Names as frames in current-day media discourse

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Abstract: Over the past few decades, the media have undergone an unprecedented amount of change, accelerating the conflict between an ongoing information explosion and the pressure to communicate information as efficiently and economically as possible. This has resulted in compressed styles of expression which are less explicit in meaning. The development is paralleled by an increase in the use of names rather than complex noun phrases to describe and evaluate persons, places, physical objects or events in media texts (e.g. *Nick Clegg is the British Obama*). The aim of the present study is to explore how the choice of names helps recipients build interpretative frames that allow them to make sense of a given message. These 'name frames' frequently place a heavy burden on recipients, who need linguistic, encyclopaedic and cultural knowledge to activate a respective frame.
Keywords: category, frame, media discourse, name, referent.

Introduction

Seldom has a linguistic phenomenon received more interdisciplinary attention than names. Logicians and philosophers of language since Frege (1892) and Russel (1905) have studied problems of reference and of the logical form of names. Names have also fascinated psychologists and linguists, and, with the development of information technology, they have aroused the interest of journalists in the mass media[1].

All attempts at specifying the position of names in the language system have been centred on the topic of whether names form a distinct class of items in the language system or whether properhood is a mode of reference. Approaches attempting to solve this problem have revealed that there is no straightforward answer. As to the notion of *name* itself, it has proved useful to follow Van Langendonck (2004: 438), who characterises names as "words-in-function" which are identified on the basis of their semantics and of the construction they appear in. With regard to the semantic aspect, the following definition will be maintained:

> A proper name is a given word assigned to a certain (mental) denotatum (referent) in an ad hoc way, i.e. not on the basis of a predication or class as with common nouns. This denotatum

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[1]   In a narrow definition (see Jucker 1995–2012), which will be adopted for the purpose of this paper, the term "mass media" refers to print media, to the electronic media, and to the online media on the Internet.

is presupposed to belong to a specific basic level category of entities and therefore displays a presuppositional categorical meaning (such as 'country' in the case of the name *Sweden*).

In their primary use names are inherently definite, but they also have various secondary uses where this inherent definiteness is lost. One such use is to identify an individual or place having relevant properties of the bearer of another name. This use makes sense only if we know the source referents and then establish a metaphorical relationship with the target referents. Thus, names can also be used as shortcuts to identify people, places and events.

This paper addresses a fairly specific phenomenon: the metonymic and metaphoric use of names referring to humans and their potential as frames in media communication. The concept of framing offers a way to show how frequently used personal names develop new standard referents with which they are conventionally associated. The data are all attested examples collected from the Internet, unless otherwise stated.

Names and their referents

The speed of development in the media of modern mass communication has considerable influence on language in general and the use of names in particular. Over the past few decades, the media have undergone an unprecedented amount of change, and this has accelerated the conflict between an ongoing information explosion and the pressure to communicate information as efficiently and economically as possible. The result is, for example, a compressed style of expression which is less explicit in meaning. The development is paralleled by an increase in the use of names rather than complex noun phrases to describe and evaluate persons, places, physical objects or events in media texts. For example, in the sentence *Nick Clegg is the British Obama* the name *Obama* serves as a source to characterise the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Nick Clegg. The question is which of Obama's media characterisations is meant here. The example refers to the elections in Britain in April 2010, and it is the performance of Liberal leader Nick Clegg in the televised debate that had an Obama type impact on the electorate, especially young people. So it is actually Obama's successful election campaign that is being taken as source information for the comparison. The sentence *Nick Clegg's successful election campaign had a strong impact on the electorate, especially young people* would have been more precise, but also more complex.

The starting-point for such a comprehension process is the assumption that the meaning of a proper name is not rigidly fixed in advance and outside the context of language use, but has a "descriptive backing", as Searle (1969: 162) and (Lyons 1977: 220) argue. The name is essentially what Langacker (1987) calls "a point of access to a semantic network". In our case we can thus speak of an online construction of meaning, which is "context- and culture-specific; indeed user-specific in the first instance" (Pang 2010: 1327), as I will argue in this paper.

A frequently quoted case is the name *Shakespeare*, as for example in the sentence *Lope de Vega was not the Spanish Shakespeare*, which was analysed by Antonio Barcelona in 2004 (363–371) and which can be used to illustrate such a network and the comprehension process related to it. According to Barcelona, as a first step in the comprehension process, a conceptual model of the standard referent of the name *Shakespeare*, i.e. Shakespeare the writer, presents Shakespeare as a writer endowed with immense literary talent. This

model is metonymic in that it represents the concept CHARACTERISTIC PROPERTIES FOR INDIVIDUAL.

As a second step, a category of individuals characterised by one or more of the relations and properties imported from the network is created. In this case, the metonymic relation in which all the members of the category participate is HAVING IMMENSE LITERARY TALENT.

As a third step the *Shakespeare* network serves as a source domain and is metonymically connected to the target domain CLASS OF WRITERS WITH IMMENSE LITERARY TALENT. Shakespeare is socially regarded as an ideal – Lakoff (1987: 87–88) uses the term *paragon* – for the category of writers with immense literary talent.

A final step, which is not explicitly mentioned by Barcelona (2004), would involve metaphorical mapping. *Shakespeare* serves as a source for the target *Lope de Vega*. Metaphorical mapping, generally speaking, implies that one 'meaning' or 'thing' is looked upon in terms of another 'meaning' or 'thing'. The relation is frequently made conspicuous by modifiers of the source domain; in Barcelona's example *Lope de Vega was not the Spanish Shakespeare* these modifiers are *not* and *Spanish*.

The existence of a conceptual network of the name *Shakespeare* is constituted by Shakespeare's known biographical data, his literary production, its reception, but mainly by what is paramount in our common knowledge about William Shakespeare – his immense literary talent. Barcelona (2004: 369) points out that a prerequisite for the creation of such a category "is the existence of the culturally entrenched metonymic model of Shakespeare". Repeated usage of such models over time may lead to names which are conventionally associated with specific meanings to the point where they may be said to have lost their status as proper name and become lexicalised common nouns which are preceded by an indefinite article (see Harvalík 2012: 12–15). In other words, the more conventionalised the source name is, the more it is used in its classifying function and the less (culture-specific) context is necessary for its interpretation. This can be illustrated with examples like *Scrooge*, *Cassandra* or *Don Juan* (see Bergien 2011).

Name usage in the media

The example including the name *Shakespeare* provides a relatively clear case. In contrast to this, the comprehension process is much more complex and dynamic when names of people are concerned whose bearers are still alive and whose biographies and activities are therefore incomplete, fluid and far from being conventionalised. This is especially interesting when different public perceptions of politicians are concerned. What is considered paramount in the common knowledge about a particular politician can change with the discourse situation. A case in point is the name *Obama*. Barack Obama has been President of the United States of America since the beginning of 2009 and was re-elected in November 2012. In the following examples *Obama* is used as a target name. Obama is
– *the new Luther King*[2] (2007)
– *a John Kennedy for our times* (2008)

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[2]   http://ml.spiegel.de/article.do?id=495325 (accessed March 10, 2013).

   – *the George W. Bush of the Democratic Party*[3] (2008)
   – *the new Franklin Roosevelt*[4] (2008)
   – *the new Reagan*[5] (2008)
   – *the new Nixon*[6] (2009)
   – *the new Jimmy Carter*[7] (2010)
   – *the next Herbert Hoover* (2010)
   – *the new King George III* (2010)
   – *no FDR*[8] (2011)
   – *the Anti-Reagan*[9] (2013).

The context of these examples explains why the respective source name was chosen. For example, at the beginning of 2008 Obama is compared to John F. Kennedy because "like Kennedy, he combines personal magnetism with a strong appeal to American idealism"[10]. At the beginning of 2010 he is compared to the Depression-era president Herbert Hoover, because, like Hoover, he is highly qualified to be president but can still fail because of the enormity of the challenges he faces and he may thus bring his party down with him.[11] In April 2010 sentences like *Obama is the new King George III* are published on the Internet. King George III was the King of Great Britain during the time of the American Revolutionary War. Obama's political opponents made up lists of the similarities between the actions of the Obama administration and the tyrannies of King George listed by Thomas Jefferson in *The Declaration of Independence*.[12]

   From this incomplete list of source names the following observations can be made:
   – With the exception of one name, George III, Obama is compared to former US presidents. So names like *Kennedy* or *Hoover* have – at least to a certain extent – developed conventional associations with specific meanings. For the interpretation of the sentences the discourse context is important, since the names were used by supporters and by political opponents.

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   [3]   http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2008/01/09/voter-who-made-clinton-cry-picked-obama/comment-page–4/ (accessed March 10, 2013).
   [4]   http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/10/opinion/10krugman.html?_r=0 (accessed August 12, 2012).
   [5]   http://www.thepartisanpatriot.com/forums/showthread.php?t=6780 (accessed August 12, 2012).
   [6]   http://floppingaces.net/2009/10/24/another-mike-was-right-moment-obama-is-the-new-nixon/ (accessed March 10, 2013).
   [7]   http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/jan/20/barack-obama-jimmy-carter (accessed March 10, 2013).
   [8]   http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/post/why-obama-is-no-fdr/2011/08/25/gIQAisFw0M_print.html (accessed March 10, 2013).
   [9]   http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2013/01/24/the-morning-plum-obama-as-the-anti-reagan/ (accessed March 10, 2013).
   [10]   http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/william_rees_mogg/article3386292.ece (accessed November 20, 2010).
   [11]   http://blog.mises.org/11543/obama-the-next-herbert-hoover/ (accessed November 20, 2010).
   [12]   http://fellowshipofminds.wordpress.com/2010/04/06/obama-is-the-new-king-george-iii/ (accessed November 20, 2010).

– Before and immediately after the elections in 2008, Obama the politician can be seen as not a unitary 'character', but a 'character' composed of a number of diverse Barack Obamas.

– There is a decline of metaphorically used names from 2011 on. And those which can still be found are frequently preceded by *no*, *not* or *Anti* (e.g. *the Anti-Reagan*).

– In contrast to the *Shakespeare* network, a standard referent or characteristic property of the name *Obama* does not yet exist.

As we can see, the current conceptual *Obama* network in the media is both very complex and very vague and cannot be compared to his individual biography. Rather, what we find is a shortcut to his professional identity as a politician (Figure 1).
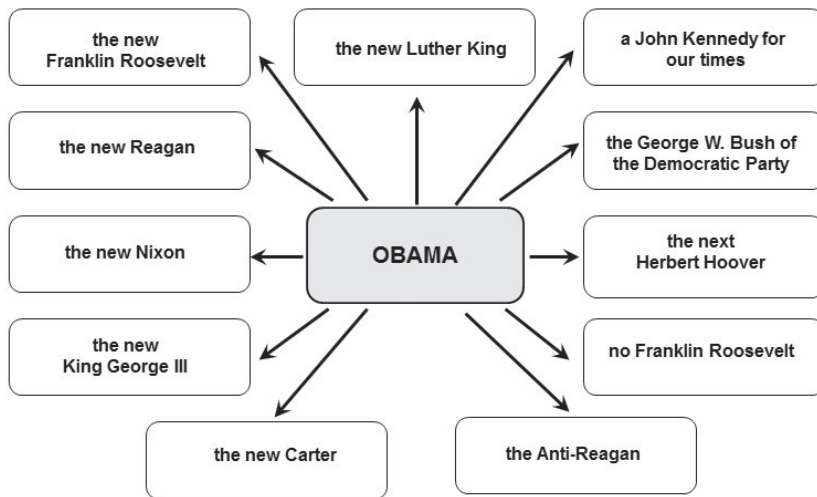

Figure 1. The Obama network.

There are three possible explanations for the fact that from 2011 these constructions are no longer used so frequently: First, the *Obama* network is more or less complete. Second, in the meantime the metaphorically used name *Obama* has developed a standard referent, and third, after such a long and frequent use by the media, the name *Obama* has changed from a target into a source name, as in the following examples:

– *Nick Clegg is the British Obama*[13]. (2010)
– *Rising Labour star Chuka Umunna is the British Obama.*[14] (2013)
– *Pope Franziskus is a new Obama*[15]. (2013)

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[13] http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/apr/19/nick-clegg-obama (accessed November 20, 2010).
[14] http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/chuka-umunnas-british-obama-wikipedia-entry-came-from-his-former-office–8569083.html?printService=print (accessed March 10, 2013).
[15] http://blog.nn-online.de/hirnduebel/2013/04/02/ganz-sicher-franziskus-wird-der-neue-obama/ (accessed March 10, 2013).

Names as frames

A powerful argument for the increasing use of names in the media can be presented when we describe this phenomenon in the context of framing. The concept of framing has been used, for example, within sociology, following the theories of Erving Goffman (1974). According to the framing concept, the choice of a linguistic item in a text helps recipients to build interpretive frames that allow them to make sense of the world. Or, as Entman (1993: 52) puts it:

> To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.

In other words, frames highlight bits of information about a person, object or event. The use of a name instead of an appellative first of all indicates the text producer's intention to refer to a single entity with the expectation that the recipient will be able to make a similar identification. So if we put a name on a particular concept, then this will reflect the meaning we attach to the concept and it certainly affects the interpretation of the nature of the concept, the influence of culture and of our encyclopaedic knowledge about the name. This shows that frames call attention to particular aspects, but simultaneously direct attention away from other aspects. For example, the name *Obama*, if used in the sentence *Pope Franziskus is a new Obama*, evokes a very special frame of the name *Obama*, i.e. a person on whom great hopes are pinned.

The conceptual frames we use to make sense of the world can be manipulated relatively easily, especially via repetition in the media. Their use thus gives the sender or framer enormous power to influence how the receivers will interpret the message. The frame that is activated via the name does not only provide an adequate description, but signals the value given to the element in question. This probably explains why names are so effective: they foreground relevant information more effectively than appellatives. Space, time and other constraints prevent journalists from including all possible perspectives, and news stories necessarily emphasise only certain values, facts, and other considerations. This is paralleled by an increase in the complexity, abstractness and uncertainty of political and economic concepts. Many political or business activities are too fast-moving for comprehension by non-experts. The financial crisis is a case in point for this phenomenon. The question is how to put this complexity into a language that can be understood by a mass media audience that is very large, anonymous and increasingly fragmented. In contrast to rather concrete categories like BIRD (e.g. *robin, sparrow*), which are used unconsciously in reasoning, it is almost impossible to identify a typical item of the category FINANCIAL CRISIS by reasoning. But to all of us the name *Lehman Brothers*, which is related to the global financial services firm that declared bankruptcy in 2008, makes sense. Thus, as a first step in the comprehension process, a name is used to construct an ad hoc category.

According to Barsalou (1983: 213), ad hoc categories – in contrast to common categories – do not have well established category representations in memory. Which properties or parts are relevant and will be selected depends on the discourse context and "the cultural or historical significance that the entity bearing the name might have

acquired at some point in the life of a group of people" (Sophia and Marmaridou 1989: 364). Ad hoc categories frequently result from our interest in all sorts of ranking and rating activities, which are based on a market conform thumbs up/thumbs down logic and present us with innumerable ten-best and ten-worst lists. This explains, among others, why names such as *Obama*, *Lehman Brothers* or *Lady Gaga* may represent more than one category and thus activate different frames in different discourse contexts (see Bergien 2013).

Against this background, the *Obama* frame can be explained with a number sub-frames, which are activated by names like *Kennedy*, *Roosevelt, Carter* or *King George III* in a given context. For example, the name *John Kennedy* in *Obama is a John Kennedy of our times* is intended to activate the frame COMMUNICATIVE TALENT and the respective context refers to Obama's excellent qualities as a speaker and to his personal magnetism. In contrast to this, *Jimmy Carter* in *Obama is the new Jimmy Carter* evokes the frame POLITICAL ASSER-TIVENESS, and the context refers to his lack of political killer instinct in times of economic tumult. The Name *King George III* is used in the sentence *Obama is the new King George III* to activate the frame ADMINISTRATIVE POWER. The text particularly criticises the creation of expensive new bureaucracies. The whole *Obama* frame, based on the subframes resulting from the different source names, is illustrated in Figure 2. The frames FINANCIAL POLICY and CRISIS MANAGEMENT occur more than once.
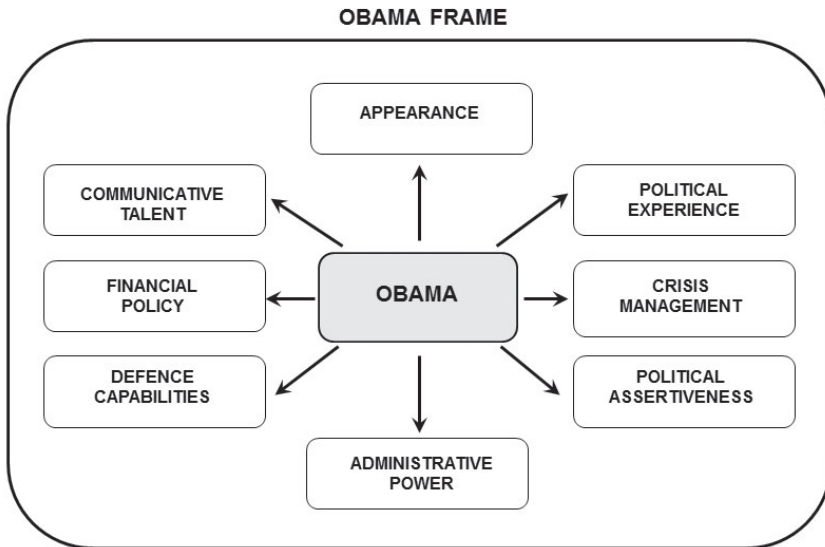
OBAMA FRAME

Figure 2. The *Obama* frame.

It is important to note that the intended frames depend on the political standpoints of the writers. *Obama is the new Hoover* was, for example, a response on the left. *Obama is the new King George* was used by the far right.

When we look at those examples in which the name *Obama* serves as a source for identifying a target name, the context shows that in all three cases the frame COMMU-NICATIVE TALENT dominates (Figure 3). It remains to be seen whether this subframe will become the standard referent of the name *Obama* when used metaphorically.
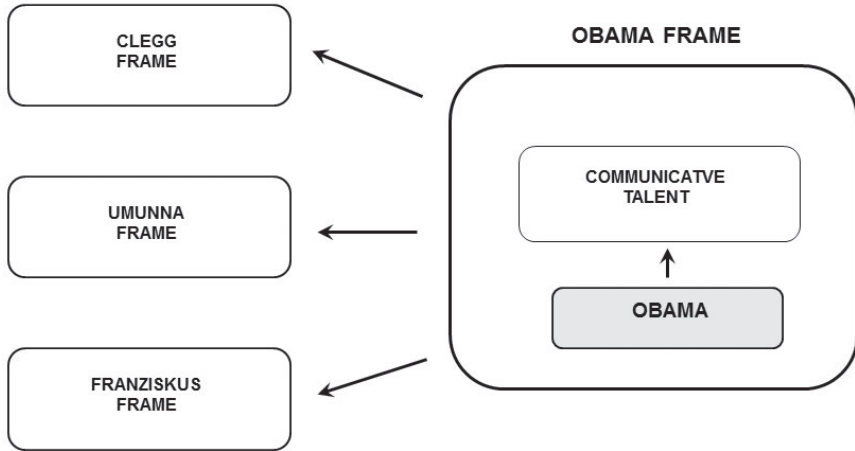

Figure 3. The subframe COMMUNICATIVE TALENT as a source for other name frames.

Concluding remarks

The sample analysis shows the need for a multi-layered approach in order to grasp the interplay between names and frames. In the context of the name *Obama*, it would, for example, be interesting to identify those characteristics of the politician which are not (yet) expressed by metaphorically used names.

Shared knowledge and socio-cultural backgrounds of the language users are crucial with regard to the identification and interpretation of the name frames. The goal of these comparisons may be to identify, promote, praise or denigrate a politician. There is, however, a growing tendency for those who are affected by such a comparison to protest against it. This can be illustrated with a quote from the British Labour politician Chuka Umunna, who is frequently compared with Barack Obama:

> It annoys me a bit. You get lazy journalists and the odd blogger who'll suggest that I fancy myself as 'Britain's Obama', and that I seek to encourage the comparison. It's never been something I've encouraged. I want people to look at me as me, not through the prism of someone else's personality.[16]

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16   http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/dont-compare-me-to-obama-is-chuka-umunna-britains-first-black-pm–6259648.html (accessed April 12, 2013).

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