

The Field of the American Name Society

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ON MANY OCCASIONS in the course of the world's history a man's liberty and even his life may have hung upon whether a certain word was a name. Even at this present time and in our own country much might turn upon whether a man had been talking, for example, of *Communism* or of *communism*.

We of the American Names Society are not in such a desperate position, and are on trial only in the sense that we are launching a new journal and hope to gain a favorable verdict from the scholarly world. But to attain the desired end, we too must consider what we mean by *name*. In short, we should define our field.

There is no reason why I rather than some other member should undertake this difficult and probably thankless task. I can only say that the task seems to me to be important and even urgent, that the attempt to shove it off upon someone else would doubtless only provoke the retort that I do it myself, and that the referral to a committee would mean that too much time would be consumed.¹

I therefore make the attempt. I can only state in addition: (1) I am not writing in any spirit of dogmatism, but am presenting what I may call trial-definitions, and (2) I hope that my attempt, as one of its results, will lead other members to refine my crudities, to amplify my brevity, and, if necessary, to correct my errors.

I believe that it is not necessary for us, and probably impossible in any case, to establish a hard-and-fast boundary line for our field. Still, we should take thought as to what we consider the center, or centers, of our activity to be, what are our marginal areas, and what subject-matter seems to lie definitely beyond our pale. In the practical conduct of a scholarly journal, this may be interpreted as (1) upon what subject-matter should we be eager to obtain articles, even to the point of stimulating their production, (2) upon what subject-matter might we be willing to admit articles, even if only occasion-

ally and experimentally, (3) what subject-matter should in itself be a cause for rejection, even if the article itself is good.

First of all, our own name raises an ambiguity. We may be "the society for the study of American names," or "the name society existing in America." Our field may be "names" or "American names." In actual practice this problem will, I think, solve itself. Most of our members are Americans; the need and the opportunity for the study of American names is very great; there are already existing journals that are interested in the publication of European name-studies, and not particularly interested in those of America. If European studies began to crowd American studies out of our pages, we might well have to take thought. But this is unlikely. For the present, I think that we can do well to publish articles on non-American names, as long as we do not begin to find ourselves in the position of being the dumping ground for articles already rejected by European journals. In particular, I think that we might provide a real service by publishing studies from other areas, such as Australia, which would probably not be especially welcome in the European journals because of their subject-matter.

A more important ambiguity exists in the word "name." In English, as in many languages, this same word is used (1) as an individual designation, i.e., a proper noun or proper name, and (2) as a more general designation, i.e., a common noun.²

In ordinary speech we make automatic allowance for this ambiguity. If I ask, "What is the name of that man?" I expect some such reply as "Jack Smith." On the other hand, if I ask, "What is the name of that flower?" I expect some such reply as "It's a camellia." I obviously do not expect to be told that the name of the flower is Susy or Rachel, because flowers do not ordinarily have "names" of that kind. When the object of inquiry happens to be a dog, the matter becomes even more complicated. If as an unsuspecting foreigner, I should ask, on the analogy of the flower question, "What is the name of that dog?" expecting to be told that it was an Irish setter or a Scotch terrier, I would probably get the reply that its name was Joe, or Champion Royal Emperor of Olympia IV. To avoid such an answer a good speaker of English would automatically word his question, "What kind of dog is that?"

The practical question is whether we are a "name" society in the stricter sense of the word, or whether we are a "noun" society. I think that we must in general subscribe to the former view.

My reasons for so concluding are both theoretical and practical. In the first place, the word "name" in the scholarly tradition has regularly been used to mean "proper noun." "Name" in the sense of "noun" is to be considered a comparatively loose or popular usage. In addition, our Sponsoring Committee and most of our members, in so far as I am acquainted with these individuals, are composed of people who have a special interest in proper names, although with some of them this interest may spread also to the more general aspects of language, such as would be represented by the other use of the word. Finally, a journal devoted to the study of nouns would take in so much territory that it might just about as well take all language as its field and be done with it.

There is, however, no need to be unduly inflexible. The drawing of a distinction between proper names and common nouns is, in fact, extremely difficult and in certain cases doubtless impossible.³ If we apply the simplest test in modern English, the use of capital letters, we find practice varying considerably—with time, with place, with individual. A considerable conventional element is involved. For instance, we capitalize the days of the week and the months (although French does not), and yet do not capitalize the names of the seasons. All things considered, we are therefore in no position to be dogmatic, and shall probably do well to adopt a position somewhat similar to that already suggested for the inclusion of non-American names. We may certainly expect the far greater number of our articles to deal with proper names, and these should be considered as having the higher priority. But there will be some borderline cases, and we should be ready to admit articles upon some classes of common nouns, especially when some actual process of naming is thus made clear.

The limitation of a field should not be taken, as it too often is, altogether in a negative sense. We should think not merely in terms of what is shut out, but also in terms of what is taken in. The field involved in the study of names is large, more extensive than most of us commonly stop to consider.

In the first place, we must concern ourselves not only with studies of individual names and of groups of names, but also with investigations of the process of naming, and of what might be called the theory of names. We sometimes use the term onomatology, but if this term refers to a science of names and not to mere agglomerations

of information about individual names, it is a science that can scarcely be said to exist. Even by the most liberal interpretation a science without a philosophy and without a theory is scarcely worthy of the name. In this respect European scholars have been remiss in that they have devoted their energies almost wholly to mere etymology. American scholars also, with a whole continent of names to subdue, have also generally devoted themselves to hewing down individual trees and not to surveying the forest. In the theory of naming we have a rich and little exploited field that is not only interesting in itself, but is also important in giving direction to the studies of individual names.

In this study of individual names, the field is also much more extensive and more varied than we commonly conceive. Generally speaking, our studies have been divided between place names and personal names. Although these can doubtless be recognized as the two most important fields, still there are many others and some of these are important and in need of study.

To emphasize the ramifications of the whole subject, I offer what may be called a trial classification of names.⁴

1. Personal and quasi-personal names.
 - a. Personal names, i.e., names referring to individual people.
 - b. Animal names.
 - c. Names of personified objects, including dolls, weapons, trees, ships, trains, and all other inanimate objects which are conceived as quasi-individuals and therefore generally not referred to by a neuter pronoun.
 - d. Personified abstractions.
2. Names of institutions and corporations. The entity here named is also that of a quasi-individual, and is so recognized legally. Actual personification, however, does not seem to occur except in nicknames.
3. Brand names, e.g., Quaker Oats, Coca Cola, Vaseline. Just what constitutes the proper name in this instance demands more analysis than has as yet been given it. Perhaps these are not really proper names, but even Gardiner (and he sets a high standard for what can be accepted as a proper name) seems to admit them to this category by implication. (See Note 4)
4. Names of tribes, groups, dynasties, etc. The names of tribes (ethnics, or gentiles) are numerous, difficult, and important, frequently giving rise to place names. Names of this group cannot in every case be distinguished from personal names (1,a) since many of these latter (e.g., Stewart) are both personal and tribal. These names characteristically show both singular and plural forms, e.g., the Mohican, the Mohicans. Collectives, characteristically with a singular form, tend to merge with #2, e.g., the Black Watch.
5. Titles, i.e., the names of books, works of art, etc.
6. Place names. Here may be included names of streets and roads, of heavenly bodies, and—at least for convenience—of buildings.

7. Names of events of history. Here are to be included not only particular events such as the Sicilian Vespers, but also everything up to whole periods, such as the Renaissance.
8. Abstractions not personified, i.e., Stoicism, Republicanism.
9. Famous objects not personified, i.e., the Koh-i-nor diamond.

Such a list—sketchy in itself and sketchily presented—is scarcely more than a martyr thrown to the wild beasts. At least I should be allowed to protect it from the lions of scholarship with a few provisos.

1. I have concerned myself with usage in English.
2. Little attempt has been made to relate the different classes one to another, genetically or otherwise.
3. The question of collective and plural names has been largely passed over. This problem has much exercised the logicians, and should be of much interest to onomatologists also. Class #4 may be considered to be composed entirely of collectives and plurals, and in a sense stands merely in this relationship to Class #1a. But collectives and plurals occur also in other classes, e.g., the Philippine Archipelago, or the Philippines (#6), the Human Comedy, the Leatherstocking Tales (#5), Old Golds (#3), the Napoleonic Wars (#7), the Claremont Colleges (#2).
4. The proviso "including legendary, mythological and fictional names" must be included for nearly all classes. Thus we have Barchester, Yaanek (#6), the Trojan War (#7), Pegasus, Cerberus (#1b), the Argo (#1c), and obviously many thousands of examples for #1a. There are even many examples for #5, including some which seem to rise to the second degree by being fictitious fictitious works, of which the most notable perhaps is an Italian work rendered into English under the alternate titles of *The Murder of Gonzago*, or *The Mousetrap*.
5. Undoubtedly a few names will fail to fall into any of the classes here listed, but I have scorned to use the heading "Miscellaneous." I might here suggest the problem, not only of such a traditional class as the days of the week, but also of a very modern one such as telephone exchanges.

Some of the classes here listed are comparatively unimportant, and others may not prove to be of much interest to scholars. The study of personal names and of place names will in all probability remain our chief interests. Certain other kinds of names, however, are deserving of attention. Here, for instance, I wish to mention titles and fictitious characters. Students of literature seem to have neglected them strikingly. By hospitality to articles of this nature we would not only further the study of names but also provide an almost new approach to the study of literature. A great opportunity is also offered in the study of brand names. These are a characteristically modern phenomenon, and are perhaps more specifically American than any other class of names. Their importance in our

daily vocabulary is immense, and some of them are becoming common nouns. Moreover, they are so recent that it should still be possible to investigate the origins through actual contact with their originators.

We may then conclude, I think, that any possible failure of *Names* will not be the result of a lack of interesting and significant subject matter. If it should not establish itself among the scholarly journals of the United States, such an unhappy event will probably have to be attributed to a present paucity of American scholars actively interested in the journal. A definite responsibility for contributions, especially during the critical first year, thus rests upon our members.

NOTES

¹ At least, I cannot plead complete innocence in the past. See my two articles which may be said to consider the question theory of names, viz., "What is named?—Towns, islands, mountains, rivers, capes." (*University of California Publications in English*, v. 14, pp. 223–232), and "Further Observations on Place-Name Grammar." (*American Speech*, xxx, 3, pp. 197–202.)

² Since students of names have generally confined themselves to one class (usually place names or personal names) the problem of the definition of "name" has been left chiefly to lexicographers and logicians. The former have often done a fairly good job of it. One may examine with profit, for instance, the article in OED, which distinguishes clearly between the two common uses of the word and offers good quotations. As in other dictionaries, however, the definitions are necessarily brief and fail to provide for all the ramifications of meaning. As for the logicians, I have failed to find them of much help. They generally seem to be discussing what a name ought to be rather than what it is. The student of names, on the contrary, must in general be guided, not by pure logic, but by usage.

For the logicians' treatment, see first, J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic* [various editions], Book I, Chap. II. This may be called a classical treatise, and most of the subsequent discussions develop out of it. For some more recent approaches, see A. M. Frye and A. W. Levi, *Rational Belief*, 1941, Chap. III; C. A. Mace, *The Principles of Logic*, 1933, Chap. V; L. S. Stebbing, *A Modern Introduction to Logic*, 1930, pp. 54–55.

The Theory of Proper Names (1940) by A. H. Gardiner employs the logician's approach. The author, however, is rather to be classed as a philologist, and the student of names will find this essay of considerable interest and value.

³ The most meticulous definition that I have found is by Ernst Pulgram, one of our members, in his thesis *The Theory of Proper Names*. Unfortunately I have not seen the full text, but am dependent upon a summary in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, v. 56–57, pp. 252–53. The title of this series would indicate that Dr. Pulgram is primarily a linguist, but the nature of the definition suggests a considerable admixture of the logician: "A proper name is a noun used *κατ' ἐξοχήν* with or without recognizable dictionary-value, of which the potential meaning coincides with, and never exceeds, its actual meaning, and which is attached as a label to one animate being or one inanimate object (or to more than one in the case of collective names) for the purpose of subjective distinction among a number of like, or in some respects similar, beings or objects which are either in no manner distinguished from one another, or for an observer's interest not sufficiently distinguished."

⁴ Although I cannot claim to have searched the literature exhaustively, I have found no previous classification of proper names—a situation which I find very surprising. A. H. Gardiner (op. cit.) apparently sets out to formulate such a list, but ends suddenly with the curious sentence: "there must be a limit to every discussion, and I shall not linger over the names of patent medicines, trade products, and the like." (p. 54).