

Here Pamp touches on the topic he has formerly discussed: the semantic features ("analytic meaning") of proper names, especially personal names.[1] It is over twenty years since Bondi Sciarone's "Proper Names and Meaning," but I think he will still stand quoting:

> It will be seen, first of all, that such names as Paul, John, Arthur are always used in reference to male persons and such names as Mary, Ann, Barbara when we are referring to female persons. Isn't it therefore possible to maintain that proper names from the point of view of the language system have something like meaning? For do not we get a particular information through these names and do not we know as English speakers that Paul is applicable to a male person and Mary to a female person? Even so, I think that we must give a negative answer to this question. We are concerned here with a non-linguistic convention resting on cultural tradition. In accordance with this tradition names formerly given to particular male persons are even now given to male persons and the same holds good for names of female persons. Once this tradition is known it is also known whether a particular name refers to a man or a woman. That we cannot speak of a linguistic convention, at this point, may also be realized from the fact that various names are used for both men and women and the same names may be used for ships, aircraft, houses etc. (84)

On the other hand, Pamp says, bynames often have a pre-history as non-onomastic words, and this fact makes them akin to placenames (cf. *Thorne,* etc. above). Overcome by these difficulties, Pamp finally utters a sigh: "And in *Grimolfus Danus* 'Grimolfus the Dane,' it is theoretically as well as practically impossible to determine whether *Danus* is a name or not" (116). Theoretically, I cannot understand why it would be impossible, provided that we were given a good definition of a proper name; at least it is not more impossible in this case than in the case of *Thorne* or *Dunna's thorp.* We have to recognize "(semi-)appellatival" personal names to as great an extent as such placenames.

In his eighth thesis (116-17) Pamp attacks the really interesting question: do proper names have meaning?

He starts by saying that if two or more persons are to communicate with each other, their mental lexica and the semantic features of the items of these lexica ought to agree, at least to a certain extent. Two persons cannot talk about foxes without coming to some agreement on the

meaning of the word *fox*. "It seems reasonable to suppose that the same goes for names," he says.Two persons talking about another person by using that person's name must have some agreement on the meaning of that name, he says; and, he adds, they "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" (116). Descriptive qualities of a name? Semantic features of a name?

Pamp provides an example (116-17): in a conversation between two persons, A uses the monoreferential nominal phrase *the man I saw you with yesterday*. This phrase has undoubtedly a descriptive quality. If B tells A that this person's name is *John Johnson*, and A and B continue talking about this person by using the name *John Johnson*, is it then, Pamp asks, "reasonable to maintain that the name, being virtually *synonymous* [my italics] with *the man I saw you with yesterday*, is devoid of descriptive meaning? Such an assertion could at least be described as mentalistically unrealistic," Pamp concludes.

An important thing to bear in mind is that Pamp bases his argument upon the individual speaker's lexicon and grammar, not a general lexicon and general grammar (see 118). I think this is a very essential point. But his argument for a descriptive meaning of proper names invites protest. If we exchange the phrase *the man I saw you with yesterday* for the "synonym" (!) *the man with the green hat*, we find that this phrase carries *another* descriptive meaning. It is not synonymous. Its semantic features are different.

This is an old truth: linguistic signs can have the same reference but different meanings. In our example the sign *John Johnson* has the same reference as *the man I saw you with yesterday*, but the two signs have different meanings.

Does a name really have a descriptive meaning? Table 1 is an attempt to describe the difference in meaning between appellatives and proper names.

I would make one comment on the fact that proper names lack reference conditions. It is said that children and primitive peoples conceive the word as a quality of the referent. We can claim that this is the case with proper names: the name is a quality of the referent. This can be expressed in another way: the intension of a proper name is derived from its extension, but not vice versa.[2] In fact, this is what Pamp — im-

Table 1. The difference between appellatives and names.

Appellatives

have	may have
conceptual meaning	associative meaning
(also called	(also called:
denotative meaning	connotative meaning
cognitive meaning	pragmatic meaning
analytic meaning	synthetic meaning)
descriptive meaning)	
that consists of	that consists of
extension =	extension =
the number of referents	the same as that of the
that can be designated by	conceptual meaning
the word in question	
and	and
intension =	intension =
the qualities that the	The qualities that the in-
referent must possess to be	dividual speaker ascribes
able to be designated by the	to the referent, depend-
word in question =	ing on knowledge of and
	attitudes toward the
	referent =
referent condition	part of the speaker's en-
semantic compoents	cyclopedic knowledge of
semantic features	the world, not a linguis-
	tic knowledge

Names

have	may have
onomastic meaning that consists of	appellative meaning (?)
extension = one referent	
and	
intension =	
the qualities that the	
referent really possesses	
(which can be unknown to	
the individual speaker) =	
the referent himself	
+	
the qualities that the in-	
dividual speaker ascribes to	
the referent (see above to	
the right).	

plicitly—says in his ninth thesis (117), which I do not need to go into here.

In his tenth thesis (117-18), Pamp further unfolds his point of view that it is the individual speaker's mental lexicon that is to be focused on when we discuss meaning. He says: "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 . . . of him, so different that sometimes communications break down . . . ; 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" (117-18). This is exactly what I have pointed out at the bottom of the left column in Table 1.

At last, let us go back to Pamp's first thesis: "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" (111). Evidently, Pamp means by "semantic features" something else than is usually meant, i. e. the assumption of an abstract lexicon of the language system, where, among other features like morphological, syntactic, etc., the semantic features are stored.

* * *

In her article, "On Homonymy between Proper Name and Appellative," Vibeke Dalberg finds it difficult to justify the use of the terms "appellative names" or "semi-appellative names" in a synchronic assessment of placenames.

Placenames like *Bækken, Kalvhagen*, formally corresponding to the appellatives *bækken* 'the brook' and *kalvhagen* 'the enclosure for calves,' have been considered to have semantic qualities different from those of placenames like *Hven* and *Skagen*. Dalberg refers to the Swedish scholar Thorsten Andersson, who has asked if it can be claimed that proper names in general are devoid of appellatival meaning.

The names under discussion are of a particular kind with two distinctive features: 1. The name has a formal counterpart in a commonly used appellative; 2. The meaning of this appellative agrees with the characteristics of the locality that bears the name (the referent or the denotatum).

Dalberg points out that it is essential that diachronic and synchronic viewpoints are kept apart. "The name must be assessed in its function as a proper name and such an assessment must not be confused with an assessment of the etymological components of the name." Further: "If the assessment is only concerned with the etymology of the name, then it is correct to use the term appellatival meaning; but the classifying properties of the appellative kalvehaven *cannot*, however, be transmitted further once the word has achieved the status of the proper name ... *Kalvehaven*. This is because the function of a proper name is incompatible with the possession of classifying meaning" (129). "The appellative," Dalberg says, "is indefinite in the sphere of linguistic competence" (la langue), but it "can be definite in performance" (la parole). It is this fact, she says, that makes it possible to use the appellative to refer to an object possessing the characteristics shared by the class (130).

Dalberg's expression "classifying properties" means the same as "generalising power," an expression used by Sciarone in 1967 (79ff). A name has no classifying properties. The name *Kalvhagen* can refer to only one particular locality, not to every locality that fulfills the conditions embodied in the meaning of *kalvhage* 'enclosure for calves.' Dalberg draws a clear-cut border line between appellatives and proper names (cf. Pamp above). I think she would agree to the following: If the name *Kalvhagen* could be used to refer to every locality that fulfills the conditions of an enclosure for calves, then it is no more a proper name. Again, I wish to quote Sciarone: "Real proper names can by no means be used metaphorically, for, when we use a word metaphorically there is always productive applicability [= generalising power] —though in a non-conventional way—which is an impossibility in proper names" (85).

Dalberg clearly insists that proper names do not give any information about the qualities of the denotatum: "The proper name, as already mentioned, does not indicate any characteristic about its denotatum" (130). And, "Agreement with the characteristics of the denotatum is not an argument for ascribing total or '(semi-) appellatival' meaning to proper names, since such an agreement makes no difference to the fact that in principle the proper name is without appellatival characteristics" (131).

This is really a hard problem to puzzle out. Undoubtedly, when we encounter an enclosure for calves (a *kalvhage*) called *Kalvhagen*, we cannot deny, if we wish to be honest, that the name conveys a description of the denotatum. And Dalberg also admits this. In the concrete perfor-

mance, she says, it can be extremely difficult to decide whether a particular linguistic sign is an appellative or a name. One and the same speaker can, in fact, use both words of the same locality (cf. Pamp above). But: "Just because there is no way of determining the correct categorical affiliation of the word, however, this does not justify us in taking it to be a transitional form between an appellative and a proper name nor in using it as the basis for the establishment of a boundary-zone in which the word can be placed" (131-32).

It is as if we are running our heads against the wall.

The solution to the problem lies in what is meant by "meaning." As Table 1 points out, there are two kinds. And Dalberg bears this in mind: "By the term associative meaning, as I choose to call it, is meant (secondary) meaning(s) which can be ascribed to words as a result of the individual performer's experiences with, and opinions about, the object referred to. . . .Further, homonymy can promote associative meaning in that the meaning of one word can contaminate, so to speak, that of another" (134).

The conclusions that finish Dalberg's paper are — remarkably enough — formulated as two questions: "If the names — as must undoubtedly sometimes be the case — transmit information to the user about an 'enclosure for calves,' a 'brook,' should this then be looked upon as a manifestation of homonymy with the appellatives kalvehave, bæk, etc.? Or to put it in other words, would it not be more satisfactory to refer to the type of meaning which some scholars have called '(semi-) appellatival' as associative meaning?" (135)

The question marks are puzzling. Is the author herself not fully convinced of her results? I think she has reason to be uncertain. I do not think she has achieved any solution to the problem of the (semi-) appellatival names. They are there, in spite of her endeavors to do away with them. In my opinion, Dalberg makes two mistakes; at least she fails to hit one essential point.

First, the term "associative meaning" in her last question is an unhappy choice. Of course, she is right in that the meaning of a proper name is always of the associative kind, but in our particular case it is in fact the conceptual (denotative, etc.) meaning of the appellative that is transferred to the name. The term "associative meaning" would then mean, speaking in Dalberg's terms, the conceptual meaning that the name is given from the appellative; but since names never have conceptual meaning but only associative meaning this is an associative meaning.

On getting this far, perhaps we could be content to say that there are, in fact, proper names with appellatival meaning and that the border line between names and appellatives is diffuse, not only in practice but also in theory. But I would like to go on to the point that I think Dalberg fails to hit. She refers (132-33) to Willy Van Langendonck, who has demonstrated the difference between conceptual meaning and pragmatic meaning. The word pragmatic is essential. Associative meaning is, as Dalberg puts it, "a result of the individual performer's experiences with . . . the object referred to" (134). This suggests to me that the associative meaning is not a part of the *linguistic knowledge* of the performer; it is part of his knowledge of reality (see Table 1).

Let us imagine this conversation. One person says to another: "Jag var i /kalvhagen/ förra veckan." ("I was in /kalvhagen/ last week.") The receiver of the message does not know of a place called *Kalvhagen*, but the speaker really means a particular place named *Kalvhagen*, and he also informs the receiver about this: "Well, it is a place that we call Kalvhagen." The receiver does not need to be in doubt whether it is a name or not: it is a name. Does this name transmit any information about the characteristics of the locality? No, as little as, for example, *Bandhagen* or *Luthagen* (names of two districts in Stockholm and Uppsala, respectively). But if he is led to the place called *Kalvhagen*, and there experiences that the place is an enclosure for calves, then perhaps he bursts out: "Kalvhagen! that's a suitable name—it refers to an enclosure for calves!"

Now we will change the conversation. A says to B: "Jag var i /kalvhagen/ förra veckan och hämtade hem en av våra kalvar." ("I was in /kalvhagen/ last week and got home one of our calves.") In this case there immediately springs up in B's mind the conception of "an enclosure for calves." He interprets the word as an appellative and he actualizes all the semantic features of *kalvhage*.

What I wish to emphasize in Dalberg's argument, though she does not explicitly draw the conclusion, is that proper names do not have any meaning by virtue of any linguistic competence; they have meaning only by virtue of the performer's knowledge of or experiences with the referent itself. Not until we accept that principle can we speak of (semi-) appellatival names, and we could say that they, in a way, exist only in practice, not in theory. The meaning of proper names is a pragmatic knowledge of the individual performer, not a linguistic knowledge in the language system.

University of Uppsala, Sweden

Notes

1. Pamp, "Names and Meanings," "Vad betyder Gösta Holm egentligen?" Cf. also Seppänen 242ff and Hedquist.
2. The concepts "reference" and "reference conditions" could be discussed at length, but this may be sufficient for the moment. At last you reach a point where it is difficult to make a distinction between reference and description (meaning). See, for example, Sciarone (79) and Leech (87-88).

Works Cited

Andersson, Thorsten. "Om ortnamn och ortnamnsforskning." *Namn och Bygd* 61 (1973): 148-70.

Dalberg, Vibeke. "On Homonymy between Proper Name and Appellative." *Names* 33 (1985): 127-35.

Hedquist, Rolf. "Egennamnens semantik." *Florilegium Nordicum. En bukett nordiska språk- och namnstudier tillägnade Sigurd Fries den 22 april 1984*. Umeå Studies in the Humanities 61. Umeå, Sweden: U of Umeå, 1984.

Leech, Geoffrey. *Semantics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.

Pamp, Bengt. "Names and Meanings: a Mentalistic Approach." *Proceedings of the Thirteenth International Congress of Onomastic Sciences, Cracow, August 21-25, 1978*. Ed. Kazimierz Rymut. Vol. 2. Warszawa-Kraków, 1982. 231-37. 2 vols. [Also in Swedish version, "Egennamn och betydelser av betydelse." *Namn och Bygd* 67 (1979): 56-64.]

___. "Ten Theses on Proper Names." *Names* 33 (1985): 111-18.

___. "Vad betyder Gösta Holm egentligen?" *Nordiska studier i filologi och lingvistik. Festskrift tillägnad Gösta Holm på 60-årsdagen den 8 juli 1976*. Lund, Sweden: Student litteratur, 1976.

Sciarone, Bondi. "Proper Names and Meaning." *Studia Linguistica* 21 (1967): 73-86.

Seppänen, Aimo. *Proper Names in English. A Study in Semantics and Syntax*. Department of English Philology Publications 1. Tampere, Finland: U of Tampere, 1974.

Van Langendonck, Willy. "Paradoxen van de eigennaam." *Naamkunde* 11 (1979): 181-95.