

The Study of Names as Humor in the Thirty-Nine Years of the Journal Names

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Abstract

Perhaps as a reaction against the popular emphasis on the humorous aspect of name study, the journal *Names* has devoted relatively little space to the study of names as humor. Those scholarly studies that have appeared in the journal over the nearly four decades of its existence include name puzzles, wordplay in names, humorous personal names (especially in the South), euphemisms for Hell, and humorous folklore about specific names.

My concern in this paper is not so much with the humor inherent in certain names or in the naming process as it is with the contributions that this journal, *Names*, has made in the thirty-nine years of its existence. *Names* is the official quarterly publication of The American Name Society, founded in 1951.² Most of the founders were linguistics-oriented scholars who had been practicing onomastics, that is, studying names, primarily placenames, under the auspices of the American Dialect Society. I have had the privilege of knowing some of these men and women, generally in their later years, and, while most of them were or are bright and witty people, I would not say that the search for the humorous element in onomastics was the motivating force behind the organization of the Society.

It was even, perhaps, somewhat present in the minds of these founding fathers and mothers to offer a corrective to the overly humorous emphasis of popular discussions of names. Placenames like *Podunk*, *Cucamonga*, or *Oshkosh* in America or the famous village in Wales with its very long name usually now just shortened to *Llanfair P.G.*; personal names like *Tim Buhr*, *Ophelia Butt*, or *Ima Hogg*; or literary names like Dickens' *Gradgrind* or *M'Choakumchild*—all these and many more are exploited ad nauseam in the popular media, usually with a headline asking, "What's in a Name?" and relegated to the trivia page. H. L. Mencken, whose contributions to

name study in America are far from trivial, usually emphasized the humorous side of those portions of his great work, *The American Language*, that he devoted to names. The humor is often at the expense of those classes of American society of which Mencken wrote so disparagingly, such as Southerners of the "Bible Belt"—a term he coined—and African Americans. Memorable is his discussion of names allegedly given by wickedly witty medical students to black babies born in charity hospitals: *Placenta* and *Gonadia* among those that apparently survived (525).

Mencken (1880–1956), one of America's great humorists and satirists, was not one of the founders of the American Name Society—he was in his terminal illness at the time and not available—but he was supportive of its early efforts in his final years. Most of the founders—but not all—were academics who wanted to put name study in America on an intellectual level with that which was being done by the English Place-Name Society and other groups in Germany and Scandinavia, and in this atmosphere the humorous dimension was not likely to receive much support.

The American Name Society started *Names* in 1953; it has continued to appear quarterly, more or less on schedule, since that time. It is as the current editor of *Names*, a position I have held for the last four years, that I approach this topic. My predecessors—of whom there have been seven—have generally been, like me, professors of literature or linguistics: specifically, German, classics, or English, although the readership includes a large number of geographers, sociologists, and psychologists. With the notable exception of Kelsie Harder, the eight of us who have been editors have not been widely known for either the theory or practice of humor.

Yet, despite the bias against humor implicit in this beginning, the journal has allowed the humorous element of naming to occupy a substantial percentage of its over 11,000 pages. Some of the humor appears quite unintended in articles with other purposes. Other articles are of the "point-and-laugh" variety. Still others assess the historical appearance of humor in names and naming. Very few—I found just one—attempt to analyze the humorous component of naming. No coherent theory of name-humor is developed or even emerges. Nevertheless, in the examples and analysis which follow, I will provide, if not a coherent theory, at least a few generalizations of how we can, through the pages of this journal, understand the relationship between names and humor; and I would encourage others to pursue this topic for future publication.

A name *in* a context often achieves humor because of its actual

appropriateness (more often found in literature, as Mr. *Gradgrind*, the pedantic unyielding schoolmaster in Dickens' *Hard Times*, and his equally suffocating teacher, Mr. *M'Choakumchild*) or its ironic lack of appropriateness (such as calling a big man *Tiny* and a fat one *Slim*). Without a context names can sound funny because of an unusual combination of sounds, even though neither the elements nor the whole word may suggest any "meaning" to us: *Podunk* and *Cucamonga* are probably of this sort, though usage or a kind of klang association may contribute to the effect.

Central to our understanding the nature of humor in names—and practically everything else about names—is the recognition that within any given culture there are certain expectations as to what a name should be. This expectation is partly linguistic in that names generally follow the same phonemic and syntactic patterns of the language, but it is largely cultural, so that even when people share a common language name expectations may differ greatly.

The body of names that is acceptable within a culture can be called an *onomasticon*.³ This term is parallel to a *lexicon*, a body of semantically meaningful words in a language, that is, a vocabulary. But it is important to realize that there are differences between a lexicon and an onomasticon. A word has *meaning*. A name has *reference*. Although the distinction between the two will vary from one culture to another, in general, the perception of a meaning in a name is one of the chief sources of humor.

Here, from a recent issue of *Names*, are some examples of how this distinction works. As a lexical item—and as a food—*Lasagna* is quite suitable. But when we encounter it as a first name, as Brenna Lorenz did and recorded it in an article a couple of years ago, our response is amusement. She also found people named *Famous*, *Fourteen*, *Glorious*, and *Nylon*, among others. There is nothing amusing about these words *as* words. If we find humor here, it is because these items from our lexicon have crossed over to the onomasticon. It is most likely that those people who know *Lasagna* (it may well be pronounced /la-SAG-nuh/) and the others think no more about the meaning of her name than we think about the meaning of, say, *Smith* or *Dill*.

A different problem arises when we bring in a name from another language, and this also shows how other cultures may have different rules for crossing the boundary between lexicon and onomasticon. In a 1989 article Lu Zhongti and Celia Millward discuss names in China during and after the Cultural Revolution of the mid-1970s). We hear a name like *Jian-giao* as a typical Chinese name, without realizing that it literally means

“build a bridge,” or that *Qing-fing* means “celebrate a bumper harvest,” or *Wei-xing*, “launch a satellite.” To us these translations are humorous because our onomasticon does not permit such literalisms, whereas *Rose* or *Lily* or other flower names are permitted and widely used in both cultures.⁴

With these principles in mind, let us look back over the thirty-nine years of *Names* for examples of how scholars have treated humor. Strangely, I found only one article that deals with humor in names in any general, theoretical way. This was a 1982 essay by Don L. F. Nilsen. Many of his examples seem to me not to be of an onomastic nature, but others give us a good insight into the subject’s potential, including wordplay, like anagrams (*Adolf Hitler* rearranges to *hated for ill*)⁵ or puns (in the nineteenth century many girls in Utah married Young) (171). As an example of another kind of humor, Nilsen cites a clever story to show the onomastic (or dialectal) conflicts between American and British speakers: The Briton was named *Cholmodeley*, pronounced “Chumly.” In later conversation the Briton mentioned Niagara Falls. “Oh,” said the American, “you mean ‘Niffles’ ” (177).⁶

A few articles have analyzed humor in names in specific contexts. C. Grant Loomis, in 1956, ’59, and ’61, discussed how names were used comically and ironically in *The Greek Anthology*, in nineteenth-century newspapers, and in Western American novels, respectively. The newspaper names article gives us an interesting insight into the changing fashions of humor. The focus is on wordplay in surnames. A Mr. Boyle found himself in trouble; the reporter said that Mr. Boyle “got into hot water and was Boyled.” A would-be poet, despite his height of 6’4”, “was no Longfellow.” Two men, a Mr. Ray and a Mr. Parr, started a newspaper. The rival paper stated that, in terms of decency, Parr is below zero and Ray is below Parr. And finally, this one, dating from 1845: a certain Mr. Love disappeared on a journey from Texas to Mexico. The writer of the account claimed that he had always “supposed that no Love would ever be lost between those two countries.” In another article entitled “The Hell You Did Not Say,” Loomis cites some of the euphemisms for *Hell* (the place) used by writers of novels about the American West. Presumably, most of these expressions were (and some still are) used by speakers in real life. Some of them, for example *Hades*, *Sam Hill*, *Hail Columbia*, *Holy Ned* echo the *H* in *Hell*. *Yuma* (Arizona), a noted hot spot, and *Mexico*, for a number of reasons, also appear as euphemisms for *Hell*.

In the 1960s Audrey Duckert, an assistant editor, began a regular Notes and Queries feature in *Names* which focussed on the humorous and

unusual. One memorable feature looked at hoaxes involving names. For example, in the wake of the international excitement over the Dione Quintuplets in the 1930s, a newspaper report in Madison, Wisconsin, claimed that a Mr. and Mrs. Herman Vielkinder had had five daughters. Apparently it took some time for the general public to realize, even in Madison, that *Vielkinder* means "many children" in German and that the girls' names, *Mendota*, *Monona*, *Wingra*, *Waubesa*, and *Kegonsa*, are the names of the lakes within the city limits of Madison. A darker hoax appeared in a letter to *Time* magazine critical of certain leaders in India. The letter was signed by four "residents of New Delhi." Too late, it turned out that the four were not names at all but unprintable obscenities in Hindi.

An essay published in *Names* in 1959 has become something of a minor classic. Its purpose is clearly humorous, though of the point-and-laugh sort reminiscent of Mencken. The author was the prominent linguist Thomas Pyles (whose own name, by the way, was the butt of many jokes). He searched newspapers, death records, school records, and many other sources in the American South to find names that to him were unusual and therefore humorous. Pyles' witty title, "Bible Belt Onomastics or Some Curiosities of Anti-Pedobaptist Nomenclature," is significant. A large number of Southern religious denominations do not believe in infant baptism, and

Where name-giving is no part of the sacrament of baptism, and where consequently a clergyman with some sense of traditional onomastic decorum has no say, individual taste and fancy may run riot—and usually do. It is highly unlikely that any man of God, even though the canons of his church were not that explicit in the matter, would consent in the course of his sacerdotal duties to confer upon hapless infants such names as Buzz Buzz, Coeta, Merdine, Aslean, La Void, Arsie, Phalla, and Raz—all legal names borne by Bible Belters of repute. And it is certain that Ima Hogg, the *grande dame* of Houston society, whose father was once governor of Texas, was so named without the connivance of any anointed priest. (86–87)

Pyles' emphasis is on the unusual, not just those names that have a possible lexical meaning like *La Void*. One Oklahoma couple, for instance, had six daughters with the names *Hoyette*, *Norvetta*, *Yerdith*, *Arthetta*, *Marilynne*, and *Wilbarene*. These are all rather euphonious names; they become comical only in the aggregate and their unusualness. The mother claimed she "wanted names no one had ever had and names nobody would ever want. So I made them up" (84).

Pyles' essay gives us a good insight into the way that cultural expectations shape the onomasticon and lead us to the edge of and even

into the comic. A few years later (1983), John and Adele Algeo, who had been Pyles' students, published "Bible Belt Onomastics Revisited," which demonstrates that, although the South still has many unusual names, there has been a steady movement toward the onomastic of the majority culture. On the other hand, research confirms that African Americans all over the country are moving rapidly *away* from the dominant naming patterns of white society (McGregory).

As might be expected, folklorists have taken an interest in humorous lore surrounding names, and some of their research has been published in *Names*. Robert Rennick, in a 1968 article called "Obscene Names and Naming in Folk Tradition," discusses many names that happen to be homophones of certain sexual or scatological words: e.g., *Outhouse*, *Hoar*, *Pickup*, *Schitt*, *Rape*, and more (214). He also cites some name stories that seem too good to be true, and probably aren't. For instance, a basketball player named *Yurin*. The announcer is alleged to have said: "There goes *Yurin* dribbling down the court (227)." Or stories like this. A man named *Herbert Stinks* goes to court to change his name. The judge is understanding and asks what he would like his new name to be: *Joe Stinks*, he says (223).

In a later article, Rennick reminds us that as serious name collectors we should be careful to distinguish between real names that can be documented and name lore of the sort we have all heard and sometimes believe, for example, *Diane DeKay*, *Dick Hurts*, *Tim Buhr*, or *Ophelia Butt* (196). The title of this article is "The Alleged 'Hogg Sisters,' or Simple Ground Rules for Collectors of 'Odd' Names." He provides full documentation for the existence of the famous Ima Hogg, who was indeed the daughter of the governor of Texas and a staunch supporter of the arts in Houston; but Ima's only slightly less famous sister "Yura" (as well as their rather obscure brother "Hesa") is purely a creation of folklore.

A different folklore approach was taken by Bruce Rosenberg in 1975: "The Gremlin: Transforming the Past's Failures." Rosenberg gives the history of the little creatures who got into machinery during World War II (but not before) and made it malfunction. Why, with such a history, did Dodge come out with a car by that name?

A darker side of modern folklore was discussed by Alan Dundes in 1985. He had discovered and recorded jokes of the "Quadruplegic Sick Joke Cycle" that focussed on handicaps: What is the name of woman with one leg shorter than the other? *Eileen*. What if she's Japanese? *Irene*. A man with a shovel in his head? *Doug*. A man without a shovel in his head? *Douglas*.

Finally, so far as I could determine, there is only one essay in the whole run of *Names* that is itself an exercise in humor. There was another, I thought, from the title, "Cow Names in Northwestern Iceland" (Hale), but on reading it discovered that it was not only serious but even significant. The one humorous article is by Bob Julyan (1988). His fictional premise is that a volcano suddenly erupts in New Mexico and as it shows promise of being a major mountain politicians scurry around trying to have it named for them. But then it stops its activity and shrinks down to a smelly hole, and no longer is anyone interested in naming it. The Indians who live nearby catch a whiff of its stale tobacco-like smell and warn their children that if they don't bathe regularly they'll start to smell like *Cerro Cigarro* over there.

This has been an overview of some of the ways that one journal has attempted to deal with the subject of humor and names. The list is small, the potential is great.

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Notes

1. This is a revised version of a paper read at the Eighth International Humor Conference, University of Sheffield, England, July 30, 1990.

2. For an excellent overview of the first twenty-five years of the American Name Society, see Bryant.

3. Nicolaisen's plenary address ("Onomastics") to the 16th ICOS discusses this point at length.

4. I am indebted to Martha Cornog for suggesting ways to define the humorous content of names and for pointing out these examples.

5. As an aside in a later article (1985) on how the general public changed its way of pronouncing Ronald Reagan's name (from REE-guhn to RAY-guhn), Alan Metcalf notes that RONALD WILSON REAGAN can be anagrammatized to INSANE ANGLO WARLORD.

6. There is more here than a British-American difference of pronunciation. Audrey Duckert, in an article on place nicknames, which looks mostly at official chamber of commerce type nicknames, lists several cities whose abbreviated forms have led to new pronunciations: e.g., Minneapolis: *Mpls* becomes [muplz]; Niagara Falls: *Nfs* becomes [niflz].

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