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Meaningfulness in literary naming within the framework of The Pragmatic Theory of Properhood (TPTP)

Abstract

This paper develops ideas originally floated in the *Journal of Literary Onomastics* 4 (2015) particularly concerning the genesis of “meaningful” or “cratylic” names for characters, so-called “sprechende/redende Namen”. I argue that literary naming falls into three or four basic types. *Cratylic naming* might be understood as covering aspects of two of these sorts. Two types of consequence follow from the views which I set out. The first type deals with the translatability of names, which I argue is technically impossible because names have no sense. In countering the superficially irrational nature of this idea, I espouse instead a view of name substitution which is completely in harmony with the view in TPTP that names are definitionally senseless; in so-called name-translation, it is the *etymology* of a name which is accessed, not its “sense”. The second type of consequence has to do with the role of such etymologies in literary reading. An attempt is made to harmonize the notion that etymology is accessible during ordinary reading with current views on the nature of semantic processing more generally.

[176 words]

For some years now, I have been promoting an approach to proper names and naming called The Pragmatic Theory of Properhood (TPTP; COATES e.g. 2000, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2009, 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2015, 2016; CAPRINI 2015). The essentials of this can be stated briefly:

1. Names are devices for referring senselessly. (= Names have no sense.)
2. An expression which is used on some occasion to refer senselessly is a name. [= a corollary of 1.]
3. Etymological sense is cancelled or suspended by the process of becoming a name or the act of creating one. [= the historical precondition for 1.]
4. Names do not denote categorially, but only individually. (Names have no intension, but only a set of individuated extensions.)

Much of that may look at first sight like the common position of the great majority of onomasticians and name theorists. The key points are that it prioritizes **reference** over **denotation** (hence the use of the word **pragmatic** in *TPTP*), and that it entails a way of theorizing the relationship between homonymous words/phrases on the one hand and names on the other. That allows the simple equation of the term *name* with *expression that carries no sense*. This paper focuses on the implications of these basic tenets for name-interpretation and name-translation as literary activities.

Proper names chosen for characters, places or other nameable individual events or things in works of fiction can be organized into four broad categories, one of which might be seen as problematic from the perspective of TPTP. It is desirable to clarify and remove a potential problem when developing a general theory of naming, and that is the purpose of this paper.

For the purposes of this paper, I shall use simplified terminology as follows: *names* always means proper names; an *author* is any creator of a work of art, the *reader* is its perceiver-interpreter and *literature* means any genre of creative artistic activity. An *individual* is any single character, place or other nameable individual event or thing.

Firstly, we need to define some key semantic terms, because they have long been used inconsistently in the literature of linguistics and especially of philosophy. My use of these terms is essentially the same as that in the tradition of LYONS (1977).

Reference is the act of picking out an individual **referent** in a **context of utterance** (which can be defined in relation to speech, signing or writing, or non-linguistically through gesture)

Denotation is the range of *potential* referents of a word or other lexical expression; that is, it is an abstraction from reference and must not be confused with it

Sense is the network of semantic relations in which lexical words and more complex expressions participate; those relations include synonymy, hyponymy, antonymy, meronymy, polysemy, and so on: i.e. a set of logically definable relations among lexical items in a conceptual space or field

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Let us now move on to the implications of these thoughts for literary namegiving. An author may choose a name for an individual by a decision process which falls into one of four broad categories:

- (a) The name may be invented. If the author invents with no intention of using the invented form to convey any meaning (in the broadest possible linguistic understanding of that term), this does not amount to a choice or provide a reason at all, but it might be of interest to a critic with an interest in subconscious associations. [Examples might include Charles Dickens' *Mr Micawber*, William Blake's creative force *Urizen*, *Mr Spock* in the TV series *Star Trek*.]¹

¹ Any of these might be disputed from a particular critical or biographical perspective. On *Urizen*, compare METCALF (1972) and SHA (2009: 237). Gene Roddenberry, the

- (b) The name may be chosen as if randomly from some pre-existing set, e.g. of (personal) given names, in which case the same applies as in (1). [Examples might include, for all I know: Jane Austen's *Emma*; Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*; Solzhenitsyn's *Ivan Denisovich*.]
- (c) The name may be chosen commemoratively, i.e. to replicate deliberately the name either of a real individual known to the author or of one which is already present in some real or fictive world known to the author; or in some way to allude to such an individual. There is a potentially important distinction between commemoration and allusion: an individual's name may directly commemorate Jesus by actually being *Jesus*, or a name may allude indirectly to Jesus, as in the case of *Salvador*, which means 'saviour' in Spanish; but that distinction does not play a role in what needs to be discussed here. [Examples of commemoration in a range of sub-senses might be drawn from the vast literature on Shakespeare's names and their associations, e.g. most recently SMITH (2015); Gottfried Keller's *Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe*, playing on Shakespeare; James Joyce's *Stephen Dedalus*, from Greek mythology. A name might be put together out of separately allusive parts, as in the "official" story of the case of Paul McCartney's Eleanor Rigby.² The commemoration might be punning and playful rather than direct, as in the case of the cartoon character *Yogi Bear*, whose name plays on that of the famous baseball player Yogi Berra.]
- (d) The name may be invented, but consist of or contain interpretable elements, and the author may intend to impose a meaning (in the broadest understanding of that term) on the reader by his or her invention; that is, the act of naming, and the name chosen, are non-random, and the lexical meaning of any expression that constitutes or is included in the name is relevant to understanding its significance in its context of use. The author may or may not succeed in imposing that meaning on an actual reader, but the (presumed) intention to do so is enough for our purposes. [Examples are manifold. Shakespeare's practice as suggested at numerous points in COATES (1987) and writings referenced there; Kipling (in the Sussex edition of his works, vol. 1 p. 43) explains, for example, that "KAA is pronounced *Kar*. A made-up name, from the queer open-mouthed hiss of a big snake." The practice of J. K. Rowling in her *Harry Potter* books has

creator of *Star Trek*, was originally and notoriously unaware of a prominent namesake of Spock, the internationally famous paediatrician of that surname.

² In an interview referenced in the Wikipedia article on "Eleanor Rigby", McCartney said he made up the name with *Eleanor* from actress Eleanor Bron and *Rigby* from the name of a shop in Bristol, Rigby & Evens Ltd, Wine & Spirit Shippers. He recalled in 1984: "I just liked the name. I was looking for a name that sounded natural. 'Eleanor Rigby' sounded natural." Others have observed that the full name occurs on a gravestone in Woolton, Liverpool, which might have been known to McCartney, subconsciously or otherwise.

excited a great deal of recent interest, especially in relation to the translatability of her charactonyms.]

It is the fourth case that is of particular interest for the topic of this paper, because one of the axioms of TPTP (1. above) is that a name has no **sense**, i.e. no lexical meaning; and conversely (2. above) that a referring expression with no lexical meaning is a name; a name is a **referential** device that comes to have a **denotation** only through an accumulation of acts of **reference** using the same name to pick out the same individual. A major consequence of literary interest follows from this: if names have no sense, they cannot be used referentially in a way which draws on any sense; and it further follows that names are untranslatable. If a name appears to deliver lexical meaning in the context of its use, as many readers and you, my listeners, will undoubtedly believe, at least at first, we need another way of conceptualizing that meaning if the principles of TPTP are to remain credible in this respect. Non-translatability does not mean that names cannot form equivalence-pairs. A name may often have a denotational equivalent in another language which is not an exact translation as ordinarily understood: *la Manche* is the English Channel, the estuary called *Šaṭṭ al-‘Arab* ‘stream of the Arabs’ in Arabic is *Arvand Rūd* ‘swift river’ in Farsi, Italy’s *Cenerentola* is Germany’s *Aschenputtel* or *Aschenbrödel*, the bilingual 1960s radio DJ Mike Pasternak was *Emperor Rosko* in English, but became *le Président Rosko* when operating in French. Importantly, these name-pairs are not complete translations of each other in any fully linguistic sense of the term. Equivalencing rather than translating is a key notion when the “translation” of charactonyms is being evaluated.

Moving on from the issue of translatability, there are many interesting things that might be said about names in works of art in general, and especially about what Anne Barton, in her Alexander Memorial Lectures at the University of Toronto in 1983, called “cratylic” charactonyms in literature (BARTON 1990: esp. 7–10). There are broadly three types of literary naming: *arbitrary naming* (not really a special type at all, but covering (a) and (b) above, and of no purely linguistic interest); *cultural naming* (which trades on conveyed meanings, i.e. implicit meanings which may or may not be fully recoverable in context, covering (c) above); and *semantic naming* (which trades on *apparent* senses or lexical meanings, covering (d)). *Cratylic naming* might be understood as covering aspects of both the last two sorts, but takes its most potent form in cases like (d).

Cratylic names are also known by the familiar German term *sprechende* or *redende Namen*, literally ‘speaking names’, and their (literary or non-literary) existence is alluded to by the ancient expression *nomen (est) omen* ‘the name is a sign’, i.e. ‘the/a name can be understood as having literal relevance at the moment of utterance’). These are names whose form seems designed to require the reader to access or retrieve some meaning within some literary work. Many charactonyms illustrate what I have called, in another paper (COATES 2012), *The Etymological Onomastic Turn*, which is perhaps not a very catchy term. This term means that such names seem to be designed to be

understood in a way relevant to the plot of the work in which they appear. Take for example the names famous in English literature of Ancient *Pistol*, *Christian*, *Doll Tearsheet*, *Mrs Malaprop*, *Roderick Random*, *Peter Poundtext*, *Wackford Squeers*, *Rosa Bud*, *Mr M'Choakumchild*, *Becky Sharp*, *Mr Quiverful*, *Gabriel Oak*, *Ernest Worthing*, *Titus Groan*, *Auric Goldfinger*, and so on. Such names may be understood, at least in part, with their etymological meaning, and arguably therefore, in many cases, their sense or semantic value, remaining available whenever they are used to refer to the relevant individual. Perhaps that is an overstatement. Perhaps it would be more realistic from the reader's perspective to say that such a semantic value is available at least on the reader's first encounter with the name, where it will help form the reader's perception of the individual's personality and role in the narrative, but the name surely need not be (but could be) interpreted anew on each occasion of use, once their referent has been established, in the way that a conventional word needs to be interpreted anew for its semantic contribution on every such occasion.

Contrast:

This is Pistol. Pistol is a comic character who is always boasting. But Pistol is really a coward.

This is a pistol. The pistol was used to shoot the diplomat. The pistol is in an evidence bag.

You do not need to interpret *Pistol* lexically on each occasion of usage: you just use the label to identify the individual in question. But *pistol* needs to be understood lexically each time for the mini-narrative to be understood.

The potential difficulty we face is that the axioms of TPTP mentioned above require us to accept that the event or act of naming separates a name from the sense of any and all of the senses of its etymological component parts. But the point of cratylic names of this type is precisely to suspend, to subvert or to compromise such a separation. What any semantically aware and intentional literary act of naming actually consists of is the *repotentiation* or *resemanticization* of the etymology of a name. To focus on what is perhaps the simplest example in the above list, *Christian*, we can presume that John Bunyan's choice of his name in *The pilgrim's progress* was intentionally transparent, that *Christian* was to be understood as being a Christian, even an archetypal Christian, and that the connection between name and word would be made as soon as the character was introduced to the reader. However, the reader is not required to access the sense of the lexical word *Christian* every time the name appears in order to identify successfully the name's referent in the text (and thereby the unique character whom the name denotes). Of course, the resemanticization of an etymology fails if the reader is ignorant. Activating the potential of the connection, and therefore recovering the intended "meaning", is only possible if the etymology is transparent to the reader, and even then only if she or he actually makes the necessary connection. Putting it very starkly, a reader could understand when they meet him that the referent of *Christian* is a

character and they could follow his progress as a pilgrim without ever making the connection with the lexical word *Christian*. Evidently that poor reader will miss something which was of considerable importance for the author and his *imagined* reader. However, that is not a matter for linguistics or onomastics as such, insofar as they have to do with meaning in the broadest sense and communication, but a matter for the study of individual variation in cultural and lexical knowledge. Activating an etymology (of a name) is obviously a very different linguistic skill from activating a sense (of a regular referring expression which is not a name). No-one can understand that the referent of *a certain town* at the beginning of Dickens' *Oliver Twist* is an unspecified place having the characteristics of a town unless they understand the lexical senses of *a certain* and *town* – not just the first time they are used, but every time they are used. In the same verbal context, “Among other buildings in ...”, they could grasp that *Mudfog* was a place-name without understanding either *mud* or *fog*.³

The non-translatability of names is another issue which may give rise to misunderstandings. I have had my opinion about this dismissed publicly, at a previous Congress, because the scholar attacking my view had failed to grasp the essence of the distinction between *translation* and *the substitution of equivalents*, and insisted on the superficial and obvious point that it is possible to substitute one name-form for another where the two stand in an equivalence relation, as explored above. By *translation* I mean narrowly the substitution of material in the target language for material in the source language having what is judged to be an equivalent *sense*. If charactonyms traded on some kind of semantic transparency amounting to having sense, it would follow from that that they could be translated, and indeed should be when the opportunity arises, just like the text which surrounds them. That would leave some charactonyms *necessarily translated* (those of type (d)) whilst others remained *necessarily untranslated* (those of types (a) and (b), and probably a goodly number of (c)). To understand the force of the *if*-clause fully, we need to take into account the *context* of name-bestowal.

Literature is art. It is legitimate to suppose that this fact cancels the assumption about name-bestowal which is normal, certainly within TPTP, namely that the everyday real-world act of name-bestowal annuls or eliminates the sense of any words or phrases which appear in the expression chosen as the name. Literary name-bestowal is different. The essence of its literariness is that it invites the reader precisely NOT to annul the connection between usage and etymology, but to perform the balancing-act of maintaining both the (senseless) form of a name and its etymological meaning active for the duration of the literary event, whether it is watching a play or TV program, reading a novel, or whatever. In cases of my type (d) like *Christian*, that means acknowledging **both** that the item is a charactonym and in principle senseless because a name, **and** that the act of using it relevantly references its etymology involving the homonymous lexical word. For that reason, in apparent defiance of the strictest application of TPTP,

³ Dickens used the name *Mudfog* for the town in earlier drafts of the novel.

something like charactonymic translation is *in a restricted sense* possible. *Crookshanks* in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels appears in the German translation as *Krummbein*, a literal equivalent, 'bent leg', with the exception of the loss of the English plural suffix; but there is no **semantic** reason why he should not be *Hoffmann*. *Dörchen Lakenreisser*, in German, is literally and etymologically '(pet form of) Dorothy sheet-ripper' for a tart called *Doll Tearsheet* in Shakespeare's history play *Henry IV, part II*; but there is no **semantic** reason why she should not be *Gretchen Werther*. Of course, there are evidently reasons which are justifiable in **literary** terms for the author not to be satisfied with or make do with *Hoffmann* or *Gretchen Werther*.

B. J. EPSTEIN (2009: 202) reports an exchange with Meta Ottosson, the translator into Swedish of Roald Dahl's children's book *Matilda*. Ottosson wrote:

How did it come about that I translated Miss Trunchbull with Domderassonskan? ... I had an impression of how she was after I read the book for the first time. When I was a child, there was a film called "Anderssonskans Kalle".⁴ Kalle was a naughty boy and Anderssonskan was a real matron, a bitch who was both angry and grim, and dared to say what she thought, as I recall ... This is what I think of when I hear this name: Anderssonskan. A not very nice person. ... Someone who commands and blusters, so it became Domderassonskan. That's how I think it was but I can not be completely sure of how my thoughts wander, how I associate when I translate.

[Epstein's translation]

The point of this is that the "translated" name is an effectively arbitrary blend of an established charactonym *Anderssonskan* with the verb *domdera* 'to go on about / keep on grumbling about [something]', a blend with full "meaning potential" only within the translator's mind at the moment of creation, and not necessarily resemanticized on every occasion of use in the text thereafter.

As these examples indicate, any name-"translation" may be either purely lexical and literal, or idiomatic and suggestive, just like all other translation. However, it can, and must, still be argued that the act of "translating" charactonyms is exactly like all other non-literary onymic "translation" in TPTP, and therefore that it accesses the **etymology** of the name in question rather than any **sense** which might be detectable from elements in its linguistic form. One does not after all (have to) investigate a charactonym cognitively for sense every time it is used referentially (recall the case of *Christian*), as one does for the senses of ordinary words and other expressions in a text, although the possibility of such a cognitive reconnection during the act of reading is not ruled out. A reading of charactonyms for meaning or "translation" therefore differs from a reading of ordinary lexical items for meaning or translation; whilst **sense** is necessarily accessed in the case of lexical items, it is **etymology** in the case of names, amounting to something *resembling sense* on the first encounter if the etymology is transparent, with

⁴ A film of 1950 directed by Rolf Husberg.

the reservations set out earlier. We might adapt a remark by Theo HERMANS (1988: 12)⁵ who said that “the translatability of proper names is a function of their ‘semanticization’” – asserted in the context of a discussion of how names become common nouns. We could replace “the translatability of proper names is a function of their semantic transparency” with “the translatability of proper names is a function of their etymological transparency to the would-be translator.”⁶

I began this paper by suggesting a second type of consequence of the basic tenets of TPTP. This has to do with the role of etymologies in ordinary literary reading, not with translation. I shall make an attempt to harmonize the notion that etymology may be accessible during ordinary reading with current views on the nature of semantic processing more generally.

The presentation of a charactonym to a reader resembles the presentation of a verbal stimulus to a subject in a psycholinguistic experiment, but with an extra layer of detachment. Before introducing a character, the author may or may not present some context which will prime or skew the reader’s response to the character’s name. If such a context is absent, the reader may (but need not) seek the dominant or most frequent lexical item(s) that might represent the name’s etymology, and suppress the less frequent material, to help “get a handle on” the character, typically generating a single possibility (or probability). Such a process is essentially the same as *convergent semantic processing*, a left-brain dominant activity whose main function is processing efficiency which eliminates ambiguity. But an author may choose to tease the reader by seeking to exploit a non-dominant or less frequent etymology which has to be approached indirectly: one relying on a less frequent sense, a metaphorical one (the teacher Mr M’Choakumchild in Dickens’ *Hard Times* does not literally choke children, but does so metaphorically) or a metonymic one (Herbert Pocket in *Great expectations*, who has no prospect of the riches that *pocket* may seem to suggest), or even an ironic one (*Little John* for the tall man in the Robin Hood stories), or even paradoxical one (a cat named *Dog* in Norma Tanega’s song “Walkin’ my cat named Dog”, 1966). Such a process is essentially the same as *divergent semantic processing*, a right-brain dominant activity which may leave a pool of possibilities available to the reader and favours ambiguity and creative inefficiency. The increased time inefficiently made available may be required for, and deployed for, understanding the author’s charactonymic intention.⁷

⁵ I owe this reference to a reading of DUKMAK (2012).

⁶ I pass over here the often-remarked fact that etymologically transparent naming and charactonym-“translation” is far more prevalent in children’s literature than in adult literature (cf. for example FORMALCZYK 2013, esp. 426-427). This is at least as much a matter for audience design theory as for onomastic theory.

⁷ For these processing concepts in action, see for example FAUST AND LAVIDOR (2003: 593) and ABRAHAM (2014).

It is important to note that the proposed process is a two-stage one: one stage where the charactonym's etymology is identified with lexical material, and another stage where the lexical material is processed for meaning (sense or denotation or both). The first stage may never take place, but must take place in order to activate the second stage, the only source of any linguistic understanding of a charactonym and its possible ironies or paradoxes. And the proposed two-stage process is universal, whether the charactonym involved is transparent or not.

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