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My Name and Myself: Duet or Solo?

Abstract

Much work in onomastics tends to be language- or ethnicity-related and subdisciplinarian. In the Western tradition, the creation of a general onomastics, an overarching theory of names and naming, has largely been the province of philosophy, especially logic, with some sporadic additions from linguistics. Attempts to predicate such a theory on data from a world-wide range of languages have been conspicuously rare. Mostly, general work on names has been expressed in language-neutral terms, but within the framework of the dominant language of academic discourse; formerly Latin, and more recently often English.

The elephant in the room of onomastic theory cannot be dealt with in this way. Humankind is split in its view of the relation between names and their individual (especially human) bearers. Are they more or less arbitrary labels, as the Western tradition broadly agrees (with some discomfort about what "more or less" might entail), or are they integral attributes of their bearers, like the mind or the soul, as other cultures insist? The point of this contribution is to frame the question in the light of current theoretical work, and to explore in what sense, if any, and in what way, it might be "answered" rather than dismissed.

Theobald had proposed to call him George after old Mr Pontifex, but strange to say, Mr Pontifex over-ruled him in favour of the name Ernest. The word 'earnest' was just beginning to come into fashion, and he thought the possession of such a name might, like his having been baptised in water from the Jordan, have a permanent effect upon the boy's character, and influence him for good during the more critical periods of his life.

— Samuel Butler, "The Way of All Flesh"

A name is a mask, a hiding place. We are all nameless inside.
— Marty Rubin, often quoted, but exact original source untraced

1. A problem in general onomastics with particular reference to personal names

For reasons that are easy to understand, much work in onomastics tends to be related to individual languages or cultures, and devoted to distinct sub-disciplines. Specialists usually focus their energies on, say, national onomastics, or on anthroponymy as opposed to toponymy, as vividly illustrated, for example, by the range of chapters in Felecan and Bugheşiu (2021). In the Western tradition, the creation of a general onomastics, that is, the creation of an overarching theory of names and naming, has been attempted mainly within philosophy, especially logic. Philosophy remains the main contributor, though there have been important interventions over the last forty or so years, especially by European linguists such as Odo Leys, Hartwig Kalverkämper, Willy Van Langendonck, Andrea and Silvio Brendler, Jean-Claude Vaxelaire, John Anderson and Fran Colman, and the American John Algeo. Little attempt has been made, so far as I am aware, to do what bottom-up anthropological linguistics is more inclined to do than top-down philosophy: namely to build an inductive theoretical onomastics on a large amount of data from a range of languages world-wide. Even anthropology has produced little, however; notable are only Alford (1988) and the introduction to vom Bruck and Bodenhorn (2006). However, there is a topic for which this could interestingly be done. In this paper I shall focus specifically on personal names.

2. Monodenotationality and monoreferentiality

Over the centuries onomastics has suffered from some misconceptions. This is partly because of the underdevelopment of relevant parts of semantic theory, and partly because of the narrow dataset employed for theorizing. As regards semantic theory, for example, for as long as no clear distinction was made between the denotation of a name and its referent(s), it could be said (and it often was) that there was a unique relation between a name and its bearer. This is obviously false if we are dealing with *denotation*: the name *Aristotle* denotes at least nine individuals recorded in Antiquity (even in the posthumous 1850 edition of Lempriere's classical dictionary); names cannot therefore be by definition monodenotational. Any unique relationship that exists between a name and its bearer exists in the here and now, in the moment of conversational exchange: a matter of pragmatics, involving *reference* to an individual (Coates, e.g. 2006, 2017). At least, that is generally the case. In addition, the narrow, Western-focused, dataset on which theorizing has been based has meant some interesting cultural understandings have been marginalized theoretically.

Despite the above, it is true that some cultures have supported practices whereby an approximation to *monodenotational* names is maintained, and the state has occasionally been reached absolutely, even when the dead are included, in some small societies (Alford, 1988, p. 68). This has some evolutionary validity as an aid to successful reference in context, but there could be less concrete undertones. The approximation could be achieved in several ways: for example by careful selection of the elements that may be combined into names when they are bestowed (as happened widely in the older Germanic languages: e.g., Old English *Ēad* + *weard*, *Wulf* + *stān*), by the employment of bynames or nicknames or inherited distinguishers (almost universally), or by avoidance or even taboo of the names of revered deceased or otherwise significant persons (in many southern African and Australasian cultures). But an approximation is what this remains in most societies, and it is at best asymptotic: strict monodenotationality is hard to achieve and hard to police. It is notable, however, that a monodenotational personal name remains a cherished and achievable goal in some societies. In recent years in Finland, for example, the number of names that have only one (or at any rate very few)

bearers has markedly increased (e.g., Eero Kiviniemi's work, as mentioned in Ainiala et al., 2016, p. 173). The same applies in the case of certain individuals. A decree of 2014 required all persons in North Korea called *Kim Jong-un* to change their name, with one exception (Reuters, 3 December 2014, report from the broadcaster KBS, mentioning similar directives regarding this person's father and grandfather). Why is the lure – or delusion – of monodenotationality so powerful?

3. Possible statuses of given names: Arbitrariness and motivation

Irrespective of the potential ambiguity of reference if names are not monodenotational, all cultures insist that individual humans should have proper (personal, given) names (Bramwell, 2016). The elephant in the room of onomastic theory concerns the nature of the relation between names and their bearers. Humankind is divided in its view of this relation. Are names more or less arbitrary labels borne by individuals, as the Western academic tradition now broadly agrees (although with some discomfort about what "more or less arbitrary" might entail – see below), or are they integral attributes of their bearers, perhaps rather like the mind or the soul, as other cultures imply or insist? The point of this paper is to frame the question in the light of current theoretical work, and to explore in what sense, if any, it might be "answered" rather than dismissed. What is it about the characteristics of names that makes the nature of their relationship to the person contestable?

At the "arbitrary" end of the spectrum, a number of immediate qualifications need to be made, which is what I meant when I mentioned "discomfort" about the meaning of "more or less" arbitrary. From certain perspectives, arbitrariness is mitigated by aspects of the real world into which the individual is born. Right across the world we find circumstance names relating to family status or to the bearer's birth and its time, propitious names indicating hopes or aspirations for the baby, apotropaic names intended to protect the baby from harm, inherited and traditional names, and many instances of naming-after (e.g., after parents or sponsors). None of these are wholly arbitrary as regards their *motivation*. Also, in many cases, an etymological meaning

can be read off the name. That meaning can be recovered and discussed, and may play a role in the bearer's life. However, it is obvious to a linguist trained in Western academia that in such cases, any accessible etymological meaning plays no semantic role <u>in the act of reference</u>. If I meet a Yoruba-speaker called *Ọlátòkunbọ* 'wealth has arrived from abroad', I may well conclude that this is relevant to the bearer's life, but it is not an obligatory part of what I need to know to achieve identification or reference in context. For the purposes of the act of reference, the form of a bestowed personal name is always wholly arbitrary. We can say that names are historically and/or synchronically motivated (and often interpretable), but that their form is arbitrary when they are involved in reference.

The fundamental arbitrariness of the relation between a name and its bearer is also illustrated by the fact that it can be broken. Bestowed names can, in principle and legally, be detached and abandoned, though the extent of this possibility may depend on the jurisdiction in question. In the UK, when one reaches the age of 16 one may use a name other than one's registered name without any legal formalities (although the process can also be formalized), unless one has a criminal intention in doing so. So far as I can gather, countries as various as Sweden, Honduras, Sudan, Azerbaijan and Japan are similarly liberal. On the other hand many jurisdictions require someone who wants to replace their name to go through a legal process leading to official authentication of the change. Some of these restrict name-replacement to cases where the bearer has specified admissible reasons to abandon their birth-name (e.g., to avoid humiliation and indecency, or revealing their parentage). In India, legal advice I have seen concerning the affidavit required to support your bid to replace your name indicates that you may invoke the surprising pairing of "neurological and astrological reasons". China allows name-replacement but advises against it, which has been interpreted by some Western commentators as an anti-Muslim policy. In France you may replace only your surname. In Greenland you must select from a list of approved Danish names. In Portugal legal name-replacement is practically impossible. At the other extreme, the most liberal situation of all appears to be in the Maldives, where the government says "please inform us if you change your name"!

There are of course anthropologically recognized life-occasions on which names may be changed or added: at puberty or when one is old enough to possess one's own cattle, gender reassignment, religious conversion, Christian

confirmation, marriage, the death of a relative, public performance especially of an artistic kind, inheritance, entry into high office (popes and kings). The importance of all these issues in the present context is what they reveal about understandings of the bond between a person and a name.

Legally we see a cline; at one end is a position taking names to be more or less freely detachable and replaceable; at the other is a position tending towards the idea that the bond between name and person, once it has been established, cannot be dissolved, whatever the philosophical or bureaucratic foundations of the relevant legal situation may be.

4. Non-Saussurean orientation to the relation between name and named

As post-Saussurean linguists, we might understandably be tempted to conclude that accepting *l'arbitraire du signe* in relation to names is a good way of dumping a lot of nonsensical ideas about "natural" meanings. We might further be tempted to agree with the Canadian aphorist Marty Rubin that "A name is a mask, a hiding place. We are all nameless inside." We can change the mask, the antithesis of a bond, whenever we feel like it. However, it does not take long to establish that outside the frameworks of established civil or canon law there are circumstances around naming which present different understandings of what binds a name and the named together.

It is easy to see how names might be thought to be inherent characteristics of individuals. That is, they are attributes which, although they are detachable, in some sense "ought not" to be. In conversation, deictic, exophoric and anaphoric pronouns shift their reference from occasion to occasion. Nouns have (relatively) fixed denotations, and they classify, but vary in reference according to their collocates when embedded in phrases and according to context of situation. Names, on the other hand, and only names, are rigid designators or identifiers (Kripke, 1980; Sjöblom, 2006; Fleming, 2011). In principle, in all possible worlds, they are associated permanently with what they denote (their potential referents) by performative acts (which may include baptism, registration, or some unofficial explicit act such as a suggestion of a name by

one parent and agreement by the other). That association is continually and causally reinforced by a continuous chain of acts of reference so that names are fixed to individuals, although that bond can, as we have seen, be undone in specific circumstances. Until that happens, whenever the name is mentioned, whatever the context, the bond is stable: the name evokes the person, and the person and name are effectively united. You can't have one without the other.

Given this crucial *association* of name with bearer, we must focus attention on how it is achieved, because that has an impact on how the association is to be understood. What is the nature of the process by which the name for the individual is arrived at? What are the possibilities? A typology of anthropologically validated naming-motivations might be considered.

For those to whom it matters, that is, for those to whom it is in any way more than arbitrary (whether as name-bestowers or voluntary name-changers), the motivation for naming is to achieve *appropriateness* to the bearer as a person, which may be categorized in different ways, though the ways are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

(1) Aesthetic appropriateness (semantics-free)

That the form of a name alone may be thought to imply personal characteristics is shown by the following Google hits, obtained as top hits for the emphasized search strings (18 August 2021):

That is what we planned to name our now 2 year old, though we changed our minds after he was born – **he just looked like a James**.
she's so beautiful and **she just looked like an Olivia**! (web-site where contributors are invited to suggest what name would be suitable for a child on the basis of a photo);

(2) Personal or contextual appropriateness (a specific feature of child's appearance or circumstances of birth or calendar);

(3) Affiliational appropriateness (family, ethnicity, religion) – expressed or implied by e.g., naming after a relative, or by acknowledged (e.g., "Scottish" or "Muslim") names;

(4) Emotional appropriateness – expression of parental or wider family emotions, including wish fulfilment (joy, long desired/delayed arrival, pain – some overlap or connection with circumstance 2.);

(5) Aspirational appropriateness (success, wealth, strength, leadership);

(6) Calculated inappropriateness (bluffing the Devil: apotropaic, prophylactic) – sometimes temporarily, to be replaced by a permanent name in defined circumstances;

(7) Mystical including astrological appropriateness (one's name is inherent and waiting to be revealed by a shaman (professional) or a web-site (cheaper)) – a preordained counterpart of nominal determinism.

Two of these visions of appropriateness, 3. and 5., are presented in conflict in Samuel Butler's novel "The Way of All Flesh":

> Theobald had proposed to call him George after old Mr Pontifex [3.], but strange to say, Mr Pontifex over-ruled him in favour of the name Ernest. The word 'earnest' was just beginning to come into fashion, and he thought the possession of such a name might, like his having been baptised in water from the Jordan, have a permanent effect upon the boy's character, and influence him for good during the more critical periods of his life. [5.]

The whole naming process is fuelled by a widespread understanding that the name to be bestowed on a child needs to be "right" in at least one of these seven senses; that therefore the naming process is loaded with a heavy responsibilty, that there is a power or potential inherent in the act of naming, and that that latent power exercised by name-bestowers in a culturally validated responsible way may transfer to the name itself.

Most European and American parents will agree up to a point – they will not want to give their child a name which handicaps them personally or socially. There are well-known psycho-onomastic studies and legends indicating that unusual names may handicap a child socially (especially a boy); that children with a deviant spelling of a common name tended to fall behind others in spelling and reading; that people who have names they do not like tend to be less well-adjusted, having damaged "implicit egotism"; and even that giving a child a frequent name may backfire (according to results publicized by Bounty.com, 2010; for popular accounts see also Sherrod & Rayback, 2008; Bryner, 2010, and for indications that the matter is of greater complexity, having much to do with the relationship between names, status and other socioeconomic variables, e.g., Zweigenhaft, 1977; Figlio, 2007; Clark, 2014). In the Bounty.com survey, 20% of relevant parents wished they had chosen a name that was easier to spell; 8% were fed up with (other) people being unable to pronounce the child's name; and 10% thought the name they chose was clever at the time, but said the novelty had worn off.

For some, giving a name is tantamount to bringing a person into being, in much the same way (though less mystically) that among the Malagasy it is by giving itself a name that a spirit brings itself into existence (Lambek, 2006).

At both extremes of this seven-item typology of appropriatenesses, it is easy to conceive that, once a name has been revealed or externalized, there is something like a necessary or even numinous relationship between the name and its bearer. A rigidly designating label that one bears from birth is the only quasi-permanent characteristic one has that is not determined by one's DNA (or the pre-scientific equivalent such as "blood"). One's name is a pivotal point between what is given by nature and by nurture. At the most mystical end(s) of the typology, a name is a fusion, a cultural characteristic emergent from the living being itself.

5. Naming and power

Naming for appropriateness of any sort is an expression of power asymmetry. Name-bestowers are considered to have a right and duty to exercise the power to apply a rigid designator which they consider appropriate. In so doing they also have a responsibility. Appropriateness is about the namer's judgement on behalf of a bearer who is not yet capable of exercising judgement. There are behaviours that testify to this power relation. Generally speaking the person named does not address or refer to their namer by name but uses a name surrogate such as *Mummy*, *Grandad*, *Auntie*. This deferential, even euphemistic, avoidance behaviour is well embedded in most cultures, and it mirrors the asymmetry of power and responsibility. Asymmetric name deference acknowledges that the namer had and may still retain power over the person named; in judging a name's appropriateness, the namer claims an intimate knowledge of the bearer's characteristics of a type that might be considered esoteric. On the other hand, users of surrogate names acknowledge that they do not have such power or knowledge. The act of naming actualizes those powers, and names themselves encode them; we may adapt a remark by Luke Fleming (2011) that "the power of words ... adhere[s] [– he may have meant *inheres*] in their very materiality" (p. 143), substituting *names* for *words*.

Name *avoidance* in contexts such as face to face is a facet of politeness. We avoid the use of our parents' or other namers' names in address; other cultures have different avoidance parameters, for example, women avoiding the utterance of a parent-in-law's name (as in the Xhosa/Zulu *hlonipha* system; Finlayson, 1982). A breach of name-politeness brings shame or embarrassment on the person uttering it because it lays claim to a power or a level of intimate knowledge that they do not have, or cannot or may not express. Name taboo, i.e. absolute, not contextual, avoidance of a name, is a step further: it might take the form of not speaking or writing the name of exalted personages, or further still, it can take the form of not speaking or writing any linguistic string that duplicates or resembles the name of such a personage or a dead person, as if the death of the person and the non-utterance of their name were the same thing.

Conveniently for the finalization of this paper, a controversy arose in August 2021 in the UK about what appeared to be a directive within the National Health Service (NHS) at Bristol. Its intentions were almost certainly innocent, but it was pounced on for its insensitivity. It suggested that staff with names that were not stereotypically Western, and were therefore "difficult" for users of English, should choose one that was not so "difficult" (e.g., BBC 2021). It is not difficult to see why this provoked a storm, because it amounted to asking people to select a rigid designator to replace the one that had been bestowed on them appropriately and in good faith. It seemed to claim the right of the NHS:

- to influence name-bestowal (inappropriately, because the NHS is not a privileged intimate of members of staff, nor in a shamanic role);
- to use an inappropriate technique (because it <u>requires</u> arbitrary self-selection of a name by staff);
- supported by inappropriate motivation (judgement of the new name's appropriateness would be a matter external to the bestower-bearer);
- at an inappropriate moment and place in the bearer's life (at the routine workplace).

Critics viewed an assault on a name as an assault on the relevant staff, infantilizing them and requiring them to shed a crucial aspect of their identity. It appeared to deflect the responsibility for dealing with British people's laziness or incompetence onto the name-bearer. The NHS appeared either to claim knowledge of the power of names and abuse it, or to be completely ignorant of that power. There are no Olympic medals for either.

Of course, we may consider that reaction to be an overreaction. We could believe instead that the suggestion was simply aimed at improving patient-staff communication by asking for a behavioural adjustment on the part of those who are in a better position to make one than sick and suffering people are. My point here is not to adjudicate between these different reactions, but to point out that the entire issue concerns the special nature of the bond between individuals and their names, hinging on the nature of that relation, even in a society where considerable freedom attends the business of names and naming.

6. Finale

So, focusing on my title, "My Name and Myself – Dduet or Solo?", what can we conclude? As analytic linguists, we are undoubtedly dealing with a duet: the functional relation between my name and my self is arbitrary, even if the motivation for bestowing it upon me is <u>not</u> arbitrary. However, there are strands of opinion and behavior worldwide that hint at the idea of a more intimate connection between the self and the name, established by a validly motivated act of bestowal, in much the same way as food or vaccines become part of the receiver's body. Accordingly, they may be viewed as sufficiently in unison with each other to constitute a solo. There appears to be a universal rule-of-thumb, that a practical intimate monodenotationality underlying the contextual monoreferentiality of names should be assumed until challenged.

But what we do not have is a world-wide attempt, beyond Richard Alford's pioneering work (1988), to collect and analyse information from a range of cultures about the significance of name-person relationships, about knowledge/use of names and about the act of naming. My binary division of the music made by self and name into *duet* and *solo* may need to be made more subtle by acknowledging relationships like *descant* and *a cappella* – at any rate, let us write the opening bars of the new tune.

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