Proper Names as the Prototypical Nominal Category

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Proper names are *the* prototypical, unmarked nouns; they refer rather than describe or predicate as do common nouns. Proper names systematically appear in close appositional structures of such types as *the poet Burns, Hurricane Edna, Fido the dog, the City of London*, where they constitute the identifying unit, while common nouns in such appositional structures characterize the name. Proper names are definite, mostly countable, singular and nonrecursive (nongeneric) and concrete; since these are the unmarked features of nouns, proper names regularly display zero or no affixes, except for marked proprial subcategories. This view of proper names apparently contradicts the cognitivist ideas of Ronald Langacker; however, Langacker's analysis can be interpreted in such a way that proper names constitute the prototypical nominal class.

Introduction

I argue that the nominal subclass of proper names represents the prototypical (or, if one prefers, the unmarked) subclass of nouns. In particular I argue that proper names are unmarked or prototypical vis-à-vis common nouns. This conclusion runs counter to Ronald Langacker's cognitivist view, which claims that the common noun phrase is the prototypical nominal.

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I agree with Ronald Langacker's proprosal (1991; 2004) that the general function of a noun is to refer to a "thing" in the widest sense, usually a person or an object, i.e., a concrete thing. In contrast, verbs are used to predicate, not to refer. Most linguists and onomasts, including

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myself, assume that proper names are used primarily to refer to a thing, and not to describe it, i.e., not to predicate something about it. If it is the essence of a nouns to refer to a thing, this seems to entail that the proper name constitutes the prototypical noun. By contrast, common nouns are then less prototypical nouns since they contain a predication, which is rather typical of verbs. For example, *a table is an x which is a table.* Proper names contain no such definitional lexical meaning, no description in the way that common nouns do; this has been argued time and again by philosophers as well as linguists. It is impossible, indeed, to ask, for instance, *What do you understand by London*? (cf. Ullmann 1962; 1969, 33), whereas it is quite possible to ask *What do you understand by (a) city*?

Elsewhere (Van Langendonck 1999; 2007), I have posited the thesis that proper names have no asserted (definitional) meaning, but they *do* have certain presuppositional meanings. An important feature of proper names is that they carry a categorical presupposition, and more specifically, a basic level meaning. Basic level meanings constitute the most accessible meaning category, for instance *dog* in the hierarchical threesome *animal* > *dog* > *beagle.* From a perceptual and conceptual point of view, basic level senses are the easiest to process. That all proper names carry a categorical presupposition or a basic level meaning has been pointed out by philosophers such as Ziff (1960; 1977) and Searle (1958; 1969), and psychologists (see La Palme Reyes *et al.* 1993 and Bayer 1991, who uses a different term). When you say *John*, it normally concerns a male being, while *Mary* is rather about a woman. In certain names, the basic level meaning figures in the name-form itself. In European languages, this is only the case in such inanimate names as *Fleet Street, the North Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, Lake Ontario, Mount Palomar*, etc. Sometimes, suffixes indicate the basic level meaning, for instance the *-y* in *German-y* or the *-a* in *Chin-a.* (As a rule, in European languages, personal names lack an overt indication of their basic level meaning male or female.) Since presuppositions make utterances easier to process, we can argue that proper names are simpler or less marked than common nouns, which can display both presuppositional and asserted senses.

I conclude that the essence of a proper name is that it refers to a "thing" in an *ad hoc* way on the basis of a basic level categorical presupposition. This meaning is never asserted (definitional) and hence, does not determine the referent. Moreover, a basic level meaning would in itself be insufficient to pick out the referent. For instance, you cannot infer from John's appearance that he is called *John*. By contrast, in the case of common nouns (appellatives), the reference is determined by the asserted (definitional) meaning of the noun. For instance, it is on account of a semantic description that I refer to something as a table or a river, etc. A possible objection to this view on proper names is that name-forms like *John* and *Mary* may refer to several people and also to animals, even if we agree that names refer on an *ad hoc* basis. To account for this multidenotativeness I have adduced the notion of "proprial lemma," a dictionary entry primarily used as a proper name. In the dictionary you may find entries such as "*John*: first name primarily given to male humans." This is an instance of a proprial lemma. So we can have *John Smith, John Brown, John Major,* etc., in which *John* each time is a different proper name but the same proprial lemma. The concept of proprial lemma is also useful to account for uses of a name-form in constructions in which it does not function as a proper name. For example, in the expression *another John*, which means "another person with the proprial lemma *John*."

I adduce an important piece of syntactic evidence for my semantic claims on proper names (for further formal evidence, see Van Langendonck 2007, chapter 2). Related to the above described semantic status of proper names is the fact that they are able to systematically appear (at least in English) in close appositional structures of the types [def art + common noun + (*of*) proper name]: *the poet Burns, the river Thames, the City of London;* [common noun + proper name]: *President Bush, Hurricane Edna;* [proper name + def art + common noun]: *Fido the dog;* [proper name + proper name]: *Robert Frost.* The common noun in these appositional structures characterizes the name, usually indicating its basic level meaning. The proper names constitute the identifying unit. In the case of the pattern [first name + family name], e.g., *Robert Frost,* both units are of a proprial nature.

When we run through the nominal grammatical features, one fact in particular is striking: proper names appear to display exclusively or at least to a much greater extent the unmarked characteristics of these grammatical features. Proper names are inherently definite, mostly countable, singular and nonrecursive (i.e., nongeneric, nonhabitual) and concrete, and as a rule, are third person. Marginal are such marked categories as collective plurals (*the Pyrenees*), collective mass proper names (*Latin*), and recursive instances (*August*).

Since proper names appear to be definite by nature, one might expect them to systematically take the definite article in article languages. Paradoxically, the most prototypical proprial subclasses, personal names and city names, usually take a zero article (in fact no article) in Dutch, German, English, French, Spanish, etc.; compare English names of the type *John, Mary, London, Paris.* Whenever the article appears, it concerns less prototypical, mostly inanimate names like names of rivers (*the Rhine*), mountains (*the Pyrenees*), deserts (*the Sahara*), etc.

Also, proper names may contain a number of connotations or associations. What is usually considered the meaning of names mostly concerns connotations or associations. These may be of two kinds: connotations that come in via the referent, for example, the name *Napoleon* may remind us of Austerlitz or Waterloo, because the referent, the name-bearer, won or lost the battle that took place there. On the other hand, the association can be adduced by the name-form if it is homophonous with a different word, for example, the Dutch name-form *Koopman* may remind us of a merchant. It should be clear that these two kinds of associative meanings are not essential and do not determine the referent, although they may help in finding the referent through a causal or historical chain of references, as has been argued by the philosophers Saul Kripke and Hillary Putnam. These connotations can be fully exploited for psycho- or socio-onomastic reasons, but we will not go into this matter here.

Langacker's View of Proper Names

My view of the unmarkedness and prototypicality of proper names is incompatible with that of Ronald Langacker, who considers the common noun to be the prototypical noun because

> every nominal profiles a thing construed as an instance of some type and further incorporates some specification of quantity and grounding [i.e., deixis]. Type, quantity, and grounding are often represented by separate words or phrases, and a language tends to develop specific, iconically motivated patterns of composition and constituency for expressions of this sort. Invariably, however, there are nominals that depart from these prototypical patterns while conforming to the schematic definition. It may be that multiple semantic functions are subsumed by a single word; for example, a proper noun like *Iraq* makes inherent specifications of type (nation), quantity (singular), and grounding (definiteness) and therefore stands alone as a full nominal. (1991, 54–55)

It is plausible to argue that the maximum content of a nominal includes the categories *type*, *instantiation*, *quantity*, and *grounding*, and that if each category is expressed by one form we have an iconic (in fact merely an isomorphic, one-to-one) relation between form and meaning. In this way, proper names appear as nonprototypical nominals, as Langacker contends: "[T]hough proper names are sometimes taken as paradigmatic for the class of nominal expressions, they are actually quite atypical" (1991, 53). In my view, however, an analysis of what the categories *type*, *instantiation*, *quantity*, and *grounding* represent in proper names reveals that names display the least marked, in other words the simplest instances of these categories. Let us look at each of them in greater detail.

As to proper names and type specification, Langacker (1991, 59, 148) expresses the view that proper names incorporate a type specification, e.g., the individual designated by *Stan Smith* is a male human. This is more or less equivalent to the thesis that proper names have a presuppositional categorical meaning. Recall that this meaning must be narrowed down to "basic level meaning" (see above; also Van Langendonck 2007, chapter 1, 3.3.2).

Regarding proper names and instantiation, Langacker (1991: 59) states: "Since the name [*Stan Smith*] is taken as characteristic of a specific person, it further presupposes instantiation." A proper name "is a type with only one instance" (1991, 63), from which Langacker concludes that a proper name is "degenerate." However, if "every nominal profiles a single instance of some type" (1991, 81), then we could say that proper names, which are even said to refer uniquely, constitute the simplest example of a nominal, even if the name is a *plurale tantum*, like *the*

Pyrenees. Here, the plural inflection merely "highlights the internal complexity of a unitary entity." (1991, 77).

A proper name "makes an implicit specification of quantity" (Langacker 1991, 59), i.e., the size of the profiled instance is presupposed to be always just one, even in the case of *pluralia tantum* such as *the Pyrenees*, as mentioned above.

In the case of a proper name, "grounding is subsumed as well, for the nominal is definite and portrays the profiled individual as being uniquely apparent to the speaker and hearer on the basis of this name alone" [i.e., *Stan Smith*] (Langacker 1991, 59).

Langacker goes on to argue that hence, in the case of proper names, "type, instantiation, quantity, and grounding are conflated in a single expression whose component parts fail to correlate with these semantic functions" (1991, 59, see also p. 148).

However, we can look at proper names and Langacker's four nominal categories from a different angle. Since, concerning form and meaning, the proper name constitutes an unmarked category with regard to the common noun, it is the prototypical noun. Langacker himself recognizes that with proper names, instantiation and quantity are presupposed or implicit. Definiteness is usually analyzed as a presupposition of existence and uniqueness in the universe of discourse, and finally, the type specification is a basic level meaning. Psycholinguistically, presupposition (Osgood 1971) and basic level meaning (Rosch 1977) are considered simple, semantically unmarked concepts. If proper names unite all these very "simple" concepts, it can be expected that their forms as nominals will be simple as well. This situation of (truly) diagrammatic iconic motivation is exactly what we find: just a noun, usually without the (definite) article. Furthermore, Langacker (1991, 58) states: "Nominals such as *this spoon*, in which the type specification and the notion of instantiation are respectively indicated by the head noun and the accompanying grounding predication, can probably be regarded as prototypical," although instantiation and quantity are not expressed here. It is then interesting to see that the psycholinguists La Palme Reyes, MacNamara, Reyes, and Zolfaghari (1993, 445) use the following formula for the definition of a name like *Freddie*: (Freddie: *dog*) = (*this: dog*), which is to be read as: "Freddie in the kind DOG" is "*this* in the kind DOG." In other words, a proper name consists of an expression

uniting deixis and basic level meaning in one word. In this view, proper names are not far from Langacker's prototypical nominal *this spoon* (further see Van Langendonck 2007, chapter 2, 3.1.6).

Langacker (1991, 18) proposes that a noun profiles a "thing" in the most general sense. However, although a thing can be "anything," prototypically a thing is a concrete, physical object. Now it appears that proper names typically denote concrete things, so they may be termed typical nouns (or nominals). Moreover, Langacker comes close to my feeling that proper names exhibit the unmarked nominal feature of definiteness and that they are prototypically singular, countable, non-generic, and concrete. After having stated that "a natural path is . . . defined by the hierarchy *definite* > *specific indefinite* > *non-specific indefinite*," he goes on to say

> a proper name (such as *George Lakoff*) represents a higher degree of definiteness than a nominal based on a common noun (e.g., *the cunning linguist*); because the relevant category has only a single member, the conception of t_i [a particular instance] is more narrowly focused than in cases where it has to be located within a reference mass comprising an open-ended set of instances. (1991: 308)

We can conclude that even in Langacker's own framework, proper names are far from being deviant or degenerate nominals. On the contrary, they can be described as prototypical. This analysis can be confirmed by neurolinguistic evidence, for which I refer the reader to Van Langendonck (1999; 2007). See also, and especially, Bayer (1991) and Semenza and Zettin (1988).

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I have established that proper names form the prototypical class of nouns, which entails that at least the prototypical subclasses of names normally display unmarked forms, often zero-forms. Also, it appears that Langacker's (1991) analysis of nominals is not compatible with a proper analysis of proper names. Finally, the iconicity of motivation appears to override the iconicity of isomorphism.

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