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NAME AND PLACE

**Ten essays on the dynamics
of place-names**

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Vibeke Dalberg's 70th birthday, August 22nd 2008*

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The characteristic properties of proper names – a contribution to the discussion*

As can be seen from the title, this article is a contribution to a debate concerning both the more abstract question of what are the characteristics of proper names and the more concrete question of whether particular linguistic categories belong to this word-class or not. Before discussing the presence or absence of proprial characteristics in specific categories, I should like to recapitulate some major points in the discussion concerning the grammatical and semantic features that constitute proper nouns as a linguistic unit.

Obviously, the definition of the proper noun is not of onomastic concern only; linguists and language philosophers have discussed the delimitation of proper nouns, too. Within place-name research, the question of delimitation has played a minor role with rather few persons engaged in the discussion. Nonetheless, I shall focus on views previously advanced in onomastics, particularly in Nordic place-name research. There is no agreement as to what are, and must be, reckoned as proprial characteristics. Above all, the disagreement pertains to how the semantic properties of the proper noun diverge from those of the appellative.

However, there seems to be agreement about one fundamental condition, namely the identifying function of the proper nouns. The proper noun distinguishes one object from other objects of the same kind. Proprial function is assigned to a linguistic unit when it, by convention, is allowed to refer to one item only. This item is in principle unique. The term mono-referential has been used to cover this proprial feature.

The mono-referential, individualising property of the proper noun has grammatical implications in two ways. First and foremost, as has often been maintained, the proper noun is neutral with regard to number and definiteness. In other words, there is no opposition

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between singular and plural or between definite and indefinite form in proper nouns. This means that, as opposed to appellatives, there is no change between singular and plural or between indefinite and definite form conditioned by the context.

Proper nouns may certainly have plural form, such as *The Hebrides*, but as it only denotes one individual item, the denotation in such cases is regarded as a unit. Such plural forms have been termed pluralia tantum. The proper noun *The Hebrides* does not have a singular form *a Hebride*. This is due to the fact that a proper noun functions by singling out individual units.

This is also the reason why the opposition between the definite and the indefinite form has been neutralised. The proper noun is inherently definite. The definiteness of the proper noun belongs to the linguistic system rather than to usage. Alternation between definite and indefinite form depending on the context is thus inconsistent with proprial function. This does not mean that proper nouns may not occur in the indefinite as well as the definite form. Actually, most proper nouns are indefinite, like *Hamburg*, and fewer are definite such as *The Baltic Sea*. In other words, definiteness is redundant in proper nouns. If a proper noun is found in the definite form as well as the indefinite one, such as the name of the lake *Furesø/Furesøen*¹ north of Copenhagen, it is usually a matter of different situations or name users. Thus, *Furesø* is mainly found in maps and other official contexts, whereas *Furesøen* belongs to the spoken language. In such cases, the alternating forms can be seen as stylistic variation.

Can this be regarded as evidence for the presence of proprial characteristics? Research has pointed out what appears to be counter-examples to the ones given above. There are familiar examples such as “there are several *Newcastles* in Britain” or “there are three *Janets* in our class”. These statements are grammatically correct, as are the sentences “she was a *Florence Nightingale* for her patients” and “the *Bushes* are very conservative”. As has been maintained, such examples should rather be seen as proper nouns

¹ *-en* is a postpositive definite article in Danish (and the other Scandinavian languages).

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functioning as appellatives. The former example, “there are several *Newcastles* in Britain” should be paraphrased as “there are several localities in Britain named Newcastle”. This means that the plurality pertains to the localities (called Newcastle). Similarly, “there are three *Janets* in our class” should be rendered as “there are three persons in our class named Janet”. The plural form indicates that there are several persons in question bearing this name. It could be added, that by definition, there are as many proper nouns as there are name-bearers. Consequently, there are a number of homonymous place-names *Newcastle* and personal names *Janet*, but the plural forms in the examples do not refer to these. The sentences “she was a *Florence Nightingale* for her patients” and “the *Bushes* are very conservative” are also instances of an appellative use of proper nouns. The former is a comparison with a person named *Florence Nightingale* and in the latter “the *Bushes*” can only be opposed to “a *Bush*”.

As mentioned above, opinions differ concerning the semantic content of the proper noun. Some maintain that under certain circumstances appellative, characterising meaning from the name formation moment may survive even after the linguistic unit has started functioning as a proper name (Andersson inter alia 1973: 154, 1994: 31, 1997: 147). One type of proper noun in particular has been used to support this reasoning, namely those formally identical with appellatives, such as *The Mill* and *Wetlands*. If the meaning of the appellative corresponds to the characteristics of the locality, i.e. if *The Mill* is the name of a mill and *Wetlands* denotes wetlands, it has been suggested that the names maintain some degree of appellative meaning. A slightly modified view adds the condition that the persons using the names should be aware of the correspondence (Peterson 1989: 83, 90). Such names have been termed *appellative* or *semi-appellative*. Among personal names, bynames² are singled out as a category inherently carrying appellative meaning. According to this view, bynames in such proprial compounds as *Red Rudy*, *Leif the lucky* or *Erik Ejegod* characterise the name bearer not only at the moment the name was coined but even in a later proprial phase, and

² Danish *tilnavne*, Swedish *binamn*.

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they can only function via the appellative meaning. John Kousgård Sørensen (1984: 94) is probably the strongest advocate of this view.

According to the opposing view, the proper noun, by definition, cannot have classificatory or semantic meaning like the appellative. The appellative assigns the denoted item to a certain class of objects having certain characteristics in common. This classificatory function is irreconcilable with an individualising function. From this point of view, a word cannot possibly have appellative and proprial characteristics at the same time. Neither does it make sense to talk about “weaker” or “stronger proprial character” (Dalberg *inter alia* 1989: 38; Helleland 1987: 25).

From an etymological point of view, place-names can certainly be coined as descriptive formations. However, once a linguistic unit takes on proprial function, i.e. starts referring to one unique object only, the appellative semantic properties present in the pre-proprial phase are suspended. Examples in support of this thesis are plentiful. A large number of place-names have no pendants in the lexicon, and for this reason cannot be associated with any appellative meaning. Moreover, proper nouns that can be associated with lexical items, like *Lund* and *Ås* for instance, have referents that do not correspond to the appellative meaning. The appellative pendants of *Lund* and *Ås* mean ‘grove’ and ‘ridge’, but the place-names refer to a city in Southern Sweden and a village in Jutland respectively. Similar examples are found in personal names. The Danish family names *Skytte* ‘archer’ and *Præst* ‘priest, clergyman’ have been borne by a politician and a football-player respectively.

What is the phenomenon at play in proper nouns like *The Mill*, *Wetlands*, *Red Rudy* and *Erik Ejegod* when they correspond partly or fully with lexical items? In these examples, there is a direct link between the proper name and the appellative for the name-user. Botolv Helleland (1999: 178) has called it a “meta-onomastic” act of language activating the descriptive aspect. As I have seen it, it is an instance of what linguistics has termed associative meaning. In my opinion, homonymy causes semantic associations for speakers (Dalberg *inter alia* 1985: 135).

Actually, there is no need to involve the original, pre-proprial, appellative meaning that has played an important role in the discus-

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sion of the semantics of proper nouns, as this is not necessary for the proprial function. Nor is it necessary for bynames like *Red* and *Ejelogod*. The name-user may use the byname *Red* in *Red Rudy* without knowing whether *Red* refers to his red hair, communist conviction or some other feature. In the same way, it is unimportant for the name-user that the name of the medieval Danish king *Erik Ejelogod's* byname meant 'ever good' at the moment of coining, rather than 'very good' in the sense of the adjective today (cf. Dalberg 1995: 14). In my opinion, these are all examples of synchronous rub-off effect from the lexicon, and should be seen in the light of the continuous interaction between the proprial and the lexical component of language.

Based on this rather brief review of the grammatical and semantic features regarded as characteristic for the proper noun, I will take a closer look at the categorisation of two groups that have been the subject of recent debate. The former is *brands* or *trade-marks*.³ I will use the term trademarks, which refers to designations for products registered by trademark law. Most name-researchers have labelled trademarks as proprial or at any rate proprial in the formation moment (inter alia Andersson 1994: 31; Jørgensen 1994: 45; Pamp 1994: 55). The non-proprial features pertaining to these words have been seen as the result of later appellative use conditioned by the context. I have maintained the opposite view, however: not only do trademarks behave like appellatives, they are actually coined as such (Dalberg 1989: 37, 1998: 157). Linguists such as Bengt Sigurd (1973: 72) and Jørgen Schack (1998: 100) support this view more or less explicitly.

Proper nouns are used as trademarks in quite a number of cases. The name of the manufacturing company is frequently used as the name of the product, e.g. *Volvo* and *Fiat*, but a number of other proper nouns turn up as trademarks, too. Just think of all the Swedish place-names used as labels for furniture from IKEA. In this

³ In Danish *varemærke* or *varenavn*, in Swedish also *varumärkesnamn* (Andersson 1997: 144). A more precise Danish term is *ordmærke* 'word mark', as we only deal with the sub-category of trademarks consisting of words and word groups.

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year's Danish catalogue we find *Huddinge* as the appellation for a settee, *Bokhult* for an oval coffee table and *Öland* for an armchair. However, most trademarks are coined directly for their purpose, i.e. to designate a specific product. An example of this is *Mifi*, designating secure fittings for windows and doors against burglary (Patented security system, Danish patent nr. 146 659).

Whether these trademarks consist of proper nouns in a new function or have another etymological origin, they all show appellative characteristics. If they refer to objects, they are indefinite or definite depending on the context. Examples are “do you drive *a Volvo*?”, “I have mounted *a Mifi* to the door” and “*the Volvo* was parked on the street”. The same goes for the plural marking in “how many *Mifis* did you buy?”. When trademarks denote substances, as is often the case, they behave like other terms for substances, e.g. requiring the same determiners as uncountable nouns. One may talk about a “tube of Colgate” just the same as “a tube of toothpaste”. The trademark does not single out individual items. From a semantic point of view, it is classificatory and descriptive. It states that an item belongs to a group of objects sharing some characteristics.

As far as I see, trademarks exhibit no proprial properties, and so far, I have seen no convincing examples substantiating their assumed proprial status. On the other hand, trademarks show a number of special characteristics depending on their commercial context. I think these characteristics have sometimes been mistaken for proprial properties. For one thing, trademarks often differ from other words in the lexicon, and if they correspond to common words, the semantic content of the word rarely tallies with the characteristics of the product the trademark denotes. In the case of trademarks, this has a different reason than for proper nouns, however. It is due to regulations of the trademark law, stating that one cannot have the common designation for an object registered as a trademark for that same object. This means that the manufacturer has either to coin a new word or use an existing word to denote a new object. Secondly, the use of a trademark is strictly limited, as it may only refer to a certain product produced by a specific company. In other words, the use of these words is restricted to a strictly limited category, which may resemble the use of proper nouns for a specific object. Thirdly,

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trademarks are spelt with initial capitals in Danish and a number of other languages, rather than with initial small letters as appellatives. This should probably be regarded as deliberate sales-promoting correspondence, which supplies them with a wrongful air of propriality.

In line with the reasoning above, I shall briefly comment on what has been termed degenerated trademarks. A degenerated trademark is a trademark that originally referred to a specific product produced by a specific company, e.g. *Grammofon*, but has eventually come to refer to any product of a certain kind. In Danish, *grammofon* is still a common term for a record player (cf. Schack 1998: 101). Consequently, a degenerated trademark is no longer a protected trademark. In the light of the analysis so far, degenerated trademarks should not be seen as original proper nouns that have taken on appellative function, but rather as appellatives whose range of meaning has been extended. Finally, just like other appellatives, trademarks may be used as proper nouns. This is what happens if a cow is named *Nivea*, a bull is called *Ferguson* or a yacht is named *Chivas Regal*.

The other category I should like to discuss with regard to propriality and appellative properties is that of *plant names*. Several scholars have pointed out that the term *plant names* is used of proper nouns as well as appellatives, in the same way as *animal names*. Most onomasts avoid this terminological ambiguity by referring to appellatives as *plant terms* and *animal terms*,⁴ reserving *plant names* and *animal names* for the propriality categories.

There is a certain amount of uncertainty as to which words belong to plant proper names and plant appellatives respectively. In botanical literature, where *plant names* is the common term just as in everyday usage, they are often treated as proper nouns. They tend to be spelt with capital initials, for instance *Yellow Marsh Saxifrage*. If the Latin term is added, the former element is usually still spelt with capital initials, e.g. *Saxifraga hirculus*. There is consensus in place-name research that the few instances of names referring to individual

⁴ In Danish: *plantebetegnelse* and *dyrebetegnelse*.

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plants like *Snapphaneeken*⁵ in Scania should be labelled proper nouns. Similarly, all agree that classificatory words such as *rose* are appellatives. What has been a matter of debate however, are examples such as *Nina Weibull* for a rose and *Golden Delicious* for a variety of apples. Bengt Pamp (1994: 55) regards these words and other terms for other cultivated plants as proper nouns.

The designations for commercially bred plants are similar to trademarks in many respects, and some of them are actually registered trademarks. We may note that they are commonly spelt with capital initials. In fact there is no difference between words for artificially bred plants like *Nina Weibull* and natural ones as far as appellative characteristics are concerned. They are all marked for number and determinedness according to the context in the same way as other appellatives. Nevertheless, like trademarks, their range of meaning is often limited, and as a result, their usage is restricted. This fact may explain why they, in my opinion incorrectly, have been regarded as proper nouns.

Finally, I should like to draw attention to some words and phrases that have been pointed out as particularly noteworthy when discussing the definition of proper nouns but unfortunately have not been subject to in-depth critical studies. These include terms for institutions (inter alia Andersson 1994: 23), historical events (inter alia Berger 1976: 376; Pamp 1994: 53), periods of history (inter alia Pamp 1994: 53), book titles (inter alia Berger 1976: 383; Pamp 1994: 54, 56), and a number of others of similar kind. An analysis of these categories, all of dubious proprial status, would certainly help to clarify our conception of what should be seen as proprial characteristics.

The problems I have dealt with in this paper are sometimes labelled “eternal questions”, i.e. questions that can never be answered, and which are thus futile. Personally, I rather agree with those who find that the delimitation of the field of research, the proper nouns, is one of the fascinating aspects of name research.

⁵ ‘The Snapphane Oak’. Depending on one’s point of view, *snapphaner* were pro-Danish freedom fighters or highwaymen during the wars between Denmark and Sweden in the 17th century.

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