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Folk onymic[1] discourses about personal names on the web

1. Folk linguistics

The concept of "folk onomastics," recently coined in the publications of TERHI AINIALA (2008, 2016), was inspired by the term "folk linguistics" that denominates a field of research within sociolinguistics. HENRY (HEINRICH MAX FRANZ) HOENIGSWALD can be considered one of the pioneers of folk linguistics, as is seen in the following quotation from as early as 1966: "[W]e should be interested not only in *(a)* what goes on (language), but also in *(b)* how people react to what goes on […] and in *(c)* what people say goes on […]" (HOENIGSWALD 1966, cited in PRESTON in print). DENNIS PRESTON, who has made a considerable contribution to the field of folk linguistics and perceptual dialectology in the past decades, together with NIEDZIELSKI (2000) defines the term "folk" as follows: "We use *folk* to refer to those who are not trained professionals in the area under investigation (although we would not for one moment deny the fact that professional linguists themselves are also a folk group, with their own rich set of beliefs)" (NIEDZIELSKI–PRESTON 2000, VIII). PRESTON (in print) also specifies that "[…] even the most empirically-minded scientist may approach some of their work with tradition-based practices that belong to the entire profession or a subset of it (and I eagerly await a study of the folklore of sociolinguists)." Consequently, he points out that "folk linguistics is primarily concerned with overt, nonspecialists' beliefs about the history, structure, and uses of human language" (PRESTON in print). The field of folk linguistics has a long tradition not only in the USA, where it seems to have originated, but also in Germany (LEBSANFT 1990 and 2017, ANTOS 1996), France (PAVEAU 2005, 2008, ACHARD-BAYLE–PAVEAU 2008), Austria (STEGU 2008), Great Britain, Finland, Spain, Costa Rica, Chile, and recently Italy and Russia, among other countries.

Since folk linguistics is interested in "how people react to what goes on" (= language behaviour) and "what people say goes on" (= metalanguage discourses), as mentioned by HOENIGSWALD above, it necessarily includes such traditional fields of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis as language attitudes, (meta)language awareness, metalinguistic representations, stereotypes, evaluations and ideologies, metalinguistic discourses, etc. Whereas folk linguistic beliefs and myths used to be regarded by specialists as false and "naïve" (cf. *Naive*

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[1] In the present paper, the attribute "onymic" is used to refer to proper names, whereas "onomastic" is used to refer to the science about proper names.

Zugänge zur Namenforschung [Naïve Approaches to Onomastics] by Ruoff
1995), especially regarding beliefs about etymology, the field of folk linguistics
is currently gaining more attention in the context of a general democratization
of science (cf. the concepts of "citizen / open science", European Commission
ed. *What is citizen science?*). It has become clear that differences between
linguists and non-linguists are gradual and not always easy to define (Paveau
2008). For this reason, alternative definitions of "folk linguistics" also take into
account that folk linguistic discourses pursue different goals than scientific
discourses (Hardy–Herling–Patzelt 2015: 7–8). I consider the term
"bottom-up-linguistics" to suit the modern research interests within this field
better than "folk linguistics," which is actually obsolete due to the generally
negative connotation of the attribute "folk" (Preston in print). The term
"bottom-up-linguistics" has been sporadically used in theoretical and corpus
linguistics to refer to the "bottom-up" (= corpus based) approach (cf. Gilquin
2010: 8). The terms "bottom-up" and "top-down" have also been used in
political sciences with a different meaning: "bottom-up" processes are initiated
within the civil society, while "top-down" processes are initiated "from above"
by political actors (cf. Voss 2014). A similar meaning can be attributed to the
term "bottom-up-linguistics" to denote metalinguistic activities initiated "from
below", far from the official state structures. However, as Preston (in print)
rightly observes, the terms "folk linguistics" in English, "Laienlinguistik" in
German, "linguistique populaire" in French (similarly "lingüística popular" and
"linguistica popolare" in Spanish and Italian), etc. have already been codified.

2. Folk onomastics

How about "folk" or "bottom-up" onomastics? So far, a few folk onomastic
studies that actually use this term have already been published. Terhi Ainiala
used the term "folk onomastics" in 2008 for the first time (see a brief overview
of research in folk onomastics in Ainiala–Östman 2017: 11). In the paper
Names in society published in the *Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming,*
she defines "folk onomastics" as "the study of people's beliefs and perceptions
about names and name use" (Ainiala 2016: 378, see also Ainiala–Halonen
2017: 204). Like Niedzielski–Preston 2000, she distinguishes metalanguage
1 ("talk about names and name elements") and metalanguage 2 ("[talk] about
name use and beliefs connected to name users") (Ainiala 2016: 378). This
definition does not focus on problematic differences between onomasticians
and non-onomasticians. But in this case it deviates from the commonly used
definitions of folk linguistics. As such, it does not consider a whole series
of dichotomies discussed within folk linguistics like "lay vs. expert", "non-
specialised vs. specialised", "popular vs. academic/intellectual", "spontaneous
vs. deliberate", "unconscious vs. conscious", "implicit vs. explicit", "covert

vs. overt", "subjective vs. objective", "feeling vs. reasoning", etc. (ACHARD-BAYLE–PAVEAU 2008, BECKER–HERLING–WOCHELE in print). In my opinion, this definition (as well as the existing definitions of folk linguistics) also underplays the role of the "people" as active agents who not only have beliefs and perceptions and demonstrate reactions but also create and promote names, negotiate about them, change and ban them, create online communities, compile dictionaries, etc. AINIALA's definition actually corresponds better to "onymic attitudes" which is however only a hyponym of "folk onomastics". The discussion about what "folk onomastics" is or should be is certainly just at its beginning.

As for further investigations on folk onomastics, BEREZKINA 2011 dedicates her paper to the perception of place names in Oslo. Publications by EMILIA ALDRIN (2009, 2014, 2016, in print) about the process of naming children and about personal names and identity have contributed to establish folk onomastics within anthroponomastics. BONDARENKO 2016 uses the terms "наивная лингвистика" ('naïve linguistics') and "наивная ономастика" ('naïve onomastics') in Russian and presents research on the perception of dialectal personal names as "normal" or "strange".

3. Metaonymic discussions on the web as primary sources for folk onomastics

So far, folk onomastic research about negotiating the meaning and status of proper names has mainly been approached through interviews and questionnaires. Interviews, especially qualitative in-depth interviews, remain the central method of sociolinguistics and socioonomastics, however further methods of assessing metalanguage and metaonymic discourses like analysing the results of non-participatory observation, perceptive experiments or vast Internet resources should also be explored in order to diversify research data. Furthermore, as NÜBLING et al. (2012: 118) and ALDRIN (2014, 2016: 392–393) point out, interviews are time-consuming to conduct and to transcribe (cf. also the longitudinal survey *Das Image von Namen* by BIELEFELD 2014). ALDRIN (2016: 393) also rightly notes that, due to the observers' paradox, the interviewer may influence the answers of the participants.

It appears surprising that as yet Internet resources have only been the subject of socio-onomastic research to a limited extent. Especially forum-like discussions represent a vast source of folk onymic attitudes. From the methodological point of view, this source offers the advantage of a naturally covert non-participatory observation while conducting ethnographic field research. It thus allows a deep insight into the processes of negotiating social "profiles" of personal names and into naming practices.

In what follows, I would like to present the potential of this source, which I argue has been underestimated in light of its highly interesting contents, free availability, findability and the fact that there is no need of transcription. Of course, there are also methodological reservations in this case. First of all, there is no or little possibility to ask questions about the contents found on the web. It has also been suggested that forum users cannot be identified as real persons. Computer mediated communication has been qualified as anonymous, with no possibility to verify sociolinguistic parameters like age, gender, origin, etc. (HERRING 2001). However, it has been observed that user nicknames do provide some sociodemographic information (ANDROUTSOPOULOS 2006: 425). Instead of talking about "anonymity", researchers in computer mediated communication now prefer to talk about "pseudonymity" which refers to the self-representation of the user while interacting with unknown partners. It does appear possible to compile a databank of user profiles and to assess the authenticity of the nickname-bearers. Sometimes, social media users even seem to be more prone to reveal their intimate partial identities than they would probably be offline (DÖRING 2010: 166). In any case, the concept of "identity" should be understood as a category of practice, at the level of self-representations and not as a first-order-category.

3.1. Examples of metaonymic comments on *enfeminino.com*

The following examples of online metaonymic discussions were obtained from the website of the international media group *aufeminin,* created in France in 1999 and currently present in 21 countries. *Aufeminin* has been the property of the Axel Springer company since 2007. It publishes editorial and community-based content for women and the group has run a research lab dedicated to marketing to women since 2011. The group offers more than 40 websites and blogs in various languages including French, Italian, Spanish, German, and English about subjects like "Fashion & Beauty", "Love & Psychology", "Mom", and "Horoscope". The success of the group is evident, as "[i]n June 2015, the group achieved close to 132 million unique worldwide visitors per month, and more than 7 million members on their social networks *(Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, Instagram and Pinterest)*" (WIKIPEDIA ed. *aufeminin*).

For the purpose of this study, I analysed the Spanish version of *aufeminin: enfemenino*. The forum discussions on this site are freely accessible. I managed to find the following discussions with the search term "nombres" 'names' (as of May 2016):

- "Leo o Leonardo", 6 answers

- "¿qué os parece el nombre de niño aimar?" ('what do you think about the baby name aimar?'), 13 answers

- "Nombres clásicos pero poco oídos" ('Classic but less heard names'), 18 answers

- "Son gemelas ... 2 nombres!!" ('It's twins … 2 names!!'), 28 answers

- "Nombres que nos han conquistado por la tele o libros" ('Names that have conquered us through TV or books'), 28 answers

- "Nombres raros, originales, poco comunes de distintos idiomas para niños" ('Rare, original, less widespread names from different languages for babies'), 33 answers

- "¿tan feo es mi nombre? 😫" ('is my name that ugly?'), 36 answers

- "Nombres unisex" ('Unisex names'), 45 answers

- "¿qué os parece noa/noah para niña?" ('what do you think about noa/noah for a girl?'), 79 answers

- "Nombres canarios..." ('Canarian names'), 90 answers

- "Pongan sus favoritos 5 nombres de niña e niños" ('Give your favourite 5 names for boys and girls'), 223 answers

- "Nombres y significados" ('Names and meanings'), 335 answers, etc.

The titles of these threads already reveal the breadth of folk metaonymic discussions at *aufeminin.*

The following four comments (translations into English by the author, the original punctuation is preserved) confirm the opinion that data and methods of the observational "netnography" (cf. JANOWITZ s. a.) can offer a deep insight into the naming process:

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Figure 1: Comment "Grimanesa" from the thread "Nombres canarios"
 ('Canarian names') (ENFEMENINO.COM ed. *Foro: Nombres canarios*).

Translation into English:

Grimanesa
*The correct spelling of the name is Grimanesa, with just one S. If you look
for it this way you will find references to María Grimanesa who has been
cited in different historical sources. As for the meaning "grey sunrise", it is
totally made-up (as sadly happens with all the meanings that are attributed to
guanche[2] names).*
*The name Grimanesa also exists (spelled Grimanessa in the work Duocento
novelle [1609], of the Italian author Celio Malespini), of literary tradition (it
appears in Amadís de Gaula), it was used in Europe for quite a long time and
is currently used in Portugal and South America. The figure of Grimanesa de
Mongrovejo, sister of San Toribio de Mongrovejo archbishop of Lima, and
spouse of Francisco de Quiñones, governor of Chile, influenced its usage in
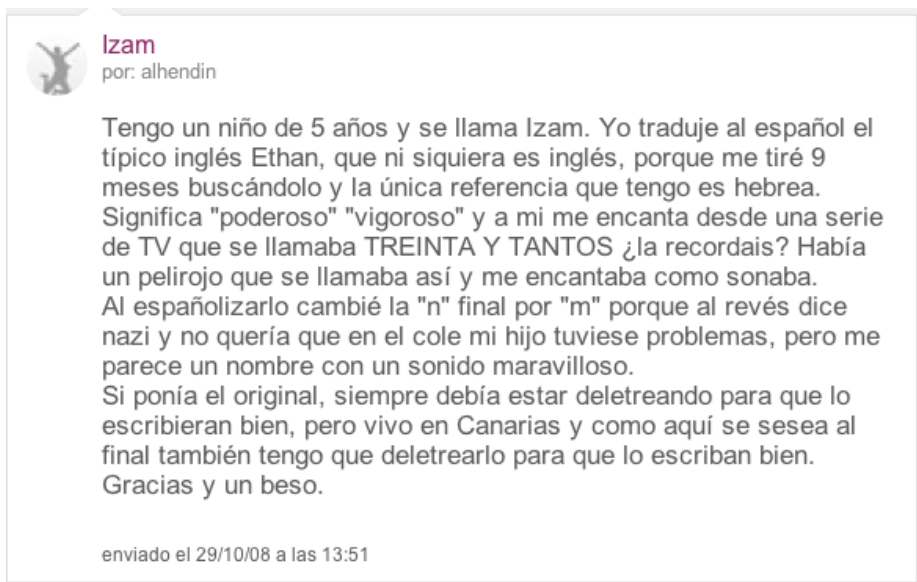America.*

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[2] Canarian / Names of indigenous Canarian origin.

Figure 2: Comment "Izam" from the thread "Ayuda con estos nombres...
ethan/izan, irune/istar" ('Help with these names…ethan/izan, irune/istar')
(ENFEMENINO.COM ed. *Foro: Ayuda con estos nombres...ethan/izan, irune/istar*).

Translation into English:

Izam

I have a son who is 5 years old and his name is Izam. I translated the typical English Ethan to Spanish, which is not even English, because I spent 9 months looking and the only reference I have is Hebrew. It means "powerful" "strong" and I've liked it since a TV series that was called Thirty Something, do you remember it? There was a redhead with this name and I loved the sound of it.

As I put it into Spanish, I changed the final "n" for "m" because backwards it is nazi and I didn't want my son to have problems at school, but it sounds wonderful to me.

If I had chosen the original, I would have had to spell it every time so that it was spelled right, but I live in the Canary Islands and as they have "seseo"[3] here so in the end I have to spell it anyway for it to be spelled correctly.

Thank you and kisses.

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[3] "Seseo" refers to the lack of the phoneme /θ/ in the Canarian variety of Spanish as opposed to the European Spanish standard pronunciation, which has a distinction between /s/ (<s> in the orthography) and /θ/ (<c> before <e, i> and <z> in the orthography). The name *Izam* is pronounced /isam/ in Canarian Spanish and /iθam/ in the European standard Spanish.
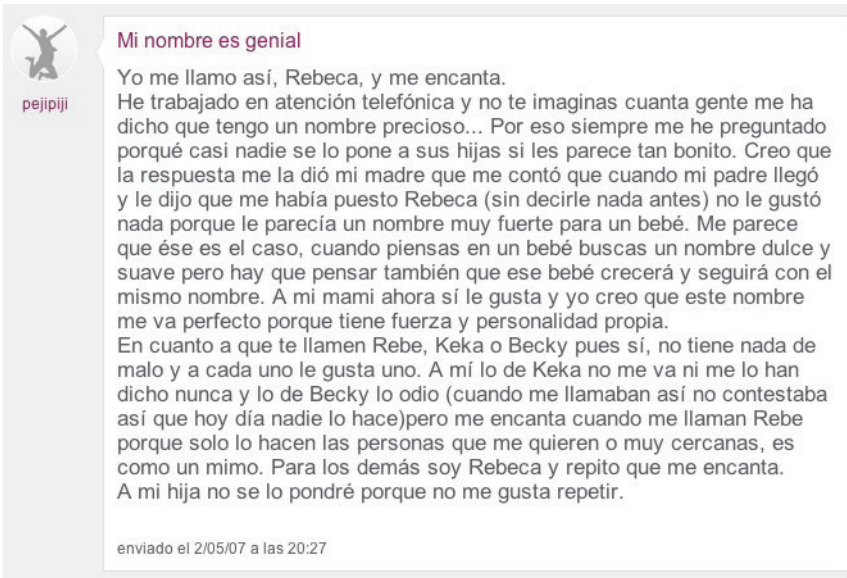
Figure 3: Comment "Mi nombre es genial" from the thread
"¿tan feo es mi nombre? 😡" ('is my name that ugly?')
(ENFEMENINO.COM ed. *Foro: ¿tan feo es mi nombre?* 😡).

Translation into English:

My name is awesome
Rebeca is my name and I love it.
I have worked in a call centre and you can't imagine how many people have
told me that my name is lovely… That's why I have always asked myself why
almost no one gives it to their daughters if they think it is so beautiful. I think
that my mom gave me the answer when she said that when my father came and
told her that he had named me Rebeca (without having asked her first), she
didn't like it because to her it sounded very strong for a baby. I think that's it,
when you think about a baby you look for a sweet and gentle name but you have
to think that this baby will grow up and keep the same name. My mom does like
it now and I think that this name suits me perfectly because it has strength and
its own personality.
Ok, as for the fact that they call you Rebe, Keka or Becky, it's not bad at all and
each person prefers one or the other. Keka doesn't suit me and nobody has ever
called me it and Becky is the one I hate (when I was called this I didn't answer
so that today nobody uses it), but I love it when I'm called Rebe because only
those who love me or family members do it, it's like a meme. For the rest I am
Rebeca and I insist that I love it. I won't give it to my daughter because I don't
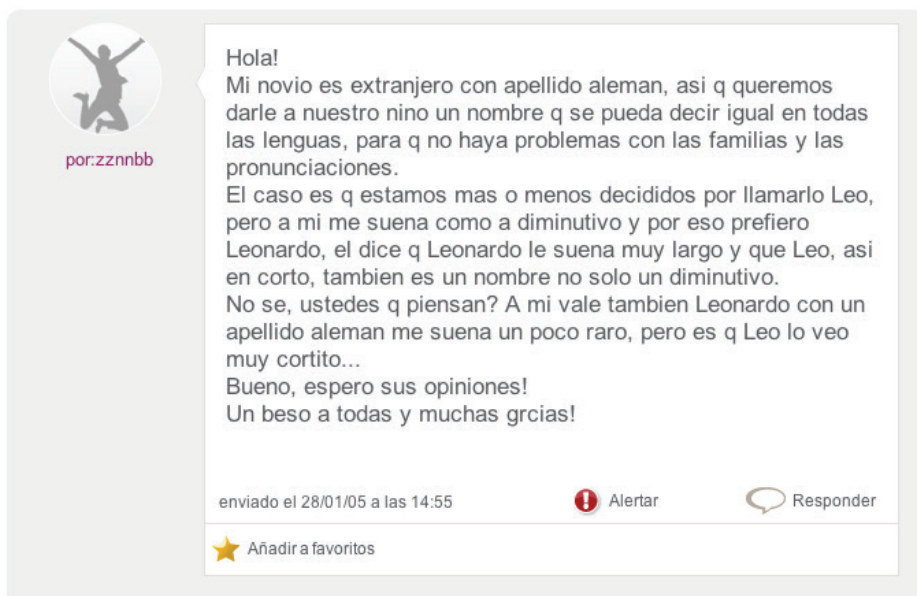*like repetitions.*

Figure 4: Initial comment from the thread "Leo o leonardo"
(ENFEMENINO.COM ed. *Foro: Leo o leonardo*).

Translation into English:

Hello there!

My fiancé is a foreigner with a German surname, so we want to give our baby a name that would be pronounced the same way in all the languages, to avoid problems with the families and pronunciations.

The thing is that we have almost decided to give him the name Leo, but to me it sounds like a diminutive and that's why I prefer Leonardo, he says that Leonardo sounds too long to him and that Leo, the short form, is also a name and not just a diminutive.

I don't know, what do you think? Leonardo is ok with me, with a German surname it sounds a bit odd, but Leo is really short…

I'm looking forward to your opinions!

Kisses to everyone and many thanks!

3.2. Analysis of selected metaonymic comments on *enfemenino.com*

The analysis of metaonymic online discussions can answer a number of open questions, not only in the field of folk onomastics but also of in the pragmatics of names, for example:

What role does the etymology of a name play in the naming process? The user with the nickname "alhendin" (Fig. 2) discovered, after a nine months of searching, that the name *Ethan*, the base of the form *Izam*, is a "typical English name" of Hebraic origin with the meaning "powerful, vigorous". She started to look for the etymology after she heard and liked the name of a TV character.

What do the name bearers know about the history of their names? The user "aurembiaix" (Fig. 1) mentions several historical personalities and literary characters called *Grimanesa* and is skeptical about the meaning "grey sunrise" proposed by other users in the forum.

Which personal names are considered to be suitable for a baby? The user with the nickname "pejipiji" (Fig. 3) reports her mother's negative reaction to the name *Rebeca* given to her by her father. According to the mother, *Rebeca* was too "strong" for a baby. The user "pejipiji" thinks that one should also think that a baby with a sweet and soft name will grow up one day.

What attitudes towards different forms of first names do users have? According to "pejipiji" (Fig. 3), there are three non-conventional forms of her name *Rebeca: Rebe, Keka* and *Becky.* She prefers *Rebe,* does not mind *Keka* and dislikes *Becky.*

Which literary characters have inspired popular first names? The user "alhendin" (Fig. 2) mentions the US-American TV series "Thirtysomething" as a source of inspiration for the name of her son. According to this user, *Izam* is a "Spanish translation" of *Ethan,* the name of one of the characters of "Thirtysomething".

Why do some first names undergo creative modifications? The user "alhendin" (Fig. 2) modified the form of the popular male name *Izan* (number 19 in the official statistics of the most popular first names of newborns in Spain in 2014, cf. BECKER 2018) to *Izam* after she realised that *Izan* turns to "nazi" if the alphabetical order is reversed. She did not want her son to have problems at school.

What are the phases of the naming process and what activities are characteristic for these phases? These are exactly the questions EMILIA ALDRIN has asked in her investigations (cf. 2014). The initial comment of the thread "Leo o leonardo" (Fig. 4) illustrates what the testing phase of the naming process ("a phase of testing when parents test how well the name suits the child or explore others' reactions to the name", ALDRIN 2014: 394) may look like this: the user "zznnbb" explains that she has a problem with the name *Leo* for her son, because she thinks that it is too short. She would prefer *Leonardo,* but she would like to hear opinions of other users in the forum first.

Finally, I would like to offer you one example of "locality" and another one of "globality", according to the topic of the *XXIV International Congress of Onomastic Sciences:* Which first names are considered to be local and which global/international? The user "aurembiaix" (Fig. 1) regards the first name *Grimanesa* as Canarian ("guanche"). On the other hand, the user "zznnbb" (Fig. 4) is looking for an international first name for her son because her partner is a "foreigner with a German surname" and her son's first name should have a simple pronunciation "in all the languages". She considers *Leo* or *Leonardo* suitable for this purpose.

4. Conclusions

To conclude, I would like to argue that investigations in the emerging field of "folk onomastics" should consider the developments within the wider context of "folk linguistics". According to the existing definitions of "folk linguistics", "folk onomastics" is primarily interested in non-specialists' beliefs and perceptions about the history, qualities and uses of proper names. Folk onymic discourses can also be expressed by "specialists" as long as they pursue different goals than scientific discourses on proper names. Taking into consideration the negative connotations of the attribute "folk", the alternative term "bottom-up-onomastics" could help to shift the focus away from the deficit-oriented approach towards a more comprehensive understanding of popular onymic beliefs and activities.

The aim of this paper has been to demonstrate the importance of Internet resources, especially forum-like discussions, for the research in folk onomastics. The following pragmatic and methodological advantages of the online material should be mentioned: a new kind of research data, a vast amount of sources, its accessibility and findability via thematic websites and specific search terms in search engines, easy handling (e. g. no need of transcription) and covert non-participatory observation.

An analysis of only four selected metaonymic comments on one website has demonstrated that folk onymic discourses can provide information about a variety of questions within folk onomastics and pragmatics of personal names, such as: motivation of the selection of names and interest in their etymology, negotiations about the "correct" etymology, reasons for creative modifications of a name form, phases of the naming process, non-conventional forms of first names and attitudes towards them, profiles of first names considered "strong", "sweet", "local", "international", etc.

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Abstract

This paper aims to contextualize the emerging field of "folk onomastics" within the broader context of "folk linguistics" and to present examples of folk onymic discourses on the web as rich and easily available resource for research within this field. It first offers a brief overview of research within folk onomastics and discusses some terminological and methodological issues. The author argues that the alternative term "bottom-up-onomastics" offers new perspectives on popular onymic attitudes and activities. The second part of the paper is dedicated to an analysis of selected online metaonymic comments on a Spanish website. Forum-like discussions about personal names are presented as promising primary sources for pragmatic and methodological reasons.

Keywords: folk onomastics, bottom-up-onomastics, folk onymic discourses, forum-like onymic discussions, onymic attitudes