# On Motivated Literary Character Names. A Coserian Text Linguistics Perspective

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**Resumen:** En este artículo, he intentado sistematizar algunas contribuciones personales anteriores con referencia a las funciones que tienen los nombres propios (o que pueden tener) en la literatura artística. Como bien es sabido, los escritores no eligen de manera casual los nombres de los personajes literarios. Muy a menudo, ellos son motivados, es decir, se encuentran en cierta correspondencia no-arbitraria con la naturaleza, el aspecto o el «destino» de aquellos personajes. Más que eso, el modo en que los personajes se nombran ofrece, a veces, indicios precisos que pueden revelar el sentido global de un texto literario (como en el caso de una novela, por ejemplo). Dicho de otra manera, según lo muestra también Eugenio Coseriu, el nombre de los personajes literarios puede constituir un factor que ayuda a la «articulación del sentido» en una obra literaria. En ese sentido, e s cierto, dado que este problema está relacionado con la manifestación del sentido (de un texto o un discurso), que el análisis de «algunos nombres motivados» debe integrarse en una lingüística textual amplia y rigurosamente fundamentada, así como la lingüística del texto elaborada por Eugenio Coseriu. En consecuencia, esta obra representa, al mismo tiempo, también una defensa para tal tipo de planteamiento.

**Palabras clave**: nombres motivados, literatura artística, ~~a~~rticulación del sentido, lingüística del texto, E. Coseriu.

**1.** In a previous article (*Personaje literare româneşti cu nume motivat*, published in 2005), renewed and improved later (*Despre caracterul motivat al numelor proprii din opera literară*, published in 2008), I have tried to establish if and to what extent the names of some characters – especially from the Romanian

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literature – are motivated[1], whether there is a connection between the name of a certain character and his nature/temperament, physical appearance or his destiny.

**1.1.** After having analysed a large number of facts, I also suggested two classifications of the types of motivations which characterize the relationship *name – literary character*[2]. I referred to the finding that «the proper name is actually also a word[3], having both denotation and connotation»[4]. In order to connect this with what I aim at presenting at this point, I will only resume here the classifications – out of typographical space reasons –, by giving only a few examples (for more examples, I invite the readers to consult the previously mentioned articles). Thus, I would then say that:

(I) From a semantic point of view (according to the information borne by names in/with them), one can distinguish two major types of motivation:

(a) *motivation through denotation*, that is by the "proper" meaning of the etymon – both of the root and its affixes – regardless of the fact that it comes from a foreign language (being accessible to specialists only) or from the Romanian language;

(b) *motivation through connotation*, including biblical, historical allusions, evocation of a personality, of a social or cultural context, i.e. everything that is situated in the sphere of intertextuality and is associated with a name or is suggested by a surname or first name. The majority of the names found in literature, of interest to us, are included here.

There are, however, for both categories, ironical names as well, which equally resort – by means of negation – to denotation or connotation, as there are also names which are simultaneously motivated through denotation and connotation.

(II) According to the source of motivation (namely to the one who motivates), one can distinguish:

(a) *intratextual motivation*, when motivation is offered by the narrator or by the character;

[1] In this article «motivated name» means, in fact, that the relation between name and character is motivated.

[2] Cristinel Munteanu, *Personaje literare româneşti cu nume motivat*, in «Limba şi literatura română» (XXXIV), Bucureşti, 2005, nr. 3, pp. 16-22; Cr. Munteanu, *Despre caracterul motivat al numelor proprii din opera literară*, in «Limba română", Chişinău, anul XVIII, nr. 7-8, 2008, pp. 75-76; cf. also Cr. Munteanu, *Lingvistica integrală coşeriană. Teorie, aplicaţii şi interviuri*, Editura Universităţii «Alexandru Ioan Cuza» din Iaşi, Iaşi, 2012, pp. 235-237.

[3] It seems that the differences between *common noun* and *proper name* are fewer than it is usually thought. See also Eugenio Coseriu, *Teoría del lenguaje y lingüística general. Cinco estudios*, Segunda edición, Editorial Madrid, Gredos, 1967, pp. 265-285.

[4] The terms *connotation* and *denotation* were there used in their broad sense (and, obviously, not as in logic). I would start from a passing remark made by Ivan Evseev, with reference to the «aesthetic connotations» of some proper names specific to the Romanian folklore or borrowed from the Greek and Roman mythology (see Vasile Şerban, Ivan Evseev, *Vocabularul românesc contemporan*, Editura Facla, Timişoara, 1978, p. 148).



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(b) *extratextual motivation*, when motivation is inferred, discovered by the reader or offered by the writer himself in a certain situation, in an autobiographical text, etc.

What is more, I would then mention the fact that «according to other criteria, however, other classifications or even sub-classifications can be made» and I would present one more. For instance, the intratextual motivation relationship can be established by the character(s) (but not only by him/them): either (i) *from the name to the character* (meaning that the name suggests a certain type of person)[5] or (ii) *from the character to the name* (the man «asks for» his name)[6].

**1.2.** With regard to motivated proper names from literary works, we would then mention Eugenio Coseriu for the importance the scholar would give them within his text linguistics. In fact, in his *Textlinguistik* (Tübingen, 1980), Coseriu stated that the signification of proper names from literary texts is a subject worth studying[7].

**2.** Nowadays, in 2016, able to fructify even more Coseriu's ideas regarding proper names in general and the importance of character names in literature, I would add new elements, not in order to criticize what I once wrote[8], but to express more clearly and completely the things stated in my previous studies[9].

**2.1.** First of all, one must mention Coseriu's characterization (from his excellent study *El plural en los nombres propios*) which summarizes the essence of proper names:

> […] el nombre propio no nombra en el mismo plano de los nombres comunes, que «clasifican» la realidad, sino que representa, con respecto a éstos, *un segundo nombrar* individualizante y unificante; un nombrar que no está antes, sino después del nombrar mediante «universales». En efecto, el objeto designado por un nombre propio

[5] As one can find in one of Mihail Sadoveanu's novels, *Venea o moară pe Siret*, where a girl, called Rățușca, makes some comments about a name: «Well, my dear godmother, one's name is of great importance. Evghenie Ciornei! When I say Evghenie, I picture something tall and skinny. When I say Ciornei, I see small eyes and a mean smile.» [my translation, Cr.M.].

[6] As inferred from Eugenița's words (a character from another novel by Mihail Sadoveanu, *Cazul Eugeniței Costea*): «I saw the boys with sleek hair from the photo. One has a crooked nose: his name must be Costăchiță. [...] I know I am right; the boy with sleek hair and crooked nose can't have another name than Costăchiță.» [my translation, Cr.M.].

[7] See Eugenio Coseriu, *Lingüística del texto. Introducción a la hermenéutica del sentido*, Edición, anotación y estudio previo de Óscar Loureda Lamas, Arco/Libros, Madrid, 2007, pp. 266-267. Coseriu observes an obvious tendency to use names as an expressive means mainly at two writers: Charles Dickens and Thomas Mann. They both prefer names which can be etymologically analysed.

[8] For instance, the distinction I made from the very beginning, the one between *intratextual motivation* and *extratextual motivation*, was taken over and applied, meanwhile, by other researchers, thus proving its validity and usefulness.

[9] Cf. also Cristinel Munteanu, *Problema numelor proprii din literatură în lumina unor idei ale lingvisticii coşeriene*, in «Limba română», Chişinău, anul XXII, nr. 1-2, 2012, pp. 37-45.



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es necesariamente un objeto ya clasificado mediante un nombre común (las *Azores* son *islas*, el *Tíber* es un *río*, *España* es un *país*).[10].

**2.2.** Secondly – referring to literature –, it is also worth mentioning the way in which proper names become common names (or eponyms). Their source could be either the world of fiction (literature, mainly; a *harpagon*, for instance) or the real world (a *hrebenciuc*, a *becali*, etc.). As common names, they have a lexical signification, which means that they already express the universal, that is «a mode of being». The phenomenon of passing from a proper name to a common noun can happen quite easily, especially in literature (since literature also represents «the intuition of the universal in concrete facts«), where the characters themselves, as models, are «fantastic universals» (according to G. Vico[11]), meaning that they «open» a universal possibility. The procedure of transformation is similar in the case of some nouns such as *hrebenciuc* – *hrebenciuci*[12], since speakers identify in a certain person/political figure a representative human type and «lexicalize» him/her as such. Once the essence (the lexical signification) grasped, it can present itself, from a grammatical point of view, in different ways (cf. Coseriu's «categorial significations»): as a noun (*becali*, *becalizare*, etc.), as a verb (*a becaliza*, *a topârceniza*, *a urmuziza*, *a argheziza*, etc.)[13], as an adjective (*machiavelic*, *caragialesc*, etc.), as an adverb (*machiavelic*[*eşte*], *caragialeşte*, etc.).

**3.** When I referred to literary characters and mentioned the motivation of names through *denotation*, and *connotation* (see *supra*, **1.1.**)[14], offering clear examples, I did not expect that this classification could create confusions within the Coserian linguistics, caused by the fact that by *denotation* Coseriu would understand *designation*, while *connotation* (taken, for instance, in Hjelmslev's terms[15] ) can also mean something else[16]. If we consider the fact that the names of literary characters are, more or less, analysable, then we could say – in Coseriu's terms – that names:

[10] Eugenio Coseriu, *Teoría del lenguaje y lingüística general*..., p. 280.

[11] See Eugenio Coseriu, *Storia della filosofia del linguaggio*, Edizione italiana a cura di Donatella Di Cesare, Carocci editore, Roma, 2010, p. 339.

[12] Frequently found on the Internet. For *vogorizi* (< *Vogoride*) and *chiţaci* (< *Chiţac*), with many ocurrences, see Dorin N. Uritescu, *De la chioşcari la vesternizare. Mic dicţionar de termeni actuali*, Editura Humanitas, Bucureşti, 1993, pp. 120-122.

[13] That is 'to behave like Becali', 'to write like Topârceanu, Urmuz, Arghezi', etc.

[14] I find it relevant that a lecture, delivered by Coseriu in 1951 at the Linguistic Center from Montevideo, was titled precisely *Denotación y connotatión en los nombres propios* (see one of Coseriu's manuscripts from the '50s, regarding the linguistic theory of proper names, once available on www.coseriu.de, Projekt C@seriu).

[15] Cf. Eugenio Coseriu, *Lingüística del texto*…, p. 235.

[16] Even if it is not always too different from what we will consider as evocation (cf. Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, Translated by Francis J. Whitfield, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1963, pp. 114-120).



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(a) either *signify* (in the case of the previously mentioned «motivation through denotation»),

(b) or *evocate* (in the case of the previously mentioned «motivation through connotation»).

**3.1.** Since a proper name is also a linguistic sign, it is worth reminding here the fact that the linguistic sign has the possibility of functioning in the discourse in connection (a relation both material and content-oriented) with other signs, with micro-systems of signs and even with whole systems of signs. It can also function in relation with other texts, with things themselves or with our knowledge about things[17]. These relations are called by Coseriu (following W.M. Urban's terminology) *functions of evocation*: «one can say that around representation there is a bunch of functions of evocation […], we deal with that ambiguity of a word which can clearly denote something, without leaving apart other denotations» [my translation, Cr.M.][18].

**3.2.** I believe that the names of literary characters (if not all, at least some of them) have a double status: (i) on the one hand, they «behave» in the universe of discourse of the work they belong to similarly to the ones in real life, representing «a *secondary nominalization*, individualizing and unifying» (Coseriu; cf. *supra*, **2.1.**); (ii) on the other hand, they are endowed with a certain «transparency», having a relationship of motivation with the respective denoted characters. In the case of literature, we witness an overlapping of levels which must be taken into consideration when analysing names: at the same time, a name stays as a proper name, but can also have the same meaning as an ordinary word or can evocate something/someone with whom the respective character gets connected[19]. Allusion – by identity or by resemblance of names – to another famous character (from another work) seems to be the most interesting one, since, this time, a new character gets to be somehow «classified», due to his/her name, by means of «fantastic universals». Take, for example, Casaubon, the main character in U. Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum*. His name is an allusion to both the philosopher Isaac Casaubon (who actually existed) and to George Eliot's homonymous character in *Middlemarch*[20].

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[17] Eugen Coşeriu, *Prelegeri şi conferinţe (1992-1993)*, ca supliment al publicaţiei «Anuar de lingvistică şi istorie literară», T. XXXIII, 1992-1993, Seria A, Lingvistică, Iaşi, 1994, p. 149.

[18] *Ibidem*, p. 153. Or as Coseriu explicitely states it in his text linguistics: «La evocación contribuye notablemente a la riqueza del lenguaje; con ella surge esa plurivocidad que no siempre debería enjuiciarse negativamente, como «vaguedad», sino que habría que valorarla también positivamente, como un enriquecimiento: el teórico del lenguaje Wilbur Marshall Urban ha puesto de relieve con particular énfasis esta riqueza basada en la función evocativa del lenguaje, es decir, en la posibilidad de referirse con ayuda del lenguaje a algo sin hablar en realidad de ello. El sentido surge entonces, como combinación de las funciones bühlerianas (representación, expresión y apelación) y la evocación.» (Eugenio Coseriu, *Lingüística del texto*…, p. 233).

[19] Sometimes even simultaneously: the name *Gheorghe* signifies (etymologically speaking) 'peasant' and evokes St. George (the soldier, *par excellence*).

[20] See Mariana Istrate, *Numele propriu în textul narativ. Aspecte ale onomasticii literare*, Editura Napoca Star, Cluj-Napoca, 2000, p. 167.



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**3.3.** The way in which writers «baptize» their characters is similar to the primitive way in which the ancients would name their children. The difference would be that the ancients (if the name did not already describe the physical aspect of its bearer) could only hope that the name would influence the destiny of the respective individual, while in literature the name shapes (even when ironical) the evolution or the status of the character.

**4.** At the same time, I would like to underline and systematize the roles of names of characters in literary texts. The issue is quite complicated in this case as well, since one can speak both about the function of name in literature, in general, and about the function of some strategies of attributing names in some literary works.

**4.1.** Firstly, names support the *idea of realistic mimesis*. They are given to characters in the same way they are attributed to the people in reality and their main function is to individualize their bearers. One can imitate – out of the need to recreate veracity – even the way in which people, dominated (in the old times) by a magical and mythical thinking (or still influenced by its reminiscences), would name (or even rename) their children with names meant to control their destiny[21]. Thus, the examples found at Marin Preda, Liviu Rebreanu, on the one hand, and Mihail Sadoveanu and Ion Creangă, on the other hand, are probably illustrative[22].

**4.2.** In literature, as shown by the majority of the examples discussed, names can be motivated; they can play *the role of «label»*: they are indicators of the character or of physical appearance or even of the destiny of the characters who bear them. The procedure by which literary heroes get names that somehow foresee their evolution – a quite naive procedure, in our contemporary reality – is fully justified in literature, since in culture everything is dictated by its finality[23]. Accordingly, the fate of characters complies with the author's wish.

[21] By using magic, the primitive man would think he can control the world. Similarly, mythology is, as Coseriu remarks (in *Orationis fundamenta*. *La plegaria como texto*), "un fenómeno híbrido que pertenece por derecho al universo de la fantasía pero que, al mismo tiempo, aspira a presentarse como explicación de hechos y eventos naturales o históricos, como ciencia" (Eugenio Coseriu, Óscar Loureda Lamas, *Lenguaje y discurso*, EUNSA, Pamplona, 2006, p. 74). In other words, what belongs to the world of necessity and causality is explained as if it were a product of the world of freedom and finality: natural or historical events are seen as caused by the intentions or wishes of some superhuman beings.

[22] See, for more examples, Cr. Munteanu, *Despre caracterul motivat al numelor proprii*..., pp. 65-80.

[23] See also Tzvetan Todorov's excellent observation in his brief presentation of the concept «personnage»: «Le personnage se manifeste de plusieurs manières. La première est dans le *nom* du personnage qui annonce déjà les propriétés qui lui seront attribuées (car le nom propre n'est qu'idéalement non-descriptif). On doit distinguer ici les noms allégoriques des comédies, les évocations par milieu, l'effet du symbolisme phonétique, etc. D'autre part, ces noms peuvent soit entretenir avec le caractère du personnage des rapports purement paradigmatiques (le nom désigne le caractère, tel Noirceuil de Sade), soit se trouver impliqués dans la causalité syntagmatique du récit (l'action se détermine par la signification du nom, ainsi chez Raymond Roussel).» (Oswald Ducrot, Tzvetan Todorov, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1972, pp. 291-292).



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**4.3.** At a more sophisticated level of literary art, there are cases in which a particular way of attributing names can be converted in a textual strategy of constructing sense. We owe to Coseriu an interesting observation on this topic, according to which the way in which characters are named in literary works can be *a procedure of articulating sense* in those works. In order to demonstrate this, Coseriu corrects one of Leo Spitzer's famous interpretations regarding the «polynomasia» or the «instability of names» from Cervantes' *Don Quixote*[24]. Spitzer tried to prove the fact that the respective instability of naming represents a very important clue for the sense of the novel as a whole, naming it «linguistic perspectivism» and trying to determine its meaning. Thus, he would resort to the medieval idea according to which the essence of the things created must be expressed by their «correct» name, only that it is not the man – limited by/in his subjectivity –, but only God who knows the «correct» names of things[25]. Coseriu states, however, that this «instability of names» is «un factor *entre otros*, es decir que sólo puede comprenderse exactamente en conexión con otros»[26]. The real theme of the novel is about freedom, about the political utopia (the Barataria Island). They all represent partial meanings which get articulated in order to give the global sense of the work: *the tragedy of hopelessness regarding freedom.* Don Quixote's madness is a sign of his enthusiasm for freedom, which is his true nature. The hero's psychic recovery – which makes him go back to his initial monotony – represents the tragedy, since it transforms him in a defeated person: he abandons the search of freedom both for himself and for the others.

Mariana Istrate provides another example of denominative instability (or, actually, a kind of multiple onomastic designation) in which the hesitant attribution of names has the role of «producing a reversal of identity, in a space in which the individual, lost in anonymity, insistently looks for his personality» [my translation, Cr.M.][27]. She refers to Georges Perec's novel, *Quel petit vélo à guidon chromé au fond de la cour?* (1966), in which «the author creates 72 onomastic constructions for the same character, all having a common element (*Kara-*), to which adjectives, nouns, verbs, interjections, suffixes specific to European languages are associated» [my translation, Cr.M.][28]. Thus, the fixed, common particle *Kara* (meaning 'black' in Turkish) would point to the fact that the character belongs to the Balkanik or Oriental space, while the second component of the name – added by means of an unprecedented procedure – would enlarge the geographical area of its possible origin: either Greek (*Karamanlis*), Polish (*Karalcrowics*), Russian (*Karaschoff*) or German (*Karalberg*), etc.

**4.4.** We have so far seen how names help characterizing the hero or how they contribute – as a factor among other factors –, to a smaller or larger extent,

[24] Eugenio Coseriu, *Lingüística del texto*…, p. 266.
[25] *Ibidem*, p. 267.
[26] *Ibidem*, p. 268.
[27] Mariana Istrate, *Numele propriu în textul narativ...*, p. 60.
[28] *Ibidem.*



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to the articulation of sense in a literary work. At this point, one can wonder whether that is possible in the other way round: whether there are texts whose existence is based on the name itself. Writings made «for the sake of names»? Of course there are. I do not know whether this is true for large texts as well (such as novels or short stories), but, for simpler textual units (such as chapters or subchapters), I think that is possible. In fact, *à propos* of the type of «concentration», one must draw a clear distinction between:

[α] name as *a principle of construction of a text* and

[β] name as *an object of metalinguistic reflection* in a text.

Thus, short texts, such as puns (even versified, as epigrams), can be constructed and their purpose is represented by the names themselves and by their power of suggestion. Raymond Queneau even entitled one of his numerous «exercises of style» *Proper Nouns* – a concise text made according to a certain "recipe" of using some common names. What is more, it is worth mentioning the Romanian writer Mircea Horia Simionescu, in whose unusual novel *Ingeniosul bine temperat* (also titled *Dicţionar onomastic*), many «entries» (organised lexicographically) are «stories» that depart from a name[29]. On the one hand, many paragraphs from a literary work can result from metalinguistic divagations or insertions, in order to explain the meaning or the origin of a name. For instance, in one of Franz Kafka's stories, *Die Sorge des Hausvaters*, etymological speculations are made concerning the name of the strange character Odradek[30]: is it a word of Slavic origin or a German term later slavised?

**5.** Eugenio Coseriu's scientific work represents an inexhaustible source of knowledge for those who want to learn linguistic theory at the highest level, but it also constitutes an inexhaustible source of inspiration, a guiding polar star for those who want to investigate insufficiently explored or clarified aspects of the human language. I hope that this paper is one more stimulus to apply Coseriu's linguistics.

[29] Here is what Nicolae Manolescu states with regard to the onomastic technique used in this novel: «It is actually the most original meta-novel I know: a novel of proper names, which are its real characters. It is not the social and individual background of the bearer of the name that determines the name (as Ibrăileanu observes in Caragiale's work, in a brilliant essay), in *Ingeniosul*, it is the onomastic itself creating, giving birth to «real» individuals, by means of a game of imagination, making use of haphazard as well. For, taking as a point of departure onomastic suggestion, one can picture as many particular beings and biographies.» [my translation, Cr.M.] (Nicolae Manolescu, *Istoria critică a literaturii române. 5 secole de literatură*, Editura Paralela 45, Piteşti, 2008, pp. 1162-1163).

[30] See Eugenio Coseriu, *Lingüística del texto*…, p. 272.



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