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Personal names in a multicultural context: Introduction

Personal names play a vital role in shaping an individual's identity, cultural affiliation, and social positioning. In today's increasingly globalized and multicultural societies, questions about how names are managed at the intersection of different linguistic and cultural systems have become highly relevant, particularly in the light of divergent legal requirements. This text introduces a scholarly workshop dedicated to the theme *Personal names in a multicultural context* held at the 28th International Congress of Onomastic Sciences (ICOS) in Helsinki in August 2024. The workshop was organized with the aim of exploring and discussing how immigrants' personal names are handled across various national and institutional frameworks.

The initiative has its background in the Swedish system of name regulation, governed by the *Personal Names Act* and administered by the Swedish Tax Agency. When individuals submit name proposals—for instance, when naming a newborn child or applying for a surname change—the Tax Agency ensures compliance with the law. In cases requiring linguistic evaluation, the matter is referred to the Institute for Language and Folklore, where the workshop organizers are members of an advisory group responsible for the linguistic evaluation of the name proposals.

A significant proportion of the names to be evaluated are of foreign origin. In our professional experience, we frequently encounter challenges when individuals seek to simplify or adapt their names to align with Swedish naming conventions—whether in order to achieve correct pronunciation, to integrate socially, or to meet institutional expectations. These adaptations are not only administrative; they touch upon issues of personal identity, cultural continuity, and the negotiation of belonging.

Our research project focuses on the extent to which individuals in Sweden are able to retain their own naming traditions, and on what happens when different naming systems meet. One case study concerns the Somali diaspora, one of the largest immigrant groups in Sweden. The Somali naming system, which does not employ fixed surnames, contrasts sharply with Swedish requirements for distinct family names. This mismatch often forces individuals to adopt unfamiliar naming structures, potentially compromising their cultural integrity.

Beyond legal frameworks and institutional decisions, we also investigate naming practices in everyday life. We analyze naming as a dynamic interplay



between tradition and change, between individual agency and collective norms, while exploring the role of personal names as identity markers. Migration, intercultural contact, digital media, and political decisions all influence how names are given, used and transformed.

It has become increasingly clear that the Swedish personal name law and the guidelines for name changes are not fully equipped to handle the linguistic and cultural diversity of contemporary Sweden. This realization prompted us to initiate the workshop, which set out to examine how immigrant names are treated in other countries and to identify the forces that shape different name policies. We were interested in both formal legislation and informal naming conventions, and in how these affect individuals' opportunities to preserve or adapt their names in a new societal context.

The workshop gathered researchers with expertise on name practices from a wide range of national contexts, including Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Spain, the United States and Lithuania. Among the central questions discussed were:

- How are immigrant names managed in countries with and without formal name laws?
- How are names linguistically or structurally adapted, if at all?
- What happens when individuals move between naming systems with incompatible structures—for example, from a system without surnames to one that requires them?
- How are names transformed when transferred across writing systems?
- What constraints do naming traditions impose, and what deviations are tolerated by the name bearers themselves?
- What possibilities exist for individuals from different naming cultures to retain or reconnect with their original naming practices?

The purpose of the workshop was to highlight the conflicts that emerge from incongruent naming traditions, and to explore possible solutions or alternative approaches. Discussions combined theoretical and practical perspectives, with the aim of contributing to a more inclusive and reflective approach to the handling of names in multicultural societies.

At the workshop seven scholars presented papers that examined the theme from the perspective of their respective countries. Additionally, participants from various other countries, who were both interested and well-versed in the subject, were present in the audience, and provided valuable insights and offered further perspectives on the issues discussed. The workshop was concluded with a summarizing commentary delivered by MICHELLE WALDISPÜHL. For this thematic section of the proceedings, four of the seven workshop presenters have submitted their contributions. Their papers are



complemented by three additional articles from scholars who did not as such participate in the workshop but addressed closely related topics in their talks at the Congress, as well as by Waldispühl's commentary. In this introduction, we also summarize the workshop contributions not included in the proceedings. What follows is an overview of the individual contributions, each offering a distinct perspective on how naming practices are negotiated in different cultural and legal settings.

VERONIKA ŠTĚPÁNOVÁ explores the complex and often sensitive issue of how proper names of foreign origin are adapted into Czech. Drawing on real-life requests for name change submitted to the Czech Language Consulting Centre, her paper examines the various linguistic strategies and attitudes involved in this process. Adaptation can occur on multiple levels: phonetic changes to align with Czech pronunciation norms, graphic transformations through transcription or transliteration from non-Latin scripts, and morphological adjustments that allow names to fit into Czech grammatical structures, such as declension. Beyond these concrete aspects, the paper also addresses cultural and social dimensions of name adaptation. These include the feminization of foreign female surnames and the reclassification of name components to conform to Czech naming conventions. Through these cases, Štěpánová highlights the ongoing tension between preserving the original identity of a name and integrating it into the Czech linguistic system in a way that supports clarity and ease of communication. The discussion is framed by a thought-provoking question: *Is it possible to use foreign proper names in Czech without any adaptation?* The diversity of opinions on this matter, ranging from a strong desire for full Czechification to resistance against any changes for the sake of identity preservation, reflects broader societal debates about language, identity, and globalization. This study offers both linguistic and sociolinguistic insight into how names are not merely labels, but cultural signifiers shaped by the language in which they are used.

BIRGIT EGGERT examines the impact of Denmark's highly regulated name law on immigrants and their naming practices. While immigrants legally retain the right to use their original names, complications emerge when these names, or those given to their children, fail to conform to the technical and cultural norms embedded within the Danish administrative framework. The article provides an overview of the main principles of the Danish Name Law, detailing regulations around first names, so called middle names, and protected surnames. Particular difficulties are highlighted for individuals from cultures that do not differentiate between given names and surnames, or who use scripts other than the Latin alphabet. Special attention is given to the Danish personal registration system, which supports only Latin characters and offers limited variation compared to the full range of characters used in Latin-based scripts globally.



The law prescribes that every individual must have exactly one surname, posing challenges for immigrants from countries where multiple surnames are customary. These individuals are compelled to modify their names to fit the Danish format. Although the legislation includes the possibility to accommodate diverse naming traditions, the system's technical constraints and underlying cultural assumptions frequently force immigrants to compromise the authenticity of their names. The article concludes by proposing the introduction of an additional registration field for names to be written in their original scripts as a potential step toward greater inclusivity.

IVAR UTNE contributes a complementary Norwegian perspective. Drawing on extensive experience in practical name consultancy and a central role in shaping current Norwegian name legislation, he offers valuable insights into the legal and cultural frameworks governing personal names in Norway. His article examines how applications for immigrants' names in the Norwegian National Population Register are handled, with particular attention to kinship-based regulations for surnames, the distinction between free and protected surnames, gender-specific rules for given names, and the strict separation of given names and surnames. These rules often require interpretation in light of diverse naming traditions, such as the use of given names as surnames, gendered variants of surnames, or other culturally specific conventions. Utne emphasizes the need to take applicants' cultural backgrounds into account, while also noting that some naming practices—such as the use of surnames as given names or gender-neutral given names—are rarely approved due to strong Norwegian conventions. At the same time, the Norwegian Name Act promotes gender equality, for instance by allowing children to carry surnames from both the mother and the father. Yet, because of the principles of domicile and citizenship, name changes approved in Norway are not always recognized in the applicants' country of origin.

DAIVA SINKEVIČIŪTĖ explores how immigration has shaped the Lithuanian naming system over the past thirty years. Her study highlights the legal and administrative challenges that arise when foreign name forms do not conform to Lithuanian law, including issues such as the feminization of male surnames ending in *-a* and difficulties with Lithuanian names recorded abroad without specific Lithuanian letters. While Lithuania has experienced relatively low immigration compared to many other EU countries, recent increases—especially from Ukraine and Belarus—have brought new challenges. Although most names are registered without difficulty, Slavic forms are increasingly visible in media and commercial contexts, subtly influencing Lithuanian usage. Sinkevičiūtė shows that immigrants from non-EU countries have had little impact on official name registration. The main challenges instead concern mixed marriages involving different alphabets and the subsequent use of non-



standard diacritics. These issues affect both immigrant families and national minorities, particularly the Polish community. A further complication arises with children of mixed families or Lithuanian citizens born abroad. Since their names are already in use in a system abroad, they are sometimes used when registering Lithuanian citizens and therefore influence naming practices in Lithuania.

Moving from the perspective of state institutions to the agency of families across national borders, DAIVA SINKEVIČIŪTĖ's second article examines naming strategies among Lithuanian immigrants in the United Kingdom. When assigning two first names to their children, parents often choose two non-Lithuanian names rather than combining Lithuanian and non-Lithuanian ones. Such practices are more common among boys than girls, reflecting a generally favorable parental attitude toward foreign names. When Lithuanian names are included, different strategies emerge: girls often receive names that are internationally recognizable, while boys' names are more likely to feature Lithuanian endings attached to stems shared across languages. This pattern makes boys' names appear more distinctly Lithuanian, while girls' names align more closely with global naming practices.

ANNAMÁRIA ULLA SZABÓ T. explores the naming practices of Hungarian parents residing in different parts of Europe. Her ongoing research considers how families negotiate language choice, make use of cultural resources, and construct identity within the domestic sphere. The analysis underscores how migration and multilingualism shape personal names. For Hungarian parents abroad, naming functions as a central strategy for cultural preservation. Although Hungarian given names are often difficult to maintain in official registers, many families continue to employ Hungarian hypocoristics in everyday life. These forms not only carry strong emotional value but also operate as an enduring means of safeguarding identity. By examining naming practices through this lens, Szabó's research highlights the central role of names in the ongoing formation of identity that is shaped by intertwined linguistic, cultural, social, and psychological dimensions.

While Szabó's work emphasizes family strategies across borders, GUY PUZEY turns to the deeply personal decision of changing one's first name. Puzey's research examines the implications of altering one's first name, particularly within European contexts where citizenship, migration, and cultural belonging intersect. Although adopting a new name may appear socially straightforward when it is readily accepted by one's community, the official procedures are often highly bureaucratic—especially for those who move across borders or hold dual nationality. Even among culturally similar countries such as England and Wales, Scotland, Italy, and Norway, the legal frameworks regulating first-



name changes differ considerably. Using an autoethnographic approach, Puzeý interweaves personal reflections on his own transition from James/Jamie to Guy with a wider discussion of psychological and social dimensions. The study underscores the intimate connection between first names and individual identity, noting that voluntary changes remain uncommon because they risk undermining a sense of self—except in cases where the change serves a clear purpose, such as affirming gender identity. Names, Puzeý argues, embody profound personal and symbolic meaning, yet they are often treated by the state as mere administrative markers. This divergence becomes especially problematic when a name change fails to be formally recognized, even if it conforms to accepted practice elsewhere. Puzeý calls for institutions to respond with greater sensitivity and adaptability, particularly in relation to new citizens and marginalized groups. Among his proposed reforms is a suggestion of extending the right to amend birth certificates to reflect name changes beyond the first year of life, as is already possible in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Such measures, he suggests, could foster more inclusive and equitable systems of registration, supporting mental well-being and strengthening the social responsibility of institutions.

We conclude with three invited contributions, not in these proceedings reproduced in written form, but they collectively broaden the scope of the proceedings. Concise summaries of these are presented here.

In the workshop, MICHELLE WALDISPÜHL (2024) highlighted challenges with and offered solutions for name spelling in a multilingual context addressing a recent case from Swiss Public Administration. The case centers on individuals from former Yugoslavia, whose names ending with *-ić* were altered to *-ic* upon applying for Swiss citizenship. The authorities justified this change by reference to ISO norms for Western European languages, stating that the acute accent mark on the *c* was not permissible. This issue gained media attention in 2016, when an individual expressed that adopting a more Westernized name was seemingly a prerequisite for acceptance in Switzerland. The public discourse led to a parliamentary interpellation advocating for individuals to have the freedom to choose the spelling of their name. This prompted the formation of a working group called “Sonderzeichen”, tasked with examining the complexities of name spelling in administrative contexts. Their 2019 report acknowledged the varied character standards used by different governmental systems for processing names, and recommended transitioning to a unified and more inclusive Unicode standard to accommodate special characters. Reconstructing the case, Waldispühl presented the interplay of aspects such as the individual’s ethnic identity, institutional constraints, and the greater context of the political economy of language mirrored in the name spelling and pointed out that even though this initiative signifies a positive step toward inclusivity,



the effectiveness of these changes relies heavily on adequate training for relevant personnel. Moreover, challenges remain for names from non-European writing systems, which still require Latin transcriptions without established guidelines, and for cultures with distinct naming conventions, such as the Eastern African three-name system. Notably, the working group lacked representation from immigrant communities, raising questions about the inclusivity of the proposed solutions. All in all, the Swiss case shows possibilities for solutions and demonstrates the administrative complexity of name spelling. The case is included in a study on historical and theoretical perspectives on personal names in multilingual contexts (WALDISPÜHL, forthcoming).

At the workshop, EDUARDO TADEU R. AMARAL (2024) presented a study examining the attitudes of native Spanish speakers toward foreign personal names in Spain. The study employed a qualitative analysis of speakers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions in relation to the perceived need to adapt foreign names to the country's official languages, as well as to the legal frameworks that regulate name assignment and modification. The theoretical foundation drew on perspectives from socio-onomastics and linguistic attitude research. The findings generally indicated that personal names are perceived as important markers of individual identity that the state should recognize and respect. At the same time, Amaral identifies both convergences and divergences between participants' attitudes and the existing legal regulations concerning naming practices. The study is reported in the *Nordic Journal of Socio-Onomastics* (AMARAL 2025).

In her talk at the workshop MARYANN PARADA (2024), who studies accommodation of Spanish Diacritics in the United States, spoke about a grassroots campaign that years ago emerged among Hispanic professional players in the Major League Baseball (MLB), advocating a more accurate representation of their names on jerseys, rosters, and in the media. Unlike Latin American immigrants' marginalization and societal erasure in manual labor working class jobs, the Hispanic professional baseball players were consistently in the public eye and discourse, which involved a verbal and visual public engagement with their Spanish-origin names and surnames. The "Ponle Acento" ('Put an Accent On It') campaign had the mission of creating awareness around the linguistic and social importance of Spanish diacritics, particularly for personal names so intimately tied to individual and ethnic identities. The campaign was ultimately successful and players' names now appear consistently in their native standard form, which, in addition to honoring the players' identities, also supports a more approximate pronunciation by media figures and the public. In her presentation, Parada discussed how the bottom-up and top-down aspects of the MLB campaign can serve as models for



other organizations, including educational, governmental, and entertainment entities, in the implementation of strategies and practices that foster a can-do stance toward multicultural onomastic representation.

Taken together, the contributions to this section of the Proceedings move from examining the form and function of names as linguistic objects, through the constraints and possibilities set by legal and technical systems, to the negotiated naming practices of families and individuals. The studies clarify how names operate simultaneously as administrative records and as living symbols of identity—and how policy, technology, and practice can be coordinated to respect both. The aim of the workshop was to explore and discuss how immigrants’ personal names are treated in different national and institutional contexts and the talks and discussions highlighted the topic from several perspectives and showed how naming systems work and are experienced in different situations. In some countries, there are clear rules for name use, while other countries have no official regulations. The workshop showed that questions about personal names and identity are complex, and in clear need of further, detailed studies of the same kind in additional communities.

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