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Onymoids

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Onymoids

Abstract: This article proposes a new technical term for a proper name which is lexically and grammatically transparent in the language with which it is most closely associated.

Keywords: Onymoid (definition), onomastic terminology, denotational and referential ambiguity.

Onymoïdes

Résumé : Cet article propose un nouveau terme technique pour un nom propre qui est transparent lexicalement et grammaticalement dans la langue avec laquelle il est le plus étroitement associé.

Mots-clés : Onymoïde (définition), terminologie onomastique, ambiguïté sémantique et pragmatique.

Onymoids

Zusammenfassung: In diesem Artikel wird ein neuer Fachbegriff für einen Eigennamen vorgeschlagen, der in der Sprache, mit der er am engsten verbunden ist, sich lexikalisch und grammatikalisch erweist.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Onymoid (Definition), onomastische Terminologie, semantische und pragmatische Mehrdeutigkeitstypen.

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Onymoids

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This terminological note is written within the framework of The Pragmatic Theory of Properhood (TPTP; see e.g. Coates 2006), because the issue it deals with is one which has been central in the development of TPTP. However, the proposal contained in the paper is theoretically neutral.[1]

Proper names are generally senseless, i.e. they carry no lexical or grammatical meaning into the process of referring in some context, apart from the simple fact of functioning as a referring expression. They are *monoreferential* in the context of utterance: that is, they pick out a single individual, whatever category that individual belongs to (person, inhabited place, mountain, river, domestic animal, business, brand…, or an individuated set of such items *(The Beatles*, *The Rocky Mountains*).

A name is *monodenotational* in the statistically low-probability case where *as a matter of contingent fact* only one individual exists to whom or to which that name attaches (e.g. the name of the Englishman *Leone Sextus Denys Oswolf Fraudatifilius Tollemache-Tollemache de Orellana Plantagenet Tollemache-Tollemache* (about whose unique status I am pretty confident), and as far as I am aware *Siddhārtha Gautama*, *Huītzilōpōchtli*, *Freiburg im Breisgau*, *Fouta Djallon*, *Llullaillaco*, *Google*). However, there are also other expressions which, with a high degree of probability, are understood as being monodenotational in a range of contexts, and that property enables them, with a high degree of probability, to refer uniquely in such contexts. These are expressions having the lexis and grammatical structure typical of the language with which they are associated, which are able in principle to be used sensefully like ordinary expressions of the language, but have the potential to be used and understood senselessly in many contexts precisely because they are, contingently, monodenotational. That means that the intended unique referent in the context of utterance could be identified either with or without the mediation of lexis and grammar (cf. Coates 2005). To put this another way: there are expressions which could be viewed either as names or as another type of referring expression, and which

[1] This paper develops an idea first presented in "Explorations in The Pragmatic Theory of Properhood", a lecture given at the Alexandras Vanagas International Scientific Conference "The Present of Onomastics: Innovations and Traditions", Vilnius, Lithuania, 20–21 November 2014.

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might in principle, to judge by their form alone, operate via either mode (i.e. through what I have previously distinguished as *semantic* and *onymic reference*) in a given context.

There are two types of (definite) expression which could serve as examples of the stated possibility.

1. One type involves nouns that have precisely one denotatum (at least in common understanding and in a large proportion of everyday usage). Examples in English include *the sun*, *the earth* [apart from the mass noun sense, 'soil'], *the world*, *the universe*, *the zodiac*, *the ecliptic*, *the equator*, *the Doldrums*, *the Mistral*, *el Niño*, *the Parthenon*, *the Kremlin*, *the Midlands*, *the Sub-continent*, *the Orient*, *the internet*, *the Pope*, *the Devil*, *the Buddha*, *the Taoiseach*.

Of course, it is easy to see how at least some of these nouns might be taken to have a wider denotational range, and that they may be used non-prototypically in such wider ways. We could defensibly say, for example, that when we look at the night sky we can see many suns, that parallel universes may exist, that a number of Russian cities have a *kreml'*, or that several diverse Christian churches have a pope. That does not detract from the fact that, in the ordinary usage of significant numbers of English-speakers (deriving from their individual life-experiences), the default interpretation of these expressions is that they are used to refer to, and that they denote, a unique individual.[2] I address the question of capitalization in English below.

2. The other type involves linguistically more complex expressions in which the head noun is not monodenotational, but where the full expression is contingently monodenotational[3] in the relevant cultural context. Examples in English include *the Second World War*, *the Glorious Revolution*, *the Big Bang*, *the solar system*, *the Red Planet*, *the North Star*, *the Milky Way*, *the North Magnetic Pole*, *the Southern Ocean*, *the Dead Sea*, *the Black Mountains*, *the Western Isles*, *the Middle East*, *the Isle of Dogs*, *the Mother Country*, *the United States*, *the Great Lakes*, *the 49th parallel*, *the Great Pyramid*, *the General Assembly of the United Nations*, *the House of Lords*, *the Second Amendment*, *the National Exhibition Centre*, *the Bridge of Sighs*, *the World Wide Web*, *the World Cup*, *the True Cross*, *the Body Shop*, *the First Fleet*, *the Eternal Leader*, *the Prime Minister*, *the Goddess of Love*, *the Abominable Snowman*, *the Princess Royal*; and also a few non-noun-headed expressions like *She Who Must Be Obeyed*. Examples without qualifiers of

[2] This state of affairs must be differentiated from what happens with ordinary referring expressions. If I say "Ask the teacher", I will generally use *the teacher* monoreferentially without believing the expression to be monodenotational.

[3] A suitable alternative term for some of these might be *protodenotational*; that is, they may well have a number of denotata in principle, but one is preferred, so to speak *par excellence*, as clearly with some of the examples in the following list.

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any sort might include by-names or nicknames such as *The Boss* = the singer Bruce Springsteen and *The/Our Lord* and *The/Our Saviour* = Jesus Christ; referring expressions applied *par excellence* to a particular individual person such as *the Prophet*; and terms applied *par excellence* to events in British and Irish history such as *the Anarchy* and *the Troubles*. Many chrematonyms have relevant characteristics.[4]

Like names, all the relevant expressions are grammatically definite. In written languages that use orthographic capitalization, their definiteness is not generally symbolized by capitalization of the article. Everyday usage in standard English certainly does not capitalize it. Of more significance is the issue of whether other words in the expression are capitalized. The fact of variability with relation to capitalization is iconic of the potential dual mode of reference enjoyed by such expressions, but the application of capitalization is by no means consistent (*the internet* / *the Internet*; *the goddess of love* / *the Goddess of Love*). Some – many – such expressions are nevertheless treated as if they are names and are routinely capitalized, like most of those in (2). In compiling (2.), I think I have followed the most frequent practice in English, but several of my decisions will justifiably remain open to question. This practice of capitalization, though inconsistently applied, must indicate that such expressions – however ambiguous their referentiality might be in principle – can have properhood bestowed upon them (see below) and work as true names thereafter, with all that that entails about potential dissociation from the logic of lexical meaning.

We do not have a technical term for namelike expressions which are lexically and structurally fully normal expressions of their associated language, but which are, with a high degree of probability, monodenotational in a range of contexts. In the metalanguage of everyday usage, they tend to get assimilated to the apparently well-understood but rather loose everyday concept of *name* (just as taxonyms do – cf. in English *plant-name*, *bird-name*), and may accordingly be treated like names in their associated language.

I propose the term *onymoid* for such an expression. This is not just a loose or catch-all term for something a bit like a name. An onymoid is an expression having lexis and grammatical structure typical of the language with which it is associated, which therefore has the potential to be used (uttered or understood) sensefully. But it also has the potential to be uttered or understood senselessly in many contexts precisely because it is *de facto* or *par excellence* or *in the experience of the user* monodenotational, such that the intended unique referent in those contexts could be identified without the mediation of

[4] The term *chrematonym* is not widely familiar in the English-speaking world, so I extract the following wording from the definition on ICOS's web-site: "name of a politico-economic or commercial or cultural institution or thing." For such items, see also noteworthily Brendler & Brendler (2004: especially chapters 21–25).

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the senses of the lexical units and structures involved. A clear enough example might be *the Second Amendment*, where a speaker is much more likely to be referring onymically to the right of American citizens to keep and bear arms than semantically to the constitutional nature of an instrument in its place in a sequence of such instruments − and equally likely to be understood as referring thus. On the other hand, it is of course perfectly thinkable that the expression might be used semantically by legal historians in a discussion of the significance of the sequence of constitutional amendments. Lexical and grammatical sense may be bypassed in monodenotational common definite expressions (1); sense may be bypassed in common definite expressions which have an institutionalized monodenotational (protodenotational) application (2).[5]

The question of identifying expressions as onymoids is complicated in the real world by the fact that onymoids, like any other linguistic material, can actually be *bestowed* as names without exhibiting any of the variability patterns implied above. Any expression, including an overt generic, can be declared a name through a culturally sanctioned act which has some of the characteristics of a *speech act* without all the formal properties that that term suggests in J. L. Austin's original formulation (1962): so e.g. "Let's call this enterprise *The Body Shop*, […] *The Open University*, […] *The Place to Be*." Or from actual documents issued by officially constituted bodies, retrieved randomly from the w/Web:

> (a) The name of the organization shall be Staff Council.
> (b) The name of the organization shall be the Management Information Systems Association.
> (c) The name of this organization shall be the Alliance for Grassland Renewal.
> (d) The name of the body shall be: Marketing & Advocacy Interest Group of the Library.
> (e) The body shall be called the British Caving Association, hereinafter referred to as the Association.

Accordingly it is clear that some expressions having the formal characteristics of onymoids can be bestowed names; that is, they may lack a non-onymic reading in many contexts. In literate cultures such bestowals will often be a matter of (formal) record, for example by published certification.

To sum up: onymoids are (effectively) monodenotational expressions sharing the lexical and structural characteristics of their ambient language,

[5] I fully recognize that in some cases the distinction may be hard to apply, and perhaps unintuitive to make. In hearing the expression *the Prophet*, we may not be able to demonstrate empirically whether the speaker is simply identifying an important historical character onymically or (at the point of utterance) using the notion of Muhammad's actually being a prophet in order to identify him. But if I were a betting man, I know where my money would be most of the time.

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having the potential to be uttered or understood either sensefully or senselessly. They are therefore located on a cline of onomaticity, but, like all linguistic strings, have a default interpretation as a proper name, and may be confirmed in that status by an explicit act of bestowal.

Note

The term *onymoid* has been used previously (i) as a nonce-form by Wilkinson (2004: 71, note 3) to refer to an invented toponymic etymology; (ii) in the unglossed list of technical terms WSK-Gesamtlemmaliste (state of May 2017); and (iii) as a quasi-technical term by L. A. Klimkova & K. V. Tinyaeva (2017), for a namelike expression created under experimental conditions. My proposed usage is distinct from these usages where their sense can be determined.

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