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Proper Names as Performativity

1. Introduction

While the nature of properhood is a classic issue in onomastics, recent scholars like RICHARD COATES (2006; 2012) have suggested that it is primarily a matter of pragmatics. This view seems sound, although it requires some fine-tuning if one accepts the suggestion, made by RONALD LANGACKER (1987: 18) and commonly accepted within various schools of cognitive linguistics, that the dichotomy between semantics and pragmatics is a false one. In onomastics, relaxing this dichotomy—in essence, the same as the one between sense and referent—does appear to help in explaining various processes of appellativisation (LEINO 2023; SARHEMAA 2024).

However one defines properhood, it is clear that the primary pragmasemantic content of a proper name is the reference—either actual or potential—to the individual named entity. It is also generally accepted as uncontroversial that a proper name can have secondary content beyond the reference itself. Much of this content is what is usually termed categorical or associative meaning (VAN LANGENDONCK 2007: 71–84), but it also includes the more direct references to appellative lexicon that are commonly treated as semantic transparency (AINIALA–SAARELMA–SJÖBLOM 2012: 31–33).

This multifaceted nature of the pragmasemantics of proper names is somewhat reminiscent of how *identity* as a term can refer to different aspects of a person. On the one hand, it can mean the unique individuality of the person, in the same sense as how a name refers to the individual name-bearer. On the other hand, it can also mean things like ethnic, professional, or gender identity, and more besides: not only am I the person commonly referred to as *Unni Leino* but I consider myself a Finn, an onomastician, and a woman. Some of these, most notably ethnic and gender identity, are often readily apparent in a personal name (HAGSTRÖM 2017; SZABÓ T. 2018; LEIBRING SVEDJEDAL 2023; SCHMIDT-JÜNGST 2020: 200–219).

This article is an attempt to take a look at how the secondary semantic content in proper names is an integral part of the ways proper names are used in identity-building. I am using gender as a test case, even though the concept of *gender identity* is problematic in itself (LEINO 2016; LEINO 2022).[1] This choice

[1] In short, there is a difference between *gender identity* in the sense described above—'I am a woman, so down with the patriarchy!'—and what SERANO (2007: 80) calls *subconscious*

is primarily because identity-building through name use can be seen as performative in the same sense as that term has been applied to gender. However, this view of name use as inherently performative is not limited to gender but also to other aspects of identity that can be seen in proper names.

2. Performativity

Within linguistics, the concept of performativity stems from Speech Act Theory, first outlined by J.L. AUSTIN (1962) and further elaborated by JOHN SEARLE (1969). The initial observation that led to the development of the theory was that there are classes of language utterances that do not have truth conditions as such but instead interact with the extralinguistic world in other ways than just describing its state. Instead of attempting to determine whether an utterance is true in the world in which it is uttered, it is often better to analyse the conditions in which it can function as the act it was intended to be. One class of such acts are performative acts that change the world by being performed.

Naming was seen as a performative speech act right at the start (AUSTIN 1962: 5): by uttering certain, to an extent formalised words, a person with the right position in society can on the right occasion impose a name on an individual, in AUSTIN'S original example a ship. This is, of course, a rather simplified view of how proper names come into being and ignores the ways that people, places, and other entities often get informal names by incidental and often unconscious or accidental acts. Requiring a formal act of naming also makes sense only if one considers proper names as strictly separate from common nouns; however, if the division is less strict (as in LEINO 2023), it becomes clear that names can come into being when someone just starts using them. Nevertheless, when naming happens as an explicit act it is typically done as a performative speech act.

Naming can, however, be performative on other levels than just the act of making a new name a part of the onomasticon: giving, or adopting, a new name can have social implications, and naming can thus be meaningful on several levels of human interaction. Some of these performative acts have been around for a long time—the Kings of Egypt[2] already had separate regnal names at the end of the fourth millennium BCE—and in recent times changing one's own

sex—'My brain expects a female body, so I am a woman'. Conflating these two and labelling them as *identity* can cause problems on several levels, for instance within politics and medicine.

[2] The title *Pharaoh* is a later one, dating in this use only to the 15th century BCE; originally the phrase *pr ʕ* 'Great House', referred to the palace and only gradually became to mean metonymically the ruler. The usual title of the king was *nswt-bity* 'He of the Sedge and the Bee', referring to the symbols of Upper and Lower Egypt.

name is relatively common for a variety of reasons. In the context of gender transition, name changes and announcements of such have been studied as performative acts (LIND 2023).

While naming is clearly a performative act, performativity is a broader phenomenon. JUDITH BUTLER (1990) expanded and adapted the concept of performativity from speech acts to gender itself. In her view, social gender is constantly created and refined by performative acts, and all gendered behaviour is part of this process. Under this view, announcing one's name change as a part of gender transition is clearly an act that contributes to one's gender (LEIBRING SVEDJEDAL 2023; LIND 2023), but performativity goes further than this: to the extent that names are gendered, their use in itself is a performative act that builds the gender of the named person.

3. Gender in names

Personal names are commonly gendered (ALFORD 1988: 65–66), and in recent times this is typically seen in terms of categorical meaning or categorical presupposition (VAN LANGENDONCK 2007: 73), inherent in names and their use. Under this view, names are gendered as a consequence of being repeatedly used to refer to people of a particular gender. This fits nicely with cognitive approaches where other aspects of language, such as grammatical structures, are seen from a usage-based point of view (e.g. CROFT–CRUSE 2004: 291–292) and meanings are seen in terms of emerging prototypes and family resemblance (CROFT–CRUSE 2004: 77–78). This also means that the line between sense and referent is not always clear, and acknowledging this makes it possible to apply common semantic tools to analysing proper names (LEINO 2023).

As categorical meanings emerge they will be applied to bearers of the name. This is not separate from the emergence of meaning, but rather the other side of the same coin: a usage-based view of language implies that as meanings are continuously renegotiated and refined each time they are used, each use also builds on the earlier uses of the same expression. These are varied, especially since they involve blending of different conceptual spaces. This interplay is complex enough that linguistic expressions can reasonably be considered to prompt for meanings rather than representing them (FAUCONNIER–TURNER 2003).

A gendered name contributes to the way the name-bearer's gender is seen. Some modern scholars (e.g. LEIBRING SVEDJEDAL 2023) see this in terms of indexicality; however, as my background is more in cognitive linguistics than socio-onomastics I would rather look at gender in terms of the semantic content of the name. Associative and categorical meanings of proper names can be strong enough to lead to appellativisation, like in the case of *grammar Nazi*

(LEINO 2023) or *oskarinkokoinen* 'Oscar-sized, i.e. small' (SARHEMAA 2018), so it seems appropriate to consider categorical meaning as meaning, however incomplete it may be. Regardless of how one sees the semantic fragments in proper names, it is clear that using a name activates not only the proprial reference but also these secondary meanings.

4. Name use as performative

From the point of view of speech acts, an utterance can include not just one act but rather several, one of which will rise as the primary one. This is in fact common, with indirect speech acts being the most common example (SEARLE 1975): there, an utterance contains several possible illocutionary acts and their different felicity conditions determine which one is the primary interpretation in the actual situation. However, while this phenomenon is usually described in the context of indirect speech acts it is more general, and a closer look shows that a single utterance can include several illocutionary acts that are all felicitous in the context.

When talking about the present topic at the 2024 ICOS congress, I started my presentation by addressing the session chair and saying *Thank you, Sheila*. The main illocutionary act here is clearly an expressive one, showing politeness, but there are others as well. Using the given name like I did was an assertion that I am familiar enough with Professor Embleton to address her by her given name; and in fact doing so also reinforces this familiarity in a manner that is best considered a minor performative act. This can, of course, only happen when the relevant felicity conditions hold, and excessive familiarity can easily have an opposite effect.

As a third act, using the given name also contains an assertion that the person addressed belongs to a category of entities that can be named *Sheila*. This is because while the primary function of the name is to refer to the named person, the name also brings with it its categorical meaning. This is true even in contexts where the name is used as a plain proprial lemma, without a specific onymic reference: *Sheila is a nice name*—but likely still not a good choice for a boy.

Using a name has a performative aspect: while an utterance such as *Hi, I'm Unni* asserts primarily the referential aspect of one's name it also asserts the other semantic components. This makes it performative in BUTLER's sense, contributing to one's own gender, and referring to others by a gender-specific name is similarly performative, bringing with it an assertion about the gender of the named person. As with all speech acts, the felicity conditions of these assertions are important in determining how successful these assertions are, and

depending on context, using a name can bring the name-bearer's gender to the forefront, in extreme cases even above the onymic reference.

Sometimes the gender of a name has major importance. Using a wrongly-gendered prior name of a trans person, usually termed *deadnaming*, tends to expose one's trans status in an uncontrolled manner (SCHMIDT-JÜNGST 2020: 177–178). As defined by KOLES (2024), a deadname[3] is a name that 1) used to properly refer to someone, 2) is now rejected by the person, and 3) should because of this rejection be considered derogatory in reference to the person. Especially when encountered repeatedly, it can be devastating, leading to significant depression and contributing to suicidal behaviour (SINCLAIR-PALM–CHOKLY 2022). While it is easy to dismiss deadnaming as just a special case of misnaming someone, its seriousness can be seen better when one notices that it can involve several interconnected speech acts. First, it asserts that the gender of the person is different from how they see it, and second, it can raise doubts on whether the person is the best authority regarding their own name. Both these acts can be accidental and if so are easily dealt with by a correction and apology, although even in such cases they are best considered microaggressions: unthinking slights in everyday communication that nevertheless contribute to the feeling of a lack of acceptance (NORDMARKEN 2014). The perlocutionary act can be, and often is, less benign than the illocutionary one.

Unintentionally asserting an incorrect gender is not all that deadnaming can do, though. As a third possible speech act, deadnaming often asserts that the speaker knows the person's gender better than they do themself, and fourth, in many use cases it asserts that birth-assigned gender is immutable and trans people as a class are deluded or should not exist. These assertions can be much more serious than the first two, and deadnaming is routinely used in politicised contexts where the last two speech acts are intentional: as TURTON (2021) notes, deliberate deadnaming is an act that ultimately aims at destroying the person's self-determined identity, so that it is not simply a case of resurrecting an identity that is in a sense 'dead' but also an attempt to cause the 'death' of the referred person's self-identity.

The problematic speech acts included in deadnaming can be hard to counter, as they are secondary to the main function of a proper name. The primary speech act in the complete utterance is something else that simply happens to refer to the person, and using a deadname adds a secondary message, sometimes seen only by the person it touches. Nevertheless, or perhaps because of this, deadnaming is used as a tool for the kind of politicising that VÄHÄPASSI (2025:

[3] The term *necronym* has been jokingly proposed as an alternative, although I have not seen it actually used in onomastic literature.

44–49) discusses. Rejecting the gender of a trans person—or similarly the right to self-determination of a member of an ethnic group (cf. KOLES 2024)—is often not only directed towards the person in question but also aims at creating and strengthening political discourses and divisions.

Some common nouns and phrases have similar properties. Dog whistles (HANEY LÓPEZ 2014: 3–5) work in a similar manner, so that there is a secondary speech act coded into the choice of words, embedded in a way that any discriminatory intent can when necessary be disputed but is also clearly seen by the intended audience. For instance, while an *adult human female* is obviously 'a woman', the phrase is used by groups specifically hostile to trans women, and this association is readily recognised both by members of these groups themselves and by the people they target. Using the phrase thus performs three different perlocutionary acts targeted at different audiences: to the in-group a reinforcement of unity, to the out-group deliberate bullying, and to the bystanders showing innocence that can be further exploited when the out-group reacts as expected.

Grammatical structures can also insert secondary speech acts. For instance, *Ich bin eine Namenforscherin* has as its primary meaning 'I am an onomastician'. However, the way grammatical gender works in German, the sentence also posits the speaker as a woman. Such secondary assertions can have serious implications: there were cases in Hispanic America in late 19th and early 20th century where grammatical gender in the constitution was interpreted as limiting full citizenship to men, while in other cases the grammatically masculine wordings were considered as generic and applying to women as well (VILLARS 2009).

5. Conclusions

The semantic content of an utterance—even a single word—is not a monolith, and while a particular meaning can in a particular context be seen as primary, the secondary meanings are important as well. Most of the semantic content of proper names, such as what is usually considered categorical and associative meanings, falls into this category. This secondary semantic content is also apparent in speech acts: an expressive act, such as *Thank you, Sheila*, can include a secondary assertive act, noting that the person addressed is seen as female. These acts can be, and often are, performative in the sense BUTLER uses the term: not just acknowledging the gender of the person but also contributing to how it is seen in society.

The existence of trans people has in recent years become highly politicised and deadnaming is one of the rhetoric tools used. Regardless of how one looks at the situation otherwise, this provides opportunities to conduct usage-based

studies into the various speech acts that are intertwined in name use, either to look at how this phenomenon meshes with onomastic theory or to study the rhetoric, social, or political sides of these discourses. It should also be possible to look at how the ideas presented above are applicable to name use in general, not just the specific example of gendered names.

Performativity is not just something that happens in the act of naming itself, but also every time a name is used. This shows two things. First, the choice of single words or phrases can by itself constitute a speech act where the illocution is to attach secondary meanings of the phrase to its referent. Second, the various secondary meanings in proper names can, and I believe should, be considered fragments of sense. This gives added support to the idea that while a definite reference—or the potential for such—is central to properhood, it is not simply a matter of a word having referent(s) but not sense.

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Abstract

Naming is one of AUSTIN's original examples for a performative speech act. As such, it has relatively well-known felicity conditions, and in general there is rather little of particular interest in the speech acts that accomplish name-giving. However, performativity is not limited to naming itself: names contain categorical and associative meanings that are present when they are used, and because of this all name use can be considered performative in the same way that Butler views gender as performative.

Since gender is a type of categorical meaning commonly included in personal names, this article discusses the ways it—but also more generally, other such secondary semantic content—introduces into utterances secondary speech acts that can be hidden under the primary act but are nevertheless real.

Keywords: onomastic theory, properhood, name use, speech acts