CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF PROPER NAMES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH TOPONYMS[1]

Abstract*: The role of proper names is to identify, to individualize. Proper names designate phenomena, objects (in the broad sense of the term) that are unique, individual, while appellatives designate classes of objects, general notions. Proper names confer concreteness, while common nouns generalize. In order to establish the characteristics of proper names one has to proceed from the general to the particular, from the abstract to the concrete, whereas, in detecting common nouns, the procedure follows the reverse direction, from the concrete to the abstract, from the particular to the general.*

Keywords*: proper names, appellatives, toponyms.*

The totality of the place names in a country or region make up the *toponymy* of the country or region in question, a term which also designates the related branch of *onomastics*, which studies the origin, the initial signification and the evolution of the topical names.

The object of onomastics is represented by proper names, which designate in particular various individual features, in order to distinguish them from the other objects of the same kind. In the specialized literature published abroad there are opinions expressing the idea that onomastics implies a broader field of research. Thus, O. S. Ahmanova (Ahmanova, 1958: 14-16) maintains that within the scope of onomastics, apart from forenames, surnames, patronymics, and names of animals – which she groups into the class of names proper – and geographic names, one should also integrate mythological names, astronomic names, names of literary characters or illustrious people, names of the various organizations, companies or associations, etc., names of watercraft, as well as the individual and generic names of the various food or industrial products, the titles of literary, musical or generally artistic works.

The question to ask then is what one should understand by proper names. In the *Grammar of Romanian (Gramatica limbii române)* one can come across the following opinion concerning proper names:

> Some nouns designate only some specific beings, things of phenomena, considered in isolation, in order to distinguish them from the others in the same category or species, which is why they are called proper nouns. They express notions which are formed through abstracting the common features from several specimens (GLR, second edition, 1963: 55).

In most grammar textbooks proper names are considered a subclass of the noun, opposed to the common names / nouns. However, lately the exclusive use of the logical-semantic criteria in delimiting the proper names has come in for a great deal of criticism, paralleled by the recommendation to use the grammatical criteria in clarifying the proper – common opposition. One has to mention the fact that the class of the proper names is far from being homegeneous in point of marking the grammatical categories and inflection, in general, and this lack of unity demonstrates the complexity of that nominal subclass. The same aspect is manifest when it comes to the "use of the articles with proper names" (Tomescu, 1998: 47 and foll).

It is a well-known fact that, almost without exception, proper names are derived from common nouns. In their evolution towards the status of proper names, the

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common nouns have taken various courses, but they all derived from the selfsame necessity, which was determined historically and socially. The first common peculiarity lies in the fact that both proper names and appellatives are linguistic signs created by humans with a view to facilitating mutual understanding, and both have been accepted by society. They both issued from the need man felt to cope with the surrounding world, using the same formal linguistic elements (sounds, letters), the essential characteristic trait of which was represented by the cohesion between the phonetic (or graphical) form and function.

A multitude of studies have appeared with respect to proper names, their semantic and grammatical characteristics, or the classes of proper names, as well as the place that toponyms hold among proper names, or the distinctions between place names and the names of people, as the latter are in fact closest to the proper names.

Famous linguists such as J. Balasz, E. Coşeriu or A.I. Greimas state that, on account of the sense of individualization, the proper names, hence the toponyms as well, cannot enter into lexematic oppositions. Place names do not represent, as is sometimes wrongly held, a peripheral division of the lexicon of a language, on the contrary, they have a status of their own, distinct from that of common terms. They are at once elements of the lexicon, and also entities opposed to its regular items.

Place names have been included in the category of the proper names, since they were not formed through abstractization, as were the common nouns.

Proper names can be traced back to certain periods of time, in a certain space or environment, and were related to certain human activities, so, to this very day they bear the imprint of the society typical of the various ages. Their apparition and evolution were conditioned by a number of social, historical and economic factors, by the kind of material and spiritual life that people lived, and equally by factors of a geographical nature, evoking the physical and geographic peculiarities of a region, as the late Iorgu Iordan remarked: "All kinds of moments in the life of a human community – historical (stricto sensu), social, economic, political, psychological – are echoed by toponymy, more often than not over a very long period of time, and sometimes permanently and definitively" (Iordan, 1963: 2).

Proper names, once having gone into the language, develop their function of identification. If at first the proper name expresses a quality, in a general sense, thanks to its function, it can become a mark of the object, considered globally.

Toponymy preserves names which are no longer analysable by the speakers; likewise, place names and city names in foreign countries are used, whose motivation is totally opaque for the speakers of Romanian, which does not mean that they are rejected by the system of our language, quite on the contrary, they are integrated as signs that singularize and individualize to the highest degree. Logician Rudolf Carnap defined proper names as *"a class with a single element"* (apud Mihăilă, 1978: 273). Starting from the concepts used by the logicians, we can say that a proper name does not express an (understood) *sense*, because it does not express *properties*, but we cannot fully subscribe to that notion, because a proper name expresses a sense or a meaning, but only as a genesis. It *signifies* (or refers to) a *nominatum* or a *denotatum*, which is the *"singular object which it designates"* (Mihăilă, *op. cit*., p. 274).

Holger Steen Sorensen is the man who first formulated, in terms of information, the sense of the proper name; it was defined as *the "information conveyed by the **designator** in connection with the **denotatum** or **denotata"*** (Apud Florea, 1989: 215). His merit does not consist only in "recognizing the meaning of the proper name by referring the name to the respective object, rather than the meaning of the common noun

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that underlies the proper one", and also in the fact that he "establishes the individual character of the meaning of the proper name with respect to the general meaning of the common noun on different bases from those preceding his own research" (Florea, *op. cit.*: 215).

Gary-Prieur advocated introducing a distinction between the content and the meaning / sense of the proper names, stating that:

> I will understand by SENSE a property that characterizes the proper name as a language unit, and is, in my opinion, very well represented by the predicate of denomination, and by CONTENT – the properties that characterize the proper name as being linked to its initial referent; this relationship (...) triggers the fact that certain properties of the initial referent can intervene in interpreting proper names (Gary-Prieur, 1994: 39-40).

For a correct interpretation of the sense of the proper name, we believe that a clear distinction has to be drawn between the various levels of the language to which the proper name can be referred. Thus, at a genetic level, the proper name is a sign constituted on the basis of the primary system of signs of the language, it is motivated and has a meaning. At a functional level in the usage, the proper name is identified with the singular object known to the speaker, evoking for the speaker the object with the multitude of its concrete characteristic features. When we refer to the level of the functionality in the system, the proper name is an arbitrary sign in relation to the singular object it refers to, and it does not express a different sense (meaning) than that of a *proper name*. Finally, at the level of the metasystem, the proper name is the name of a class of proper names. For instance, *Albeşti* can be the name of all the villages named *Albeşti* in Romania.

Therefore we can say that the proper name has a *sense* or *meaning* only when its motivation is transparent. The moment motivation becomes opaque, and the proper name becomes arbitrary as to the object designated, it also loses its primitive meaning, and its only quality expressed is that of a *proper name*.

Another very interesting and highly disputable point of view is related to their recategorization as proper names, which has been effected gradually. In some respects, place names "are closely linked to the names of persons in that either of them can appear or can be changed through the will of a group of people, or even a single individual" (Graur, 1972: 6), as Al. Graur remarked in his work *Names of persons*.

Staying within the field of proper name semantics, Ion Toma stated that "the semantic formula of the proper name (irrespective of the subsystem it is integrated into) is: that x (x = person, place, animal, company, etc.), which… (followed by a restrictive relative clause, which enumerates the characteristics necessary and sufficient to individualize x)" (Toma, 1995: 108).

To be able to differentiate between the meaning of the proper names and that of the common names, Domnița Tomescu concludes that "the specific function of the proper names is denomination through identification and individualization, while that of the common nouns is that of designating through generalization" (*Ibidem,* p. 1), hence proposing the following **definition** of the former:

> from a semantic point of view, proper names, defined in a contradictory manner, through the absence of meaning, through monosemanticism, or through excess of signification, are different from common nouns, not through their ability to express sense, but through the way in which they achieve signification (...). The relationship between the proper name and the object denoted is temporary, dependent on the verbal and situational context (*Ibidem)*.

"Thus, we propose – D. Tomescu continues – for all the proper names three levels of the linguistic analysis: the etymological (i.e. initial) formal plane of the

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designation, the current functional plane, where the proper name designates, identifies and individualizes an object within a given context, and the complementary (or additional) functional plane, where the proper name finally comes into its own denotation in that it is being used in designating objects in the same class, or in different classes" (*Ibidem,* p. 9). The same author is of the opinion that "from a semantic standpoint, proper names can be only singular, but from a linguistic standpoint, they can also be singular and plural" (Tomescu, 1973: 471).

The linguist Ion Roşianu believes that "the sense of proper names is an individual, referential-connotative sense, which is not achieved through generalization and abstractization, and the designation through proper names is not a notional designation, but an individual, particular and restrictive one" (Roşianu, 1999: 27).

As far as the terminology used in the course of time is concerned, D. Tomescu briefly surveys all the terms, namely: - *nume osebit*, which occurs in the first Romanian grammar book, written by Eustatievici Braşoveanu (1757); - *nume osebite* and *nume însuşite*, terms left unexplained, which appears in Radu Tempea's grammar (1797); - *nume însuşi / nume însuşit*, terms present in Văcărescu's grammar (1787); - *nume particular*, a term which appears in I.C. Massim's works (1854), being very close to the functional specificity of the proper names, but will not be taken over by subsequent grammars; - *nume propriu* (*proper name*), the present-day term, to be found for the first time in Văcărescu's grammar (1787); - *nume proprie*, used by Golescu (1840), N. Măcărescu (1848), T. Cipariu (1854), and Puşcariu (1875); - *nume proprii*, a term that can be encountered in Constantin Diaconovici-Loga (1892); - *nume propre*, a term used by Şt. Neagoe (1870) and I. Çirca (1878) (Tomescu, *op. cit.:* 19).

Viorica Florea, in her article *Derivatele toponimelor în raport cu cele ale apelativelor româneşti*, cites *Alan Gardiner* (*The theory of proper names*), stating that "Proper names possess the faculty of designating something, while at the same time singularizing, whereas common nouns have the twofold faculty of signifying and designating something" (Florea, ACIL: 1138). Sabina Teiuş understands that, in order to define the notion of proper name, we have to consider the two levels or planes of realization, that of the message, and that of the signalling. Consequently, "the proper name only possesses the faculty of designating, while simultaneously singularizing, whereas the common noun has the twofold faculty of meaning/signifying and designating something" (Teiuş, 1967: 514). In other words, the proper name "lacks semantic content" (Marouzeau, 1963: 124), having only its sphere of usage, and in its turn the latter is "*reduced to a minimum"* (Kurilowics, 1956: 5, 13), while "the common noun possesses a signification, a semantic content, and has a wider sphere of usage, as it expresses notions formed through abstracting the common features from several objects of the same type" (Teiuş, *op. cit.:* 514). Thus, synchronically, unlike the common noun, the proper name lacks the stage or level of abstractization, of generalization, the very stage in which the common noun is assigned a semantic content.

Considering the above discussion, we can derive the following conclusions:

- from a pragmatic-semantic point of view, the proper name is "a linguistic unit endowed with a lexical or conventional sense, being used by the speakers either in a referential position, if an act of reference to particulars is aimed at, or in a non-referential position, if an act of predication is intended" (Miron-Fulea, 2005: 286).
- as a unit of the linguistic system, the proper name occurs in two stances: as a *lexical item* (a lexical unit which is still not categorized grammatically), and as a *nominal item* (a lexical-grammatical unit belonging to the category of the nouns / Nomina);

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- as a discourse unit, the proper name is an intrinsically referential expression, which gives rise to two types of speech acts: the act of unique reference (i.e. reference to particulars), and the act of predication;
- from a morphological standpoint, the proper name has an inflection characterized by the presence of the grammatical categories of gender, number and case;
- from a syntactic point of view, proper names accept the combination with the same determiners as those of the common nouns (the definite article, the indefinite article, the demonstrative adjective, the possessive determiner). Thus the proper name provides a constant reference, whereas its determiners introduce the features of singularization, either permanent or momentary, while sometimes assuming modality values.

Thus, proper names are different from common nouns primarily from a semantic standpoint, because they do not denote classes made up on the basis of common properties, but rather they refer directly to individuals. Proper names are characterized by the prevalence of designation, by the absence of connotation, and by referring back to a known referent.

In conclusion, the essential distinction between a common noun and a proper name consists in the fact that the common noun makes a differentiation between one class and another, while the proper noun strictly individualizes the object it designates, possessing a distinct value, which can even go as far as to isolate it. Proper names are not opposed to one another as lexical units, they are not mutually exclusive, they rather presuppose one another, fulfilling the same communicative function. Being conveyers of information, they serve as a means of expressing ideas, notions, etc.

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