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# Proper Name as a Bilateral Linguistic Sign and the Levels of Properhood

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to propose a semiotic definition of a proper name with the classic Saussurean bilateral linguistic sign as the *genus proximum* and the individual concept (and not a general or categorical one) constituting a name's *signifié* as the *differentia specifica*. This Aristotelian definition is accompanied by the notion of a poly-polar space of properhood, within which one may distinguish between more and less prototypical proper names. The individual concept is defined as a mental unit located in a language user's mind and comprising knowledge of an individual (single) object, its properties, and associations connected with it. Perceiving a proper name as a bilateral sign creates a need for terminological decisions. An onym is defined as any linguistic form or expression that serves as the *signifiant* within a proper name while a typical onymic form is defined as any linguistic form or expression that serves as the *signifiant* within many separate (homonymous) proper names. Relations between *signifiants* and *signifiés* of many proprial and appellative signs make it possible to list several types of proprial meaning: denotative, referential, etymological, and structural, as well as the denotative predisposition of an onymic form.

### Keywords

proper name, properhood, definition, individual concept, linguistic sign

## 1. Introduction

In May 1978 a university professor of materials engineering, Buckley Crist, received a “returned” parcel he had never sent. Being suspicious about the situation, he called the campus police, who opened the package. The parcel exploded, turning out to be a mail bomb that started a long series of mail bombings, which continued in the United States until 1995.

The FBI got involved in the investigation soon after. After further bombings (i.a. a bomb placed on an American Airlines plane in 1979, another one sent to the president of United Airlines, and several addressed to various academics) a pattern emerged that allowed for an assumption that all the bombings were prepared by the same perpetrator(s) who, however, could not be identified or indicated at that stage. The FBI started to collect and aggregate pieces of information on the culprit’s *modus operandi* and on the bomber him/herself. The list of places from where the parcels were sent was prepared in order to outline the area where the perpetrator possibly lived. Subsequently, the bomber’s psychological profile was prepared by FBI profilers. At some point even a facial composite was drawn. Thus, a lot of facts and indeed a large portion of knowledge was collected that, however, did not make it possible to indicate or identify the particular person(s) standing behind the bombings.

In the meantime, the identifier UNABOM (an acronym of *University and Airline Bomber*) was assigned by the FBI to the case. Once the media got to know the case name UNABOM, they began to refer to the culprit as the *Unabomber*. The name hit the headlines and soon became perfectly recognizable and comprehensible to the public. The vast majority of US citizens knew the name and were perfectly clear about what was meant by it: the bomber. And so, everybody understood the name *Unabomber* and everybody used it but still no one could indicate or identify the very person that was referred to with this expression. It was only in 1996 that the FBI investigators and the public found out who actually had been called the *Unabomber* for so many years.

The discussed example goes to show that the very nature and essence of proper names is in no way about identification in the sense of the ability to indicate or point a single specific and individual specimen of a given

category. In this respect *Unabomber* does not differ from a name of your friend's or co-worker's cat. You may listen (or be simply forced to listen) to a lot about what the cat does, eats and looks like. After so many stories told to you about the cat you may even get to know the pet better than the owner. And so, you become perfectly familiar with the name of the cat. Still, seeing the cat for the first time among a group of other similar cats of the same breed, you are not able to identify it or point to the one you have heard and know so much about. Identification and individualisation is only one of the many possible properties of proper names but definitely not the essential one. In other words, what tends to be referred to as a "deictic component in names" (e.g., Van Langendonck & Van de Velde, 2016, p. 24) is the common element in names, but it is in no way obligatory and does not constitute the condition of properhood.

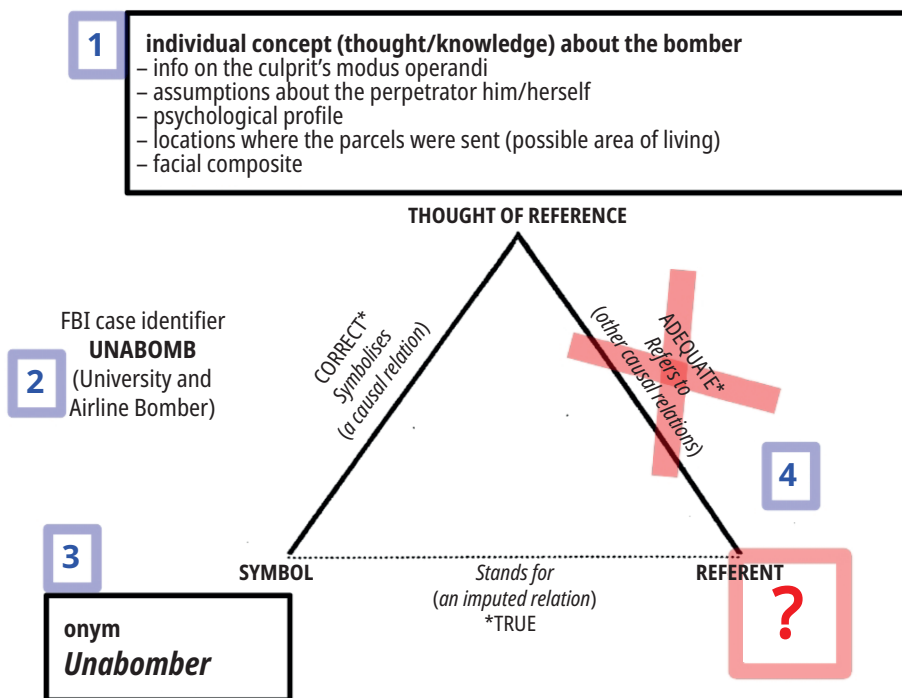
## **2. The semiotic approach: The first step in the search for the onomastic definition of a proper name**

A possible attempt to project the developments behind the name *Unabomber* onto the structure of the classic semiotic triangle proposed by Ogden and Richards (1923) may take the following form:

Figure 1 comprises the following stages:

- (1) The existence of a specific individual object is inferred from the results of the object's actions (the results themselves being some kind of semiotic indices in the classic and well-known sense proposed by C. S. Peirce). This is the first step in the creation of an individual concept, a mental entity that resembles the object in the mind and comprises the knowledge about it. Of course, the creation of an individual concept is often initiated by direct empirical observation or perception of an object. It is, however, often so (as it was in the discussed case of the Unabomber) that even the indices are not directly available for perception and we learn pieces of knowledge of the inferred individual object from textual reports. In fact, this is (most often) the scenario of how individual concepts of literary characters are evoked in our minds. In many cases we are indeed provided

with a more or less detailed description of a character first (i.e., textual information), which triggers the process of the creation of an individual concept of that character in our minds. And only then are we provided (in the given piece of literature) with the name of the character, the name, which now may be attached as a “label” to the individual concept already existing in our minds.



**Figure 1. The semiotic triangle (an onomastic adaptation)**

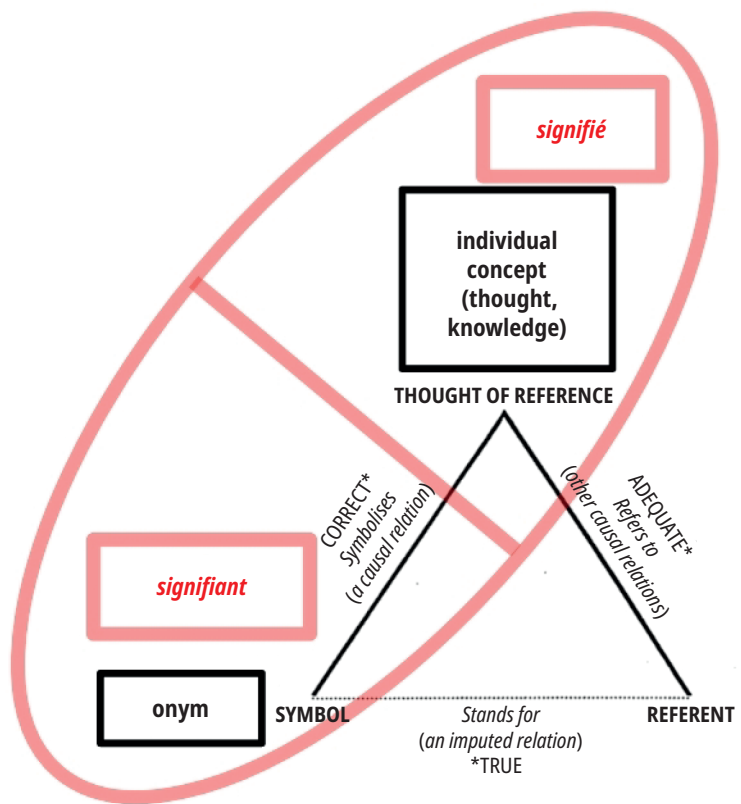
Source: own work; comprises the illustration of the semiotic triangle originally published in Ogden & Richards, 1923.

- (2) The label was created by the FBI, however, neither for the bomber (= individual object) nor for the individual concept of it but for the case. Nevertheless, this stage illustrates a quite typical process of creating proper names: appellative expressions for some important elements of the object’s characteristics were used as the source linguistic items to coin the label.

- (3) The common references to the individual concept of the bomber in texts made it necessary to have a handy textual representation of it, because it was rather inconvenient to constantly use something that could be called a “definite description”. Hence the label *Unabomber* was coined as an expression leading to the concept.
- (4) The unambiguous connection of the label (linguistic form) *Unabomber* and the individual concept of the (inferred but unidentifiable) culprit (as a material and physical object not involved in the very connection of label and concept) worked perfectly for much more than a decade. Hence, a perfect, full, understandable, and clear proper name existed and was commonly used in texts while there was absolutely no object that could be identified as the name’s bearer. A proper name as a linguistic sign does not need a referent to function in language communication as a meaningful unit. At the same time a proper name may exist in a language and be used in texts as a perfectly understandable and clear expression while providing absolutely no possibility to identify the named object (in the sense of providing an ostensive definition of what is meant by a given proper name). Probably almost all native speakers of English know, understand and even occasionally use the oikonym *Limerick* (as a name of the city and not as an appellative for a form of verse) but, relatively speaking, only few of them would be able to point the picture of the city of *Limerick* among several panoramas of various Irish cities.

The term *linguistic sign* appears above as the keyword and the main signpost on the way towards the sought definition of a proper name. No matter how discouraging for the modern and innovative theoreticians of linguistics it may be, when it comes to autosemantic language entities and the relation between fixed and well delimited chains of sounds and letters on the one hand and their fixed meanings on the other hand, there is probably nothing more sensible than the bilateral linguistic sign as proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure.

Now, the modified semiotic triangle discussed above may be reduced to a bilateral linguistic sign (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Semiotic triangle and properial bilateral linguistic sign**

Source: own work; comprises the illustration of the semiotic triangle originally published in Ogden & Richards, 1923.

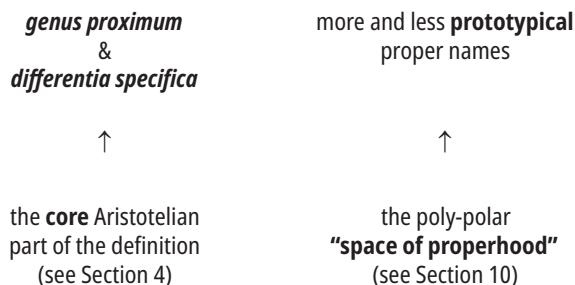
### 3. The desiderata on an onomastic definition of a proper name

Of course, the present proposal is not the first attempt to outline the general conditions of properhood. And it is definitely not the last. Nevertheless, the aim is to provide a possibly compact and systemic model and definition of properhood that may cover and systematically order as many onymic phenomena

as possible. Therefore, the desiderata on an onomastic definition of a proper name are that the definition needs to:

- (1) consist of *genus proximum* & *differentia specifica*;
- (2) take into account the existence of more and less prototypical proper names;
- (3) take into account the material and formal findings of philological onomastics;
- (4) recognize the semiotic nature of proper names (proper names are signs and do have meaning);
- (5) take into consideration the formal properties of names but not in the sense of grammar categories (i.e. a proper name cannot be simply defined as a noun) but rather in the sense of formal relations (between forms of proper names and of non-onymic language expressions);
- (6) be a universal one, i.e. must belong to general onomastics and be valid for different natural languages.

It is, however, of importance that the desiderata (1) and (2) need to be taken into account jointly for they are in no way mutually exclusive. While the core Aristotelian part of the definition, consisting of the *genus proximum* and the *differentia specifica*, provides a clear position of the category of a proper name among other categories and linguistic notions, the assumption that there are more and less prototypical proper names allows for the internal diversity of the category. This determines the following main structure of the present considerations (Figure 3):



**Figure 3. A map of the present considerations**

Source: own work.



#### 4. The *genus proximum* and the *differentia specifica*

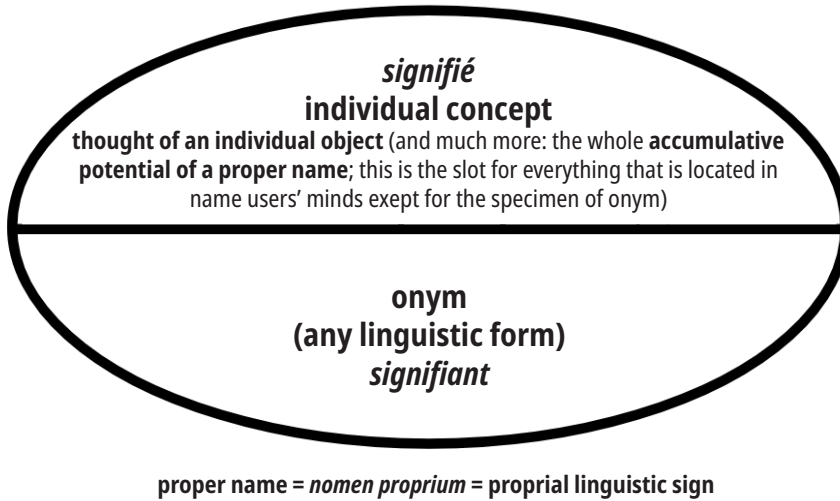
Before proceeding to the discussion of the proper *genus proximum* a justification needs to be provided as to why a proper name cannot be defined only in the terms of its formal properties (i.e. properties of the *signifiant*).

First of all, pure labels consisting of phonemes, allophones or their written representations cannot be considered proper names. *John* (as a chain of letters or phonemes they represent) cannot be a proper name if there is no mental portion of knowledge or simply a thought it stands for. If you want to speak of a name, you need not only a label, but also something that is named. In this sense *John* as a chain of characters is in no way a better proper name than the chain of characters *Qwedsa*.

Secondly, (especially nowadays) almost everything may serve as such a label, as long as it consists of linguistic elements or may be pronounced. *Q* or *007* may be pronounced and may serve as labels (*signifiants*) in proper names not less or worse than *Maria*, *John Smith* or *Jacksonville*.

It seems highly reasonable to choose the classic Saussurean bilateral linguistic sign as the best possible *genus proximum* of a proper name. Therefore, every proper name is a bilateral linguistic sign consisting of 1) the *signifiant* (*signifier*) (now we shall forget the term *label*) and 2) what is meant by that: an individual concept, a thought of an individual object, i.e. *signifié* (*signified*) (see Figure 4).

The proposed approach creates a space for reflection on the proper terminology which, nevertheless, is strictly combined with the conceptualization of a proper name itself. If we consider a **proper name** to be a bilateral sign consisting of an **onym** (language form, *signifiant*, *signifier*) and an **individual concept** or simply a portion of knowledge or a thought of an individual object (*signifié*, *signified*), there is no possibility to treat the terms *proper name* and *onym* as synonyms because what is referred to as *onym* constitutes only a part of what is referred to as *proper name* (or *nomen proprium*). This conceptual and terminological distinction is of great importance in defining the subject of the onomastic research. While the traditional linguistic and etymological studies of names concentrated mainly on the origins and formal properties of onyms, modern onomastics explores the microcosmos of the *signifié* and its complex relations to language, text(s), culture, reality and so on and so forth.



**Figure 4. Proper name = *nomen proprium* = proprial linguistic sign**

Source: own work.

Defining *proper name* as a linguistic sign has been already offered in the theory of onomastics, i.a. by Nyström (2016) who states:

The relationship between a name and its referent is sometimes called *denotation*; at least that is how the term is used in British and Scandinavian onomastics. (...) *Oxford* is the linguistic sign (the name) while the city itself (...) is the object (the referent) that the name *Oxford* nowadays *denotes*. Depending on, for instance, my personal knowledge and experiences of the city of Oxford, the name *Oxford* evokes certain *connotations* when I hear it: greyish buildings, a cosy book-shop, hot tea, heavy rain, etc. (p. 41)

However, the Saussurean idea of a bilateral linguistic sign does not seem to be deployed in the quoted theoretical stand. There is nothing to indicate that, according to Nyström, the name as a linguistic sign is of bilateral nature, comprising both a name form and a mental representation of the named object. Hence, the question remains unanswered: where are the connotations stored if it is not in the name's *signifié*?

Having indicated a bilateral linguistic sign as the best possible *genus proximum* of a proper name, one needs to declare the optimal *differentia specifica*.

What differentiates a proper name from a non-proprial linguistic sign are the qualities of the *signifié*. To put it concisely: it is an individual concept (and not a general or categorical one) that constitutes a proper name's *signifié* and its uttermost brief description would state that an individual concept is a mental unit comprising knowledge of an individual (single) object. It is based on a general categorical concept which is enriched with individual components comprising individual properties of the named object. This is the understanding of an individual concept that is directly derived from the theoretical proposals of the Vienna School of Terminology established by Eugen Wüster. And it is at this very stage that it becomes quite evident that it is the theory of individual concepts that needs to be perceived as the core element of the general theory of onomastics, semantics of proper names, and the onomastic definition of a proper name.

## 5. Individual concepts

The theoretical choice that it is an individual concept constituting the *signifié* that serves as the *differentia specifica* in the Aristotelian definition of a proper name results in two corresponding oppositions:

<i>signifié</i> :	<b>general (categorical) concept vs. individual concept</b>
bilateral linguistic sign:	<b>appellative linguistic sign vs. proprial linguistic sign (i.e. proper name)</b>

The central position of an individual concept as the *sine qua non* condition of properhood opens a difficult question whether (theory of) onomastics is capable of defining its object independently, i.e. with no reference to the philosophy of language or rather the philosophy of nature in the term's uttermost primitive sense.

Nevertheless, the introduction of individual concepts as the *signifié* of every proprial linguistic sign or simply as the meaning of every proper name has several indisputable advantages.

First of all, an individual concept is the element, which is, so to say, reserved for a name user's mind and for the whole complex of phenomena connected with perceiving the reality or with the mental creation thereof. The primitive and naive conception that reduces names to (phonetic or graphic) labels that are simply attached to named objects is definitely not capable of explaining some properties and qualities of name existence and name usage discussed in the further parts of the present paper.

Secondly, an individual concept as a portion of knowledge of an individual (single) object (no matter how this knowledge was acquired by a name user: by empirical perception of the named object or by learning about it from textual descriptions just like many people did in the case of *Unabomber*) explains the continued comprehensibility of names of individual objects that ceased to exist as material entities (or never existed as such). It is because the name forms *Hamlet* and *William Shakespeare* stand as *signifiants* for the respective individual concepts of a character and the playwright who created him that both names *Hamlet* and *William Shakespeare* are nowadays comprehensible in perfectly the same way. No one among the readers of this very paper has ever seen either Hamlet (the real one, not an actor pretending to be him) or Shakespeare. Just think of your late ancestors (e.g., your grandparents), that you have learned about in your childhood. Their names, so dear to you, are not labels possible to be attached to the living individuals anymore. These name forms are *signifiants* attached to the very vast, rich, and comprehensive individual concepts of your grandma and grandpa that you possess in your mind. And it is your stories about your grandparents you tell (or one day will tell) your grandchildren that will make the names comprehensible to them: through the textual descriptions and the textual usage your grandchildren (will) learn both the *signifiants* (name forms) and the individual concepts. And so, the names of their great-great-grandparents, whom they will have never seen, will be perfectly familiar and meaningful to them, because they acquire the individual concepts.

Thirdly, the stability of the connection between a name form (*signifiant*) and an individual concept (*signifié*) present in the minds of many name users (i.e. the stability of the bilateral linguistic sign as a social fact) explains why and how proper names exist between repeated acts of name usage. In this sense the existence and persistence of proper names differs in no way from the existence and persistence of appellative linguistic signs. The stable existence of the common noun *car* in the English language results from the stable

connection of the phonetic word form /kɑ:r/ and the graphic word form *car* on the one hand with the general (categorical) concept of ‘a self-propelled road vehicle with four wheels and seats for several people’ on the other hand in the minds of speakers of English. In exactly the same way, it is the stable connection of the name forms /wɒʃ.ɪŋ.tən/ or /wɑ:ʃɪŋ.tən/ and the graphic name form *Washington* on the one hand and the individual concept ‘the capital city of the United States’ on the other hand that makes it possible for the oikonym to persist.

This brings us to the obvious conclusion that proper names (just like language itself) exist as mental or neurological entries in name users’ minds or brains. What is important is the fact that the knowledge of a name form (a mental specimen of a *signifiant*) and the knowledge of the named object (individual concept, *signifié*) are most probably stored in human minds or rather in human brains as separate items. And it is the existence of individual concepts as portions of knowledge of individual named objects that explains the very common situation when somebody is able to precisely describe an individual object or recognize it (e.g., recognize a person’s face) but is not able to provide the name form, which is due to a missing link between the individual concept (*signifié*) and the mental specimen of the name form (*signifiant*). Neurolinguistic observations of two types of anomia, the proprial anomia and the appellative anomia, seem to support the theory of two types of concepts: individual and general concepts.

The existence of individual concepts as mental items that name forms refer to is probably the best possible explanation of the comprehensibility of names of unidentifiable or unreal objects (such as Unabomber or Frodo Baggins).

Finally, the theory of individual concepts perfectly explains why knowing a name and understanding it (almost) always implies the ability to state the general category the named object belongs to (which is not more and not less than the lexical meaning embedded in a proper name).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The issue of lexical meaning within proper names has been discussed by numerous authors. Among others, Van Langendonck and Van de Velde (2016) point out that “A crucial characteristic of names is that they have an inherent categorical presupposed sense (...) [certain] Philosophers (...) argue that this categorical sense is necessary for every use of a name to preserve the identity of the referent. (...) certain psychologists see a categorical, and more precisely a basic level sense in names. The inherent categorical sense of names is presupposed and therefore cannot be negated. *A fortiori*, in a sentence like *London is on the Thames*, the existence of London is presupposed, as is its basic level category *city*” (p. 24). A very useful classification

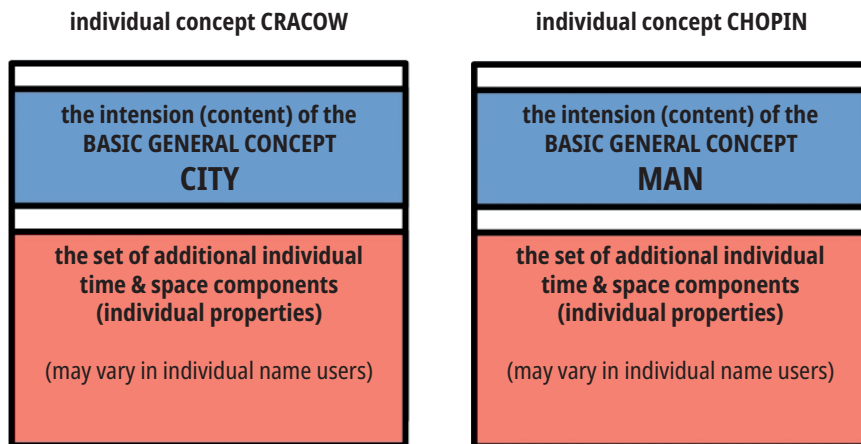
As stated above, the idea of individual concepts is based on the theoretical stand proposed by Eugen Wüster and the Vienna School of Terminology, which has been briefly explained in the Austrian norm:

Begriffe sind Denkeinheiten, die dem Erkennen von Gegenständen, der Verständigung über Gegenstände sowie dem gedanklichen Orden von Gegenständen dienen. Begriffe vertreten entweder nur einen Gegenstand (Individualbegriff, dessen Bezeichnung ein Name ist) oder eine Menge von Gegenständen, die bestimmte Merkmale gemeinsam haben (ÖNORM A 2704, Entwurf, 1989; quoted in Arntz & Picht, 1995, p. 44)

According to the Wüsterian theory of concepts, a basic general (categorical) concept (which is, so to say, a bundle of properties present in every item of a given category) becomes an individual concept in the process of individualisation, i.e. through deepening and enriching its intension (in the logical sense) by adding further individual properties present not in the whole class but only in a given unique and individual object. In other words, the intension gets considerably larger and more comprehensive while the concept's extension (again, in the logical sense of the term) gets reduced to as few as only one element. The element(s) added to the content of a general concept in the process of its individualisation are referred to by the Vienna School of Terminology as time and space components (cf. Arntz & Picht, 1995, p. 46).

And this is why knowing and understanding a name is about knowing the category the named object belongs to: there is the general concept CITY embedded within the individual concept LIMERICK that is referred to with the onym (name form) *Limerick*; and there is the general concept MAN embedded in the individual concepts WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE and HAMLET that are referred to with the onyms (name forms) *William Shakespeare* and *Hamlet*. Even in the case of the unidentifiable Unabomber there was a general concept HUMAN (or GROUP OF PEOPLE) embedded within the (referenceless) individual concept UNABOMBER (cf. Figure 5).

of various authors' theoretical stands in respect to the lexical meaning of proper names is provided in Pisarek (2021, p. 18) even if it is discussed in broader terms of more general question whether proper names do have meaning or not.



**Figure 5. The structure of individual concepts**

Source: own work.

Noticeably, there has been nothing stated so far on the very structure or internal organization of basic general concepts and hence of individual concepts as whole entities. And this is on purpose: the proposed definition of a proper name is valid no matter what we suppose concepts to be. Thus, it is not important whether the basic general concepts are either of classic Aristotelian structure (i.e. constitute a bundle of binary features) and define a classic Aristotelian category or rather have a fluid and continuous structure traditionally discussed by cognitive linguistics in the terms of natural radial categories and in the terms of the prototype theory. Hence, the horse name *Bucephalus* may be a perfect bilateral sign, irrespective of the structure of the general categorical concept serving as the basis for the individual concept of BUCEPHALUS: the basic general concept HORSE may be of (more scientific) classic structure combining all precise properties that allow for Bucephalus to be classified as *Equus ferus caballus* as well as of prototypical nature that does not require the concept-bearer to be aware of all specific properties that differentiate the (scientific) general concept EQUUS FERUS CABALLUS from EQUUS FERUS PRZEWALSKII. One may take as an example dog names as well. For a professional dog breeder an individual concept within a name of one of their dogs is surely based on a precise general concept of a specific breed while for a person not familiar with the detailed

breed definition the named dog's individual concept may be based simply on a natural category.

The example of a professional breeder having in their mind an individual concept of one of their dogs based on a very detailed categorical concept of a specific breed does not mean that the general claim made by Van Langendonck and Van de Velde (2016) may not be true, when, while discussing the notion of an inherent categorical presupposed sense present within proper names, they write:

*person* is usually not the **basic level category** for personal names, nor is *place* the one for place-names. In such highly salient categories the basic level tends to be lower on the hierarchy, *man* and *woman* for human beings, *city*, *country*, *village*, etc. for places. (pp. 24–25)

Time and space components added to a general concept in the process of its individualisation make it possible to create two or more different individual concepts comprising the knowledge of one and the same entity of extralinguistic reality (object) at different stages of its existence (nevertheless, the diversification of individual concepts may be due to other changes of an object's properties as well). Such different individual concepts of a single object are usually referred to with different name forms (*signifiants*). Some examples will make it clear. The name forms *Byzantium*, *Constantinople*, and *Istanbul* stand for the same city, but they are combined with different individual concepts of the city, all differing mainly by the time component. The name forms *Gandalf the Grey* and *Gandalf the White* are *signifiants* of two separate individual concepts comprising the thoughts of the same entity (fictional character) at two different stages of its existence.

Extreme cases of moulding a name's meaning by modifying space components of an individual concept are to be found in the (politics- or diplomacy-driven) use of choronyms. Especially the great shift of state borders in Europe after the Second World War may serve here as an illustration: after the war the name form *Germany* was attached to a reshaped concept of a much smaller territory, while the name form *Poland* went to a new concept of a smaller territory shifted westwards. Such (political) changes often do not make the original concept disappear. It remains but is given a modified name form. A good example: most Hungarians probably connect the name form *Magyarország* with the territorial concept of their country spatially limited by the



present-day state borders. Nevertheless, they keep the concept of pre-1920 Hungarian territory, which is referred to by the name form *Nagy-Magyarország* (Great Hungary). It is the same country as such but in a different time and different space. Hence, two different individual concepts with different time and space individual components and referred to with different name forms.

## 6. Onomastics in (absolutely no) need of philosophy?

Accepting the fact that the individual status of a concept present within a linguistic sign as its *signifié* is the *sine qua non* condition of properhood makes the very idea of an individual concept the core element of the onomastic definition of a proper name. In turn, defining the subject of onomastic research and hence onomastics as a discipline needs to rely on a well elaborated theory and definition of individual concepts. At this point onomasticians (who are mainly linguists) need to face the fact that onomastics itself does not necessarily have to be capable of providing such a definition and such a theory of individual concept and that findings of other disciplines may be indispensable. And if there are no valid or adequate findings of other disciplines, it may still not be the onomastics that has such theoretical work in the central point of its scope. To state it clearly: the definition and the very nature of individual concepts as portions of knowledge of single and unique objects (even imagined ones) is situated rather in the scope of neuroscience, neuro-linguistics, and psycholinguistics. If these disciplines are not ready to provide relatively precise answers to the questions as to how the knowledge is stored in proper name users' minds, the missing scientific findings need to be provisionally replaced with non-scientific speculations of philosophy of language, which in this case is nothing more than philosophy of nature providing hypothetical explanations of phenomena we still cannot explore and study in a scientific way.

Therefore, the structure of individual concepts discussed in the previous parts of this paper needs to be perceived only as a kind of rough approximation, a general model of what may happen in name users' minds. After all, the traditional structural semantics operating on sets of basic semantic properties

most probably has nothing in common with the neurological processes present in a language user's mind because there are no bricks in the mind that would be added to construct a lexical meaning in the way structural semantics may seem to suppose. The human mind is not a computer operating on binary values.

Neuroscience and neurolinguistics may provide an accurate internal model of individual concepts. I refer to this model as *internal* because it is supposed to be based on studying the neurological mechanisms of knowledge storage in name users' minds. What philosophy of nature and philosophy of language are capable of is only proposing some external models. *External* because they are based only on the observations of external symptoms.

## 7. The two main types of onymic meanings

What is a meaning? There are many possible theoretical answers to this question, the most obvious and reasonable, however, being the one that the meaning is what a visible or audible form stands for. So, it is the *signifié* that constitutes the meaning of a linguistic sign. *Mutatis mutandis* it is an individual concept that constitutes the meaning of (or rather within) a proper name. Nevertheless, a meaning may be understood as a relation or connection between *signifiant* and *signifié* within a linguistic sign (and in relation to other linguistic signs). At this point I stick to the latter understanding, because the variety of possible types of onymic meaning is a direct result of relations between a name form and an internal structure of an individual concept.

An individual concept (as a name's *signifié*) is internally composed of the basic general (categorical) concept and the individualizing time and space components (including all sorts of specific knowledge, ideas, and associations an individual name user has about the named object). Therefore, to understand a name means to know what type of object it stands for. In turn, the relations between a name's form (*signifiant*) and its meaning (*signifié*) are of a dual nature: the name form leads both to the category an object belongs to and to the set of its individual properties that make it unique. The former relation may be referred to as a **denotative (categorical) meaning** while the latter as a **referential (individual) meaning** (see Figure 6).

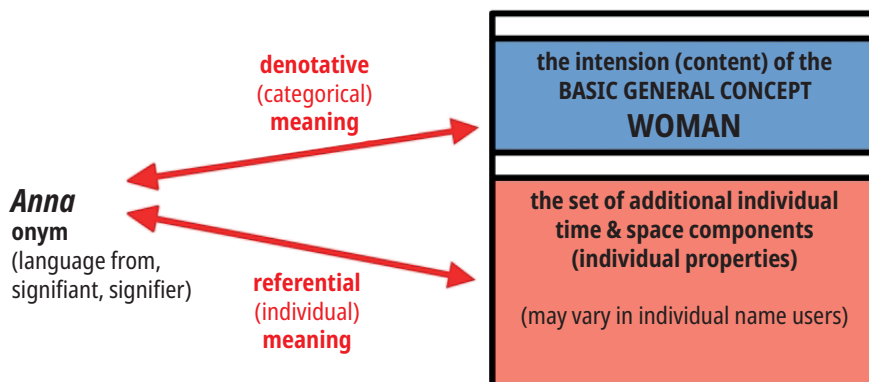


Figure 6. The denotative and referential meaning within a proper name

Source: own work.

### 8. Onym versus (typical) onymic form

When a proper name was defined as a bilateral sign it was stated above that nowadays almost everything may serve as the *signifiant*, as long as it consists of linguistic elements or simply may be pronounced. Hence, almost everything may serve as an **onym** which may be defined as any linguistic form occupying the place of *signifiant* in a proprial bilateral sign.

It is quite obvious, however, that there are forms that serve as *signifiants* in more than one proper name. In fact, some **typical onymic forms** serve as *signifiants* in virtually uncountable proper names that share the same onym. A self-evident example are personal given names (first names)<sup>2</sup> (cf. Figure 7).

<sup>2</sup> The discussed notion of a typical onymic form, defined as a language form that serves as an onym in many separate names, partially corresponds with the idea of *name lemma* as proposed by Van Langendonck and Van de Velde (2016) when they state: “The term *name lemma* indicates a dictionary entry with an onomastic valency. For instance, the lemma *Mary* has the potential to be used as a name with one or more sublemmas that each underlie a name. Thus, the lemma *Mary* underlies a large number of names, such as *Mary the mother of Jesus*, *Mary Stuart*, and so on. Since the lemma *Mary* is typically used as a name, it can be called a *proprial lemma*” (pp. 19–20).

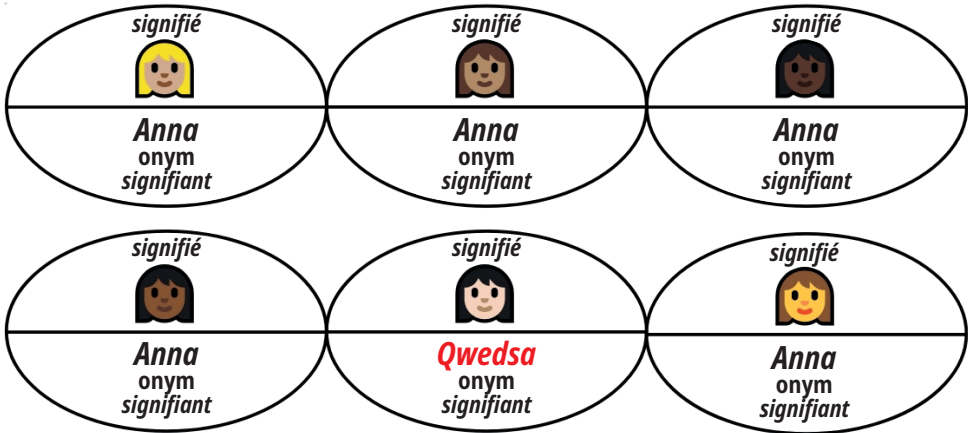


Figure 7. A group of propriial bilateral linguistic signs, most of them sharing the same onym (= typical onymic form)

Source: own work.

There are extremely numerous separate proper names (propriial linguistic signs) with different *signifiés* (different individual concepts of different persons) that share the same onym (*Anna*), which in turn may be classified as a (typical) **onymic form**. At the same time the form *Qwedsa* may be in no way less an onym than *Anna* (for it may serve as a *signifiant* in a proper name as well) but it is not a (typical) onymic form (at least from the perspective of languages and cultures I am more or less acquainted with). Therefore, an onymic form is a language form that commonly serves as a *signifiant* in many different proper names. It is onymic forms of specific languages (or the forms' common properties or elements) as well as their structural, etymological, and semantic classifications that constitute the scope of many onomastic studies.

## 9. Other types and aspects of onymic meaning

Once the concepts of an onymic form, onym, individual concept, denotative meaning, and referential meaning have been introduced and defined it is possible to discuss other types of onymic meaning constituted by the relations of many proprial linguistic signs and their elements.

At this point the advantage of choosing the Saussurean bilateral sign as the *genus proximum* of a proper name becomes even more evident; Nyström (2016) is, of course, perfectly right when he claims that:

a constant interplay takes place between the proprial part of our mental lexicon (the onomasticon) and the non-proprial part (the common words), which makes even the idea of lexical meaning more complicated and more important than it appears. The lexical meaning and the proprial meaning (i.e. the meaning of a certain word used as a name or name element) depend, or least can depend, on each other. (p. 41)

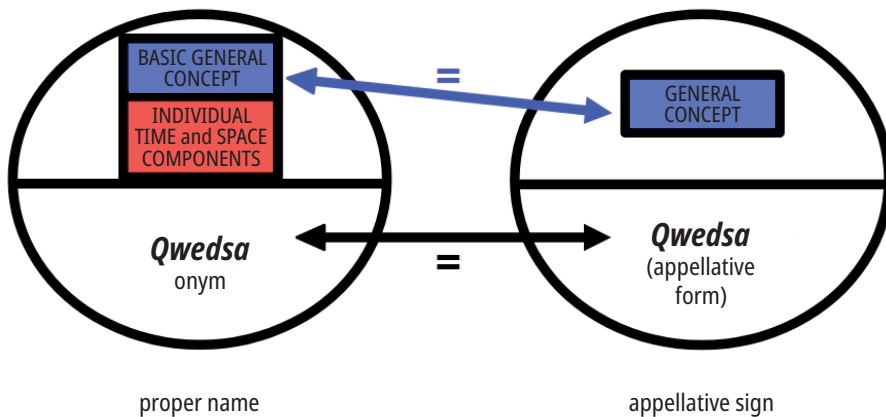
However, it is hardly possible to explain this interplay and the various types of onymic meanings in any other way than with multiple relations of *signifiants* and *signifiés* within a network of appellative and proprial bilateral signs present in mental lexicons of language users. Structuralism is still alive!

Various (sub)types of onymic meaning (meaning within or of proper names) have been proposed and discussed in onomastic works. Noticeably, in this context some similar or identical terms may stand for different notions in works by different scholars. For example, Rzetelska-Feleszko (2006, p. 187) states that proper names may comprise and convey i.a. structural, etymological, and substantive (content-oriented) meanings, while Nyström (2016, pp. 41–50) discusses lexical, proprial, categorical, associative, and emotive meaning.

As far as the denotative meaning of many proper names sharing an identical onym is concerned, it needs to be underlined that such a situation creates what one could refer to as the **denotative predisposition of an onymic form**. To put it simply: because the onymic form *Anna* serves as an onym in so many proper names that include the general (categorical) concept FEMALE PERSON as the part of the *signifié* (i.e. of the individual concept) the form *Anna* has a **denotative predisposition** to serve as the *signifié* in a name of a woman

or a girl rather than in a name of a ship, not to mention a car, other type of vehicle, a building or settlement.<sup>3</sup> Of course, it may happen that a locality or a building is given the name *Anna* but it is something that most language users would notice as a case of atypical denotative meaning.

The **denotative-motivational meaning** is about the relation between a proper name and an appellative bilateral sign that constitutes the origin of the former. Many proper names are created in the way that a general (categorical) concept (the *signifié* of an appellative sign, in the Figure 8 on the right) is individualized by adding time and space components but the *signifiant* remains unmodified. Sometimes, however, it happens that the original appellative expression disappears from a language (see Figure 9) and the *signifiant* remains only in the proper name. This is why it may be differentiated between **synchronic** and **diachronic denotative-motivational meaning**.



**Figure 8. Synchronic denotative-motivational meaning**

Source: own work.

<sup>3</sup> In this respect a remark by Pisarek (2021, p. 18) needs to be underlined that goes even further. Pisarek concludes that from the sheer fact that somebody is called *Ryszard* (Polish for *Richard*) a speaker of Polish may assume that the name's bearer is most probably a man and is of Polish nationality, or, though less probably, is a king of England, because in Polish the given names of foreign monarchs are translated (i.e. replaced with the Polish equivalents of given names; Queen Elisabeth II is present in Polish texts almost exclusively as *królowa* 'queen' *Elżbieta*).

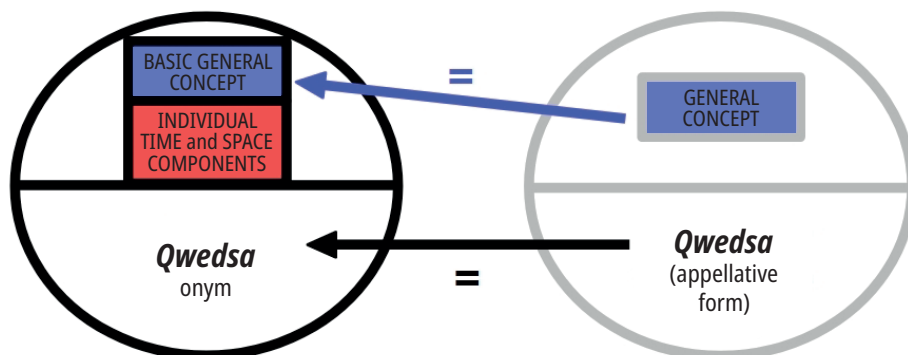


Figure 9. Diachronic denotative-motivational meaning

Source: own work.

The very nature of both synchronic and diachronic denotative-motivational meaning is about both the *signifiant* and the (basic) categorical concept being inherited by a proper name from an appellative sign. It seems that it is in fact the denotative-motivational meaning that many laypeople want to know when they ask, “what does this name mean?” (usually one in a foreign language). It is the synchronic denotative-motivational meaning that stands behind the tendency in many languages (including English) to “translate” foreign proper names, especially toponyms.

It may happen, however, that a proper name inherits only the *signifiant* of an appellative sign and the basic categorical concept within the proper name’s *signifié* is other than the general concept constituting the *signifié* of an appellative. Of course, this discrepancy may be due to other scenarios as well (e.g., due to an essential change within a named object or when a *signifiant* was inherited by a proper name only indirectly through another proper name). If this is the case, one may speak of an **etymological meaning** of a proper name (Figure 10). Again, an answer to the common question “what does this name mean?” is often about the name’s etymological meaning.

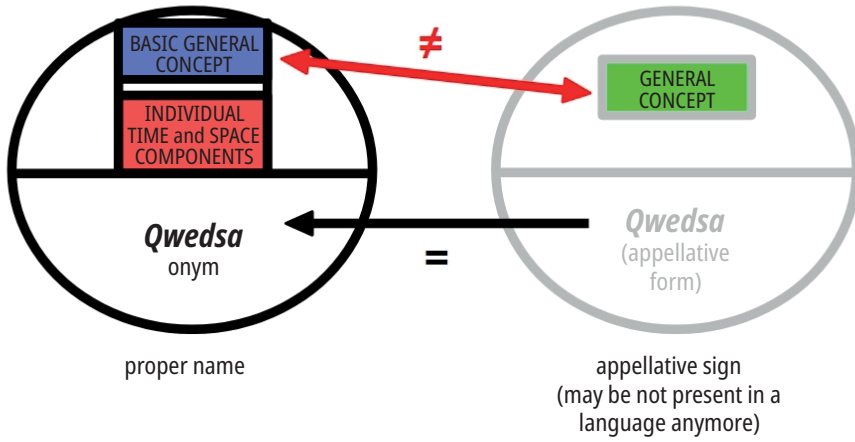


Figure 10. Etymological meaning

Source: own work.

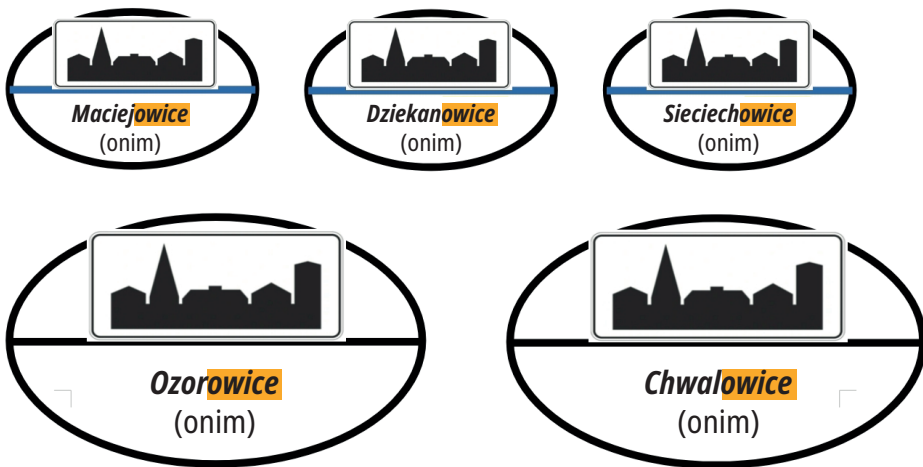


Fig 11. Shared properties of numerous *signifiants* in Polish names of localities as the source of structural meaning conveyed by the segment *-owice*

Source: own work.



Another type of relation between numerous proper names is the **structural meaning**. The structural meaning originates from a formal property (e.g., specific suffix, ending or a noun in compound names, depending on the morphology of a given language) that is shared by many onyms serving as signifiers in many proper names of objects belonging to the same category (cf. Figure 11). Because the suffix, ending, or noun: *-ville*, *-borough*, *-burg*, *-au*, *-aue*, *-grad*, *-gorod*, *-owo*, *-ów* are common in *signifiants* of very numerous names of localities in specific languages, all names including this element in their *signifiants* are predestined (in respective languages) to be interpreted as leading to the basic categorical concept of LOCALITY.

It is important, however, that a structural meaning does not necessarily have to result from elements that may be described in grammatical terms. In other words, the ending or element perceived as typical by laypeople does need to correspond with a typical unit of linguistic description such as morpheme, suffix, etc. It may be a typical segment perceived by the eye of a non-linguist.

## 10. More and less prototypical proper names

Among the desiderata on an onomastic definition of a proper name there is the need to take into account the existence of more and less prototypical proper names, which corresponds with the stand taken by Wolnicz-Pawłowska (2014, p. 203) when she states that properhood is a gradable property.

This gradable nature of properhood may be possibly described and classified by using a theoretical model of a **poly-polar “space of properhood”** constituted by several scales or axes. If a linguistic sign is to be classified as a proper name due to the individual concept constituting its *signifié*, the level and type of its properhood may be “measured” by defining its position in relations to *signifiants* and *signifiés* of other proper names and appellative linguistic signs. In the following these relations shall be discussed in terms of specific criteria that may serve to assess various types of properhood and the level of properhood in more or less prototypical proper names. These criteria are:

- (1) typical onymic form;
- (2) formal-grammatical;

- (3) structural meaning;
- (4) type of motivation;
- (5) denotative-motivational meaning;
- (6) denotative predisposition;
- (7) unambiguity in a communicative community.

What needs to be underlined here is the fact that these criteria are not meant to take into account only the scientific need of precise classification based on the linguistic categories of description. The offered set of possible criteria designed for assessment of the level of properhood in more or less prototypical proper names is intended to pay attention to the probable common-sense perception of properhood by non-linguists as well, even if this is only of speculative nature.

What has been just stated is an important remark for two good reasons. Firstly, the general theory of proper names and the scholarly onomastic models of the nature of properhood are not supposed to be a kind of reverse engineering. The nature of properhood is not a mechanism hidden in a device an onomastician may disassemble in order to prove that it actually works just like he or she has described it. The same applies to most branches of general linguistics and especially to the philosophy of language.

Secondly, the theory of onomastics needs to take into account that the level of properhood may not be imposed by any theory and that properhood is, in fact, a result of non-linguistic perception of “nameness” by language users. As long as there is no survey research on that, the common-sense non-linguistic understanding of the level of properhood may be outlined only in a speculative way, even if it is done with reference to theoretical linguistic categories.

### 10.1. Typical onymic form

A proper name comprising an onym that is a typical onymic form (e.g., *Anna*, *Maria*) is a more prototypical proper name than a proper name comprising an onym that is formally identical with a *signifiant* of an appellative sign (e.g., *Mount Sunday*) or an onym that is a potential word like \**Tagel* or simply a chain of allophones/allographs, e.g. *Qwedsa*. A proper name with *Maria* as the onym is still a more prototypical proper name of a nuclear reactor than *Qwedsa*.

## 10.2. Formal-grammatical

The grammatical criterion, although listed here, seems to be the most questionable one when it comes to the universal validity of any onomastic definition or characteristics of a proper name. The simple and obvious reason for that is that even the most typical morphosyntactic properties of what are considered to be proper names in one language (or many related languages) may be completely absent in perfectly prototypical proper names in other languages. In their paper, Van Langendonck and Van de Velde (2016, p. 18) recognize the fact that their attempt to characterise proper names in grammatical terms must be inevitably biased towards the languages in which they provide examples (in fact, it is mainly English). Unfortunately, it turns out to be quite an understatement, because large portions of their analysis may serve, indeed, as a good argument for the conclusion that language-specific morphosyntactic properties are simply useless in creating a generally-valid characteristics of proper names; Van Langendonck and Van de Velde (2016, pp. 22–23) pay much attention and devote much space to the discussion of the definiteness of proper names and to their possible position in restrictive relative clauses in English. They state, for instance, that “The unique denotation of names entails their definiteness, as well as their incompatibility with restrictive relative clauses (...)” (p. 22). While citing one of Van Langendonck’s older works they even claim that “In fact, definiteness is the most natural state of a referring expression, that is, definite and referential go together” (p. 26) and so completely ignore a vast number of languages, including Slavic ones, that lack the category of definiteness in their grammars. Therefore, basing any general characteristics of proper names on the grammatical category of definiteness makes such general description invalid.

One of the possible ways to outline a general and universal formal-grammatical criterion is to state that a proper name comprising a *signifiant* formally identical with a *signifiant* of an appellative expression is a more prototypical proper name if the grammar properties of the onym differ from the grammar properties of the appellative.

These differences may be of a diverse nature, depending on the language-specific grammatical categories. For instance, in the Slavic inflectional languages (which Western general-onomastic theories tend to ignore) the mentioned grammatical differences may be manifested in declension. So, in Polish the surname *Dąb* may be considered to be a more prototypical proper name if its genitive is *Dąba* and not *Dęba* (the form *Dębu* is grammatically

possible, but would be probably never used by a native speaker of Polish with reference to a person):

	Nominative	Genitive
appellative 'oak'	<i>dąb</i>	<i>dębu</i>
family name	<i>Dąb</i>	<i>Dąba</i>

### 10.3. Structural meaning

A proper name comprising an onym having some regular word formation properties typical for many proper names of objects belonging to a given category (e.g., localities) is a more prototypical proper name. A good example are names with a suffix that gives a clue as to the type of the named object, just like: *-ville*, *-borough*, *-burg*, *-grad* as well as *-au*, *-aue*, *-owo*, *-ów*, *-sk*. These markers of properhood are, however, language bound.

This criterion may be discussed in the terms of categorical presupposition (i.a. Nyström, 2016, p. 48) as well. Furthermore, what Nyström (2016, p. 50) and Van Langendonck and Van de Velde (2016, p. 32) discuss as emotive meaning may be perceived as a subtype of structural meaning in which emotional components of proprial meaning are conveyed (e.g., by diminutive or augmentative suffixes in personal names).

In light of the proposed criterion the name *\*Goodville* would be (from the perspective of the English language) a more prototypical proper name if it stood for a locality than if it stood for a restaurant.

### 10.4. Type of motivation (denotative versus etymological meaning)

A proper name with an etymological motivation (etymological meaning) is a more prototypical proper name than a proper name with a synchronic or diachronic denotative motivation (denotative meaning). The Croatian name of the city *Rijeka* (← *rijeka* 'river') is a more prototypical proper name than a proper name of a river *Rijeka*. This criterion is to a great extent about the formal relation between an onym and existent or already non-existent *signifiant* of an appellative behind the name.

### 10.5. Denotative-motivational meaning

A proper name with a diachronic denotative motivation is a more prototypical proper name than a proper name with a synchronic denotative motivation. For example, *Snowdon* (← OE *dun* ‘hill’) is a more prototypical proper name than *Pendle Hill*.

### 10.6. Denotative predisposition

The criterion of the denotative predisposition is about a name’s denotative meaning’s compliance with the typical denotative meaning of most names comprising the given onym. For instance: *Maria* as the proper name of a woman is a more prototypical proper name than *Maria* as the proper name of a nuclear reactor, because it is the general concept FEMALE PERSON or WOMAN that is embedded in the individual concepts within most proper names *Maria* and the general concept NUCLEAR REACTOR does not take this position commonly (if the name of the reactor in the Polish National Center for Nuclear Research is not the only case). This criterion could be discussed i.a. in the terms of categorical meaning and categorical presupposition as proposed by Nyström (2016, pp. 47–48) as well.

### 10.7. Unambiguity

This criterion is simple: the bigger the communicative community within which an onym unambiguously leads to a single specific individual concept, the more prototypical the proper name. A communicative community within which the name *Anna* is unambiguously interpreted by all community members as having specific individual concept of a specific person as its *signifié* may be as small as a single family. In contrary, the name *Ukraine* is unambiguously interpreted by all members as having a specific individual concept of a specific country in a communicative community of the whole world.

Probably the best theoretical proposal that may serve as the starting point in discussing the possible hierarchy of communities for the purpose of the discussed criterion is the **theory of linguistic storage and communicative communities** offered by Zabrocki (1968; see a brief discussion thereof in

Włoskowicz, 2019, pp. 293–295). The theory comprises a conceptual system that may be referred to as a **spatial sociology of geographical names** but may be easily adapted to all types of proper names. An important disadvantage of the theory, however, is that in the 1960s it could not take into account well-developed and commonly accessible telecommunication, which nowadays makes human communication a rather non-spatial phenomenon. In other words, in present-day circumstances a small communicative community of a single family does not need to be defined as living in one place; it may be dispersed all over the world and still use names comprehensible only to its members.

A communicative community both establishing and established by a name is an indispensable element that distinguishes proper names from pronouns. While the latter have fixed reference in a given situation or context, the former have fixed “reference” (i.e. *signifiant–signifié* connection) within a given community. If there are two or more homonymous proper names used within a given community, it is usually the context that makes it possible for a listener to decide which sign has been actually used by a speaker.

## 11. Instead of conclusions: the (most important) definitions

**proper name** – a bilateral linguistic sign consisting of an **onym** as the *signifiant* (*signifier*) and an **individual concept** as the *signifié* (*signified*).

**onym** – any linguistic form or expression that may be pronounced irrespectively of its graphic form that serves as the *signifiant* within a proper name.

**(typical) onymic form** – any linguistic form or expression that serves as the *signifiant* within many separate (homonymous) proper names.

**individual concept** – a mental unit located in a language user’s mind and comprising knowledge of an individual (single) object, its properties, and associations connected with it but not necessarily any deictic information.

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