Prototypical definition of names

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INTRODUCTION

To determine the difference between names and linguistic expressions other than names, I attempt to sketch a prototypical semantic description.[1] The intention is to find the core of the concept of name and its more or less fuzzy boundaries. This is a response to a desire expressed by Bo Ralph in the Festschrift for Hugo Karlsson, where, inspired by the nineteenth Norna symposium in Gothenburg in 1991 about 'Other Names', he called for a prototypical description of the concept of 'naminess' (Ralph 1994, 239). Unfortunately, the limited space here does not allow me to cite the views of all those who have defended a particular definition of names. Nevertheless, I hope that readers will accept the following account, which sets out degrees of 'naminess'.

It is fairly common to discuss the nature of names with reference to what I think we can readily agree to be typical representatives of the class, namely personal names and place-names. These lack inflectional morphemes and are almost exclusively used to indicate a specific referent (Peter, Eliza, London, and Oxford; cf. Bakken 2002, 20–36). Since I proceed from the view that whether something is a name or not can be determined by an intuitive feel for language, and settled by semantic rather than morphological or syntactic criteria, my prototypical description will be a semantic description. I give only secondary

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[1] This article is based on a paper read in Swedish at the fifteenth Norna Nordic Onomastic Conference at Askov in 2012, published as 'Prototypisk namndefinition', in *Navne og skel: skellet mellem navne*, ed. B. Eggert and R. S. Oleson, 2 vols, Norna-rapporter 91 (Uppsala, 2015), I, 217–30.

consideration to the form and syntactic function of the linguistic units, or properties of the phenomena designated by the expressions. If I nevertheless discuss designations within categories, such as trade names or dog breeds, it is in order to find examples that can help us to discern the blurred boundary. I am not looking for categories in which everything is either a name or not.

I support the view that names lack meaning. Richard Coates (2006), in an article in *Language*, has claimed that a name is formed when an expression loses its meaning. I agree with him, but want to dwell more on semantics. Coates regards names as a pragmatic phenomenon and argues that, if an expression that has lost its meaning has a referring function, then it is a name. I want to start with what meaning is and to consider what a language user does in semantic terms when using a name in contrast to a meaningful expression.

Starting from Coates' standpoint that the characteristic feature of names is that they lack meaning, I want to approach the boundary between names and other expressions and give examples that are on the borderline. The debatable edge is more interesting than the unambiguous core.

DEFINITION OF MEANING

The theoretical premise for the semantic reasoning here comes from action-theory semantics, where meaning is described as the cumulative effect of a person's activity as a language user, when speaking or writing in a language community, in order to achieve something – to make the listener or reader do, believe, or feel something (cf. Keller 1994a, 1994b). A fundamental feature is that this does not presuppose any ideal Platonic world or concepts such as intention, extension or denotation to describe the meaning of words. This approach to semantics describes meaning as knowledge and accumulated experience of the use of words in the collective of language users.

Names are monoreferential

In all name theory we repeatedly find names described as mono-referential. This is surely at the core of a prototypical definition. But the

fact that names are monoreferential is not a sufficient condition, since *the sun*, *the moon*, and *the earth* are also monoreferential, or at least *the sun* and *the moon* were before we knew that there are other suns and that Jupiter has four moons. The fact that the word *earth* is monoreferential can perhaps be regarded as an irrelevant chance. *The earth* happens to identify our planet individually, as a name does, because we do not know of any other planets with the properties of the earth. We indicate the earth and other people understand what we mean. We use the meaning-bearing noun and need no name, as we might perhaps have done if there had been other earths that we wished to distinguish. The word *earth* is monoreferential, but that is a matter of fact (not linguistics) and it does not make it a name. It is still a noun while it has meaning. Contrast *Tellus* – Latin 'earth', applied to the ancient Roman earth goddess – which has no meaning for us, and is thus a name.

What makes *sun*, *moon*, and *earth* unconvincing as names is that they have meaning in a reasonable sense of having meaning. When the words are used, the cumulative effect of earlier use in the language community plays a part. The words have been used by many people with the aim of making others understand what is meant, and language users have thereby acquired a partly shared idea not just of what the words refer to, but also thoughts and feelings about what the words possibly can refer to. This constitutes the meanings of the words. The use of the words has had the result that *the earth* usually has more meaning than *Tellus*.[2] That is why *the earth* is a noun whereas *Tellus* is a name, although both are monoreferential.

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[2] In some contexts, however, *earth* seems rather to be a name, for example when in a science fiction story a space ship returns to Earth (without definite article; in Swedish, however, with enclitic definite article: Jorden). Here the word seems to have lost its meaning and corresponds to Mars, Jupiter or Venus in referring to an individual planet. Like those designations, Earth then lacks meaning, i.e. any obvious knowledge or accumulated experience of the use of the word. (Thanks to Bo A. Wendt for pointing this out.)

In semantic philosophy the concept of denotation is used similarly to the concept of reference. The difference is that *reference* describes the connection between a linguistic sign and the phenomenon designated by the sign in specific use, whereas *denotation* describes the connection between a sign and all the phenomena to which the sign could possibly refer. The latter is actually the same as having meaning. As I base my definition of what a name is on an explicit description of what meaning is, I prefer to talk about having meaning instead of framing the discussion in terms of denotation. Another reason not to use the term *denotation* is that in some literature *denote* and *denotation* are used synonymously with *refer* and *referendum*. This is unfortunate, especially when describing names: it is then necessary to distinguish between having, or not having, meaning.

To conduct a semantic prototypical study, one must try to discern where the blurred dividing line runs between names, which lack meaning, and non-names. This should be done without having to spend time categorizing potential name-bearers, such as heavenly bodies, in order to distinguish them from others. That would be doing something other than semantic analysis.

Lack of meaning

The core of the description is thus that names are monoreferential and lack meaning. Meaning in this case excludes the identification of categories; for example, that we primarily think of those who are called Peter, Mary and Eliza as persons, but categorize Newport, Oxford and Hampstead as settlement names. Nor is the definition of name upset by implications of probability, for instance that the British Museum is likely to refer to a museum and Heathrow Airport to an airport. We may also ignore associative meanings, such as the facts and experiences that may be brought to mind by the name Kebnekaise, the highest mountain in Sweden. These associations do not make Kebnekaise into a word with meaning like the appellatives *chair* or *earth*. We can use those words with greater certainty of achieving a communicative goal over and above merely referring; we reckon with what other people know about chairs

and about the earth to a greater extent than we can reckon on a common understanding of Kebnekaise. When we refer to the latter we focus only on indicating the unique referent, the mountain Kebnekaise; we do not point out a specific referent among a class of things called Kebnekaise, nor a specific referent among something that could be included in a class but happens to be unique. We use a name; the expression lacks meaning. We cannot take advantage of the cumulative associations of the word, deriving from its use in a language community. It is difficult to determine when monoreferential words are used in this way; perhaps we can only note intuitively that it simply is the case that *the earth* has meaning, while Kebnekaise or Tellus do not.

Expressions can move towards or away from the core of names. In the phrase 'to do a *schettino*' ('to behave shamefully and stupidly', as captain Schettino did when he left his sinking ship claiming he had accidently fallen into a lifeboat), the name *Schettino* is in the process of acquiring a meaning. In other cases the same shift has already happened: *jeep*, *wellington* and *frisbee* are examples. And it can happen that appellatives become names, as in certain instances of *Prästgården* ('the vicarage' becoming 'The Vicarage') and *Kalvhagen* ('the calf pasture' becoming a place-name). This phenomenon has received most attention in the case of place-names that are close to, or actually are, appellatives with the definite article, but original definite appellatives can also become personal names by losing their meaning. When a four-year-old boy is asked to come with the words *Kom Gubben* or a little girl is greeted with *Hej Gumman*, these are uses of the original nouns (meaning 'the old man' and 'the old woman' respectively) affectionately to indicate a unique referent, just as unambiguously as if the names Peter or Eliza had been used. *Gubben* and *Gumman* are employed without their full appellative meanings to refer to a unique person.

NAMES AS A WORD CLASS

Names are perceived as a nominal category, and are often counted as nouns, although not in *Svenska Akademiens grammatik* (*Grammar of The Swedish Academy*), where they constitute a separate word class or part of

speech. This suits my description, as we shall see, but at or near the core of a definition of name there must also be one of the central properties of nouns, namely, that they designate things, phenomena, or features. In that respect, then, there is no difference from nouns. The difference lies in the monoreferentiality and in the lack of meaning. Let us look further to see where this difference makes itself felt, and examine roughly where the boundary runs.

Names and gender, species, number

Names are often described as a category where gender, species and number oppositions are void. Can this help us to distinguish between names and other things? I do not think so. All examples such as 'two *Peters* in the class' or 'a new *Hitler*' can be explained by rewording as 'two boys with the name *Peter*', 'a new politician with the same properties as *Hitler*'. We are thus still using names, but conversational implications make it obvious that we are alluding to something other than the unique referent. We know this and when interpreting we presume that what is said is reasonable, relevant, and true (cf. Grice 1975). It is therefore possible to use names to mean 'persons who bear the name' or 'a person with the same properties as the one we know by that name'. The same line of argument can be used of names that are not recognized as names by all: trade names or brands. Names of Scandinavian newspapers such as *Expressen* and *Politiken*, and toothpastes like *Colgate*, I regard as names even though we can say that we bought two *Expressen*. We cannot mean anything but two newspapers with the name *Expressen*, thus corresponding to what we mean when we talk of two *Peters* in the class.

Have we come closer to the boundary for what is a name when we are dealing with, for instance, makes of car such as *Ford* and *Volvo* or names of newspapers and the like? What characterizes these names is surely that they are often employed to designate individual examples of the thing that bears the name (*I bought a second-hand Volvo*). This can be done with personal names and place-names too (*a new Peter in the class*), which has not led anyone to want to deny such words the status of name.

Mass names

We seem to come closer to the boundary of what constitutes a name in the matter of mass names, that is, substance names and designations of species or classes, such as *tungsten*, *ytterbium*, *gold*, *water, lark*, *pheasant* and *pole-vault*.

It must be fairly obvious that there are fuzzy dividing lines within groups of such designations, for example, among the names of the elements. *Tungsten* and *ytterbium* are probably names according to many people's linguistic intuition; but *gold* is not. What is the reason for this? It has to do with the language users' shared knowledge and accumulated experience of the use of these words. Does this exist or not? Let us trust our spontaneous feel for language in an attempt to clarify where the dividing line runs, rather than saying in a sweeping statement that all elements are to be considered either names or nouns.

What makes it difficult to consider substance names and dividuative class designations as names may be that we do not see any individual, unique referent and possible bearer of the name. The name bearer is the total matter or phenomenon that is described by the word in question, that is, *tungsten* or *pole-vault*, and a mass or set like this does not have the distinct image that we are accustomed to when we identify a unique referent by means of a name. But if we reflect, we can see that even *tungsten* has a unique referent, namely, a separate unit within the group of elements, and we can refer to this class with a word that lacks meaning, thus a name. For most people there is no cumulative effect of the use of the word *tungsten*. In contrast, there is such an effect in the case of the word *gold*.

What about *pole-vault*? It certainly has a meaning, but as a designation for an event in field athletics it has a unique referent. It is thus on the verge of being a name.

Species designations

In Swedish it is easier to regard words with non-Swedish morphemes as names. Among bird species, for instance, there is *ortolansparv* 'ortolan bunting' (probably from Italian *ortolano*, 'garden'), versus *vitryggig*

hackspett 'white-backed woodpecker'. The transparency of an expression, the fact that we can recognize the origin, increases our tendency not to regard it as a name, but it would be wrong to use that as a criterion. *Vitryggig hackspett* can in fact be viewed as a name because most of us do not know anything in particular about such woodpeckers, and the expression therefore lacks additional meaning. On the other hand, *gråsparv* 'house sparrow', literally 'grey sparrow', a much more common bird, is more likely to convey meaning, i.e. the accumulated knowledge about house sparrows that exists in the language community. The word is therefore easier to regard as a noun and harder to see as a name. Coates (2006, 369) argues that the answer to the question of what is or is not a name lies with the user. The user's intention in applying a name, or referring 'onymically', thus without meaning, turns the expression into a name. This intuitive approach makes it impossible to draw distinct boundaries, but it gives more convincing results than a blanket categorization of the name-bearers.

Class and species designations that are not noun phrases

We should thus try to make a semantic assessment to decide whether we are dealing with a name or not. Is *mercury* a name, and *silver*, *strontium*, *umami*, *water*, *pole-vault*, *dandelion*, *honeysuckle*, *columbine*? No, not *water* or *dandelion*, and perhaps not *mercury*, but *strontium* and maybe *honeysuckle* and *columbine*, as they lack meaning. And one must also assess class designations that do not consist of a noun phrase, such as Swedish *stöta kula* 'putting the shot' and *hoppa hage* 'hopscotch', which are just as rightly and reasonably the names of sports or games as nominal designations are. Notice that they have the same syntactic function as a noun phrase in that such terms can be, for example, an object (*Vi gillar stavhopp* 'We like pole-vault', *Vi lekte hoppa hage* 'We played hopscotch'). Coates (2006, 373) says that names are noun phrases, but, as he says, the head does not need to be one.

Names of non-material works

Names of artistic or other non-material works, such as the titles of books or films, also sit near to the boundary, in that they can be used for

individual examples of the work. Ian McEwan wrote *Atonement* and Margaret Mitchell wrote *Gone with the Wind*. When speaking Swedish, I can have one *Atonement* and two *Gone with the Wind* (i.e. two copies of *Gone with the Wind*) on my bookshelf. Names of non-material works also often differ morphologically from what we first think of as names, since they can consist of something other than a noun phrase, for example, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

Names and extended uses

Trade names and class or species designations are less prototypical names in that their use easily shifts from being a name of the superior category – the company, the class, the species, or the like – to being a name in extended use about a single specimen. Consider, for instance, a dog of the poodle breed, known as an individual by the name Fido, but also described as one of several poodles in the neighbourhood. In this case the word *poodle* has meaning, and thus it is not a name. Many instances have resulted in an accumulated, shared knowledge of what the word can be used for.

It is common for species designations to occur in definite form. Has Swedish *haflinger* (a horse breed) switched from a name to an appellative when we talk about *haflingern* 'the Haflinger' (*The history of the Haflinger started many hundred years ago*)? Has the noun *haflinger* been formed from the name *Haflinger*, to be used for individuals of the breed, and here in definite form with a general meaning? Or has the name *Haflinger* acquired an extended use in definite form denoting all horses belonging to the Haflinger breed?

There is not the same ambiguity in the following construction with the brand *Ford* in definite form: *The Ford was parked further down the street*. This refers to an example of a car made by *Ford*. If we want to refer to Ford cars in general, we would use an indefinite form: *Many people in the twentieth century have driven or ridden in a Ford*.

The fact that the name in definite form is extended to individual specimens (*the Ford*) entails no risk to the brand name. It cannot be

claimed that the definite form marks a redefinition of the word. It has not undergone the same generalisation as the brand name *Jeep*; when we talk about *a jeep* and *the jeep* to designate a cross-country vehicle, the term is no longer a name since meaning has been added – it is a noun. So the definite or the indefinite form of an original name can be, but is not always, a criterion that the word is not a name.

Van Langendonck's analysis

What is and what is not a name has been a subject of speculation for over two thousand years. It is certainly difficult to reach an understanding. For me, Van Langendonck (2007) has been a source of inspiration, along with Coates (2006), and the reception study by Paulin Kobeleva (2008). It is frequently psycholinguists and neurolinguists, perhaps more often than name scholars, who try to define names.

Van Langendonck cites and comments on many other researchers and presents a theory of his own. To be able to describe the whole spectrum from personal names and place-names to more peripheral names such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, he uses the term 'proprial lemma' to designate names categorized as such in a dictionary – usually uncompounded, conventionalized names. He distinguishes names by both semantic and syntactic criteria. His syntactic criteria are the least convincing. As a criterion of names he cites the possibility of being appositional descriptions of a noun: *the country Denmark*. Yet this means that all word forms can be names: for example, *bank* in the phrase *the word 'bank'*. *Bank* in this use would thus be a name borne by a particular word. Numerals and years are also names (*the number 7, the year 2016*). I think that these appositions are best described as quotations. One expresses, orally or in writing, the word to which one is drawing attention, whether the word *bank* or a specific year. Van Langendonck gives many examples that can be discussed with the same pleasure and enthusiasm one can get from a parlour game. What about the words for the seasons, are they names, or the days of the week, the months, letters? Letters (*a, ess*) are surely not designated by names, though *aitch* and *zed* are possible exceptions.

Van Langendonck criticises Coates, arguing that the latter's analysis does not make any distinction between names and pronouns. I find it hard to see this. Although pronouns identify individually as names do, they have meaning in that, for instance, *I* designates the speaker, *he* a human male individual, and so on.

SYNTHESIS

This section will sketch a synthesis describing which type of expressions constitute the core and which the periphery of the category of name. That is to say, expressions that are more or less individually identifying, without meaning, expressions that are more or less names. Number 1 represents the core; increasing numbers describe categories further away from the core.

1. **Monoreferential expressions without meaning**. There are of course many cases where there is a question as to whether or not an expression lacks meaning. I summarily consider some such cases under the following points. But associative meanings and the implications of probability do not undermine the central premise that names lack meaning. Examples: Peter, Lisa, Kebnekaise, Stockholm.

2. **Expressions designating non-everyday substances**. These are expressions that, on the one hand, can – like uncountable nouns – denote a phenomenon that is divisible so that each of the parts can be called by the same expression; and on the other hand satisfy the requirement under point 1 of lacking meaning – we have no shared knowledge or accumulated experience of the use of these words other than that they are used as designations. The designated set or mass is not an individual, but the expression nevertheless identifies a unique referent; for example, the mass tungsten or the part of it that is also called by the non-meaning-bearing expression (the name) *tungsten*. Other words denoting substances are used about everyday phenomena (*butter*, *water*). These are not names because they have meaning: they bring to mind clear, and shared, images and associations.

3. **Names in a non-lexicalized extended use**. These are expressions that designate single occurrences, examples, or manifestations of the unique

phenomenon that is also designated by the expression. The expression continues to be a name after the extension. Examples: *Expressen*, *Aftonbladet*, *Gone with the Wind*.

In maintaining the close connection to its origin, and falling short of lexicalization (i.e. falling short of a establishing a lasting new sense), the extension can be compared with an extension of, say, the place-name Stockholm to a metonymic use; for example, *Stockholm has decided*, in the sense of 'the Swedish government has decided'. In the extended use Stockholm is still a place-name, just as *Aftonbladet* when used about a copy of the newspaper is still a name.

4. **Names which often have a lexicalized extended use.** When *poodle* is the designation for a class of dog (*this breed is called poodle*), the word does not designate any one thing that belongs to that class of dogs (in the same way a chair belongs to the class of chairs). The word *poodle*, like *buzzard*, *lark,* and *columbine*, thus has a unique referent, which happens to be a class, genus, family or breed. On the other hand, when the word is used about an individual example of a dog (*a big poodle was sitting there*) it designates something that is part of a class consisting of poodles, just as a chair belongs to the class of chairs. The original name is then used metonymically and nominally. This use has been lexicalized: it is the established word used for an individual dog of this breed. It has departed from the original use as a name. We might compare the extension of a word like *youth* ('the state of being young'), lexicalized to designate a concrete individual, a young man. The difference is that, in the case of *poodle*, we move from name to noun, whereas *youth* has meaning and is a noun the whole time.

5. **Unstable designations for abstractions**. This refers to designations for categorizations, classifications, and other abstractions that are seen as categories, etc., only on reflection, but are more often perceived as designations for more substantial phenomena. Examples are weekdays (*Monday* as the name of the first day of the working week), sports (*pole-vault*, *football*, *putting the shot*), annual festivals (Swedish *midsommar* 'Midsummer'), other recurrent calendar events (*the winter solstice*), letters (*a*, *be*, *ce*, *de*) and other more or less occasional divisions, for

example categories of vehicles for taxation or other regulation (*light motorcycle*). These expressions are unstable in their capacity as monoreferential designations, in that they can be used to designate something that belongs to a class: *a tough Monday, Mondays are difficult* – in these cases *Monday* denotes something that belongs to the class of Mondays, just as what we call a *chair* belongs to the class of chairs. Language users have acquired shared thoughts and feelings about what the word can refer to. The words thus have meaning. In the following example it is likewise nouns, not names, that are used: *Where shall we celebrate this Midsummer? He bought a light motorcycle*. Designations for historical events can go in the opposite direction; first they are descriptive nominal expressions but they are sometimes then petrified, in that they come to identify an individual event and virtually become names, although often without wholly losing their meaning (*the October Revolution*, *the French Revolution*, *the Stockholm Bloodbath*).

AFTERWORD: UNDERSTANDING WHAT A NAME IS

It can be difficult to reach agreement, but perhaps it is not always so important. In his book *Minnen* ('Memories') Torgny Lindgren recounts a situation where it actually was very important, a matter of life and death. There was a girl whose father bred pups to skin them and use their coats. She had become fond of one of the pups and had given him the name *Schwarten* or 'Blackie'. When she realized that the pups were to be put down, she begged for Schwarten to be spared. Her father said that the dog did not have a name, but the girl tried to show him that it did because it responded when she said *Schwarten*. Then her father objected that the dog had misunderstood and just believed that it had a name. I would have liked to hear the father explain what he thought it really meant to have a name. He seemed to know, but he presumably differed from me and the girl in his opinion of what a name is: a linguistic expression used within a language community, perhaps as small as the one that a girl and a dog can have together, referring unambiguously to what one wants to identify without any meaning playing any part in the context. Admittedly, there is

the implied probability that the dog is black, but that is not necessary for the name to be used successfully. Names refer without meaning. The dog knew that the girl was referring to it.

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