Mihaela Miron-Fulea[1]

Proper Nouns and the Prior Denomination Feature

Abstract: *The goal of the present study is to demonstrate the theoretical pertinence of the concept of prior denomination feature in building an interpretation model for the semantic content of proper nouns. The author opts for a contrastive analytical approach focused on a critical examination of theory proposed by Kleiber (1994), according to which the denomination is not an essential property except for modified PNs, but not for unmodified ones as well. The immediate consequence: a non-unitary treatment of PNs, by correlating the dichotomy modified PN / unmodified PN with the dichotomy descriptive denominative meaning (truth-conditional) / denominative instructional meaning (non- truth-conditional). By contrast, the author proposes a unitary approach of the meaning of proper nouns, projected at the level of language as a collection of pre-conditions of use. Thus, the proper noun (as a linguistic system unit and, implicitly, in the absence of any discourse use) is a nominal predicate which covers, in a non-vacuous, virtual and open referential class, individual (or discrete) occurrences conceived as particular entities endowed with the same denominative feature to be called /N/, acquired by virtue of a particular naming convention. The denominative feature, far from being non-essential, imposes itself as a pre-condition of use, to the extent that any discourse actualization of the modified or unmodified proper noun, in a referential or predicative position, will refer to the original performative naming act I call you /N/. In other words, the prior denomination presupposition is integrated in the semantic content of proper nouns.*

Key words: *proper noun; prior denomination feature; descriptive meaning; instructional meaning; denominative meaning; nominal predicate; modified proper noun; unmodified proper noun; referential position; predicative position.*

In the study suggestively entitled *On the definition of proper nouns: ten years after*, Kleiber revisits the theoretical position defended in 1981, in order to submit it to a reevaluation in the light of criticisms addressed to it over time. From the very beginning, Kleiber states that

> taking into account their lesson, positive or negative, I will propose a new approach to the proper name, which, on the one hand, will preserve the semantic option and central property of denomination from the previous definition, but, on the other hand, will abandon one of the pillars that supported it, namely that proper nouns are predicates (1994: 11).

[1] Ovidius University of Constanța, Romania

BDD-A3722 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:53 UTC)

1. **The first part of the study recalls the essential advantages of the theory of the denomination predicate. Firstly, it is the possibility of a uniform treatment of modified and unmodified proper nouns, without invoking the change of the status of proper noun into that of common noun for modified nouns such as:**

(1) Ultimately, there are few Charles who are linguists.

and without making it necessary to "imagine a special device of switching from the unmodified proper noun Charles to the modified proper noun few Charles" (12). The second advantage lies in the possibility of solving "the semiotic dilemma raised by proper nouns" (12). Assuming that proper nouns don't have a meaning, since they do not describe the referent, as in the case of common nouns, then "we must, on the one hand, explain how, in spite of everything, the reference operates and, on the other hand, to endorse the idea that there are signs without a signified". If we opt for the existence of meaning, "we are faced with the difficulty of determining which is this meaning: there is a high risk of loading the proper noun with semantic features which represent mere factual features of the bearer of the name." (13)

2. **Next, Kleiber focuses on the objections brought to the theory of the denomination predicate, which he splits into three categories, according to whether they concern the option of assigning a meaning to proper nouns, the denomination feature, or the treatment of the meaning of proper nouns as a denomination predicate. Only criticism falling under the last category will be accepted and implicitly endorsed by the author, who claims: "It appears to us indeed that all criticism directed against the predicative option, unlike those directed against the denominative meaning and justified" (22).**

Kleiber shows that there is no decisive argument in favor of the theory of the semantic vacuity of proper nouns, as claimed by Noailly (1987) and Jonasson (1994), in the fact that they occupy a marginal semantic position, since "if proper nouns do not fit in the semantic network of a language, as common nouns do, it is precisely because their meaning is different from that of common nouns and that, precisely because they have a non-descriptive meaning, they also exhibit such marginality" (14). An argument in favor of the existence of a meaning of proper nouns is the fact that, in a statement such as:

(2) Paul drank Riesling.

an interlocutor who doesn't know who Paul is, who, therefore, doesn't count with the help of knowing the bearer of the name, does not consider for this reason that the form Paul is

BDD-A3722 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:53 UTC)

> semantically vacuous, and, in the same context of not knowing the referent concerned, he does not consider as semantically vacuous the definite description the man in The man drank Riesling. (15)

Kleiber specifies that a semantically non-vacuous linguistic unit represents a unit which imposes certain constraints on the type of referent denoted "constraints representing, more specifically, its meaning" (15). While accepting Noailly's (1987) view that, in example (41), the predicate drank selects a / + Human / subject, he rejects Noailly's conclusion that the proper noun Paul has no meaning, since "although the predicate contributes to the construction of interpretation, it can not be realized except within the limits strictly imposed by the meaning of the proper noun Paul". Furthermore, Jonasson's (1994) counterargument, according to which the possibility of understanding sentences containing proper nouns, far from proving that they possess a meaning, "rather indicates that the phrase Paul is identified by its phonological form and its distribution as belonging to the linguistic category commonly referred to as proper noun and for which reference to a particular entity is one of its prototypical uses" (118) is refuted by Kleiber in an argument in favor of the presence of meaning. Indeed, we can only ask ourselves - rhetorically – along with Kleiber: "But, identifying Paul as a proper name and knowing that, as a proper noun, in the actualized use, it refers to a certain type of particular entity named Paul means assigning a meaning to the proper noun, doesn't it" (16).

To the extent that there is no denying that a linguistic sign refers to something different from the sign itself, by virtue of certain conventions delimiting *a priori* its scope, we are compelled to admit that all the indications that guide us in identifying the referential category represent the meaning of the sign and that, implicitly, the act of reference is performed based on the meaning, regardless of its nature. For this reason it can not be assumed that proper nouns should be signs without a signified, as claimed by Noailly and Jonasson.

In this respect, we share Kleiber's opinion that it is not appropriate to transform proper nouns in linguistic signs without a signified,

> merely because, since the referent itself is not present in the sentence, the form Paul in our sentence, if it should refer to something different from the form itself, but not just anything, must include some indications, regardless of their nature, to guide our interpretation towards the entity that motivates its presence. (16)

Another counterargument to the semantic option is invoked by Conrad (1985) and taken over by Jonasson: if, in the context of utterance, there is just one cat, we can say:

(3) Look at the cat!

but not:

(4) Look at Tosca!

BDD-A3722 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:53 UTC)

because, while the definite description *the cat* requires that the interlocutor have only linguistic knowledge, the proper name requires him to have extra linguistic knowledge about the referent, i.e. to know that Tosca is the name of the cat in question. Therefore, "the referential usage of proper nouns does not depend on their meaning" (Jonasson 120). Kleiber's answer is that, firstly, example (4) is possible in the context imagined by Conrad, since the interlocutor, even if he does not know that *Tosca* is the name of the cat, can get to deduce it, based on pragmatic principles of relevance. Secondly, assuming that he were not be able to retrace the connection between the proper noun and the cat, this does not mean that proper nouns do not have a meaning, unlike common nouns. On the one hand, the definite description *cat* fails to recover its referent based on its meaning alone, requiring extra-linguistic knowledge. On the other hand, the proper noun *Tosca* demands linguistic knowledge, since

> we must, indeed, understand that Tosca is a proper noun and that it refers here to a referent stored in the stable memory as the Tosca and that this referent (...) is not of any type, a semantic restriction explaining why, as we have already said, an interlocutor who does not know that Conrad's brave, contextually, solitary cat is called Tosca may, however, understand that the utterance refers to it and therefore ... to look at it (17).

Furthermore, Conrad's alleged difference between extra-linguistic and linguistic knowledge is a consequence of the semantic difference responsible for the opposition proper/ common noun.

For Kleiber, the only way to demonstrate that proper nouns don't have a meaning is to show that they don't have any conditions of use. It was Jonasson's (120) aim, but the major objection, which he addressed to Kleiber, is that of having mistaken the assignment conditions for the conditions of use. Thus, Jonasson reaches the conclusion that "a proper name does not appear, therefore, in contrast to expressions such as cat or the cat, to reveal the conditions of use or ... a meaning, starting from the observation that, unlike common nouns, which apply to a certain entity, only if it possesses certain properties, the proper name is assigned to individuals, not by virtue of their properties, but in an arbitrary manner. It is clear that Jonasson compares the conditions of use of the common noun and the assignment conditions of proper nouns, which inevitably leads to an incorrect result. If we consider the assignment act, we notice that both proper nouns and common nouns are assigned arbitrarily to the extra-linguistic segment that they are to designate. The dispute between conventionalist and naturalists ended long time ago, but, on a strictly linguistic ground, no one questions the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign (cf. Saussure).

Returning to the conditions of use, we notice, along with Kleiber, that they apply to the proper noun, which "is restricted, only to a certain type of entity, an idea that we will develop, and, if it used referentially, it is necessary, moreover, that these entities have been named as such" (18).

We could say, however, that the prior denomination is not a condition that characterizes only referentially used proper nouns, but also those in a non-referential position. Even proper nouns employed as lexical units, aside from any use, contain the same condition.

The existence of conditions of use forces us to accept a meaning for proper nouns and to specify its nature, which leads Kleiber to focus his attention on the objections concerning

BDD-A3722 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:53 UTC)

the denomination feature, proposed in 1981, as meaning of proper nouns, which he separates from the predicative status.

The first disputed issue regarding the denominative meaning was that it “applies to all nouns, including common nouns: cat is x called «cat»" (Martin 143). The same opinion is shared by Kripke (55-56), for whom examples (5) and (6) are trivial:

(5) Socrates is called Socrates.
(6) Horses are called «horses».

However, Kleiber draws attention to the fact that the objection is unfounded, since, as early as 1981 and 1984, it showed that, unlike common nouns which represent metalinguistic denominations, proper nouns are conventional denominations: example (5) does not inform us about the linguistic code, but it foregrounds a property of the referent (that of being the bearer of the proper noun *Socrates*). The difference in level between the two denominations results from the fact that the entities denoted belong to two distinct types: proper nouns always denote some particular entities, common nouns denote some "*general concepts*" (cf. Kleiber). We could rather say that common nouns denote entities that are never seen as different, but as co-elements of a referential category. And this is because - as we have already seen - the distance between proper and common does not rest in the opposition particular / general: particular entities are denoted by proper nouns and these are organized into referential classes, according to the name which is assumed to have been already assigned to them.

Therefore, we incline towards the hypothesis that the difference between the type of entities denoted concerns the unique (different) or non-unique character of individual occurrences, regrouped by the name, therefore an opposition of uniqueness. The status of particular entity is fundamental, in the case of proper nouns, not being overridden in the stage of building the referential category or later when speakers actually use the proper noun, irrespective of whether it is a potential or actual proper noun. For common nouns, the status of particular comes to be acquired only by vesting the noun with the status of head of a (definite or indefinite) noun phrase, which the speaker uses in a referential position, to perform an act of unique reference. Thus it explains, once again, why "the entity denoted by a proper name can not be denoted by a common name for which it serves as an occurrence" (Kleiber, 1994:19) as a particular, it was never denoted by the common name, only by the proper noun. Therefore, the condition of prior assignment of the name, for a particular entity, is satisfied only by the proper name, not by the common name as well (or more precisely by the definite/ indefinite description whose head it is), for which the prior denomination concerns individual occurrences, by definition, non-unique or, in other words, not yet identified as particular entities. If we consider the example of Conrad's cat, Tosca, we notice that "if it is called Tosca, it is not, however, called cat, although it is a cat, unless it was named Cat, something that may happen"(20).

Another counterargument against the denominative meaning would be the observation that "the name is not sufficient for the referential act" (Martin 143). Kleiber easily rejects this criticism, simply because he has never claimed that "the denominative meaning itself would explain all the referential and interpretative phenomena of the proper noun" (143). Conversely, he integrated "explicitly the causal theory in the explanation of the referential

BDD-A3722 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:53 UTC)

act entirely performed by a proper name, and recourse to the properties of the name's bearer to account for any of the uses of the proper noun was not excluded either" (20-21). And because Jonasson (1994) considers that resorting to the causal theory to account for the referential uses of proper noun spares us the need to postulate a meaning, Kleiber replies that, under these circumstances, it would mean to decree that definite descriptions too that refer to particular entities, "because they also trigger a causal chain, no longer require recourse to meaning" (20-21), which is clearly false.

The most important argument against the denominative meaning or "the major difficulty" (Martin 141) would be represented by the fact that the denomination is not a key property. Martin's demonstration is based on the negation test: if negation of the denomination does not affect the referent, whether in the case of a common name or a proper name, on the other hand "negation of an essential property implies that, in the counterfactual worlds, what we call chairs, for example, would no longer be chairs" (Martin 141).

The examples provided by Martin are:

(7) if tables were not called "tables", they would be not less than what they are
(8) if Mary would be called Sophia or any other way, she would be not less than what she is

in contrast to:

(9) if seats didn't have back rests they would be stools, if they had arms they would be armchairs.

Kleiber noted that examples (8) and (9) are not equivalent, since they concern different types of referents: in (9), the referent is generic (chairs), in (8), the referent is particular (Maria). Therefore, "it is sufficient to oppose generic referents in order for the difference noticed not to hold anymore" (1994: 21). Example (7) would be on balance with example (10)

(10) if Marys were called Sofia, they would no longer be what they are (that is Marys).

The conclusion reached by Kleiber is that the denomination has the status of property or predicate only for the modified uses Marys / a Mary, while for unmodified proper nouns the denominative meaning doesn't have a predicative nature.

We notice that Kleiber believes that, in order to pass Martin's test, the only salvation is offered by abandoning the idea that unmodified proper nouns should have a denominative meaning, conceived as a "descriptive or truth-conditional meaning", which means that unmodified proper nouns, unlike the modified ones, are not denomination predicates.

BDD-A3722 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:53 UTC)

3. Before presenting Kleiber's opposition between the instructional denominative meaning and the descriptive denominative meaning, it is important to reflect on *the pertinence of Martin's tests*, since they are responsible for Kleiber's option to treat modified and unmodified proper nouns differently.

We notice that, indeed, Martin contrasts referents of a different nature, but we believe the opposition goes beyond the pair *general / particular*, being a distinction between the language level and the discourse level, which not even Kleiber considered consistently. Thus, negating the denomination leads to different results for common nouns in contrast to proper nouns, just as the naming act represents a general or a private convention. At the level of language, the connection between the name and the class to be designated by it is arbitrary. Therefore, individual occurrences considered, for some reason, as forming a single referential category may be denoted, theoretically, by any linguistic sign: choosing the sign does not depend on the properties of referents, it is arbitrary, but as soon as it is conventionalized, the sign acquires an immutable character. On the other hand, signs are mutable, because it is possible that the old denominative convention be substituted by another convention, which, once instituted, transforms the sign's mutability into immutability.

Example (7) is built precisely on the alternation between immutability and mutability, which offers the possibility of constructing discursively a counterfactual world where individual occurrences designated in the primary referential world by the sign *table* are conceived as occurrences undesignated yet, to which a different name is assigned. Given that we are talking about the same occurrences, regardless of the linguistic sign assigned by the initial denotation act, the relevant linguistic properties remain the same. In other words:

(11) If chairs were called stools they would still have back rests, if chairs were called armchairs they would still lack arms.

For proper nouns, however, the situation is more complex. Individual occurrences are introduced in the same referential class conventionally designated by a particular proper name, only to the extent that the condition of the existence of a particular denotation convention that binds each particular occurrence to the proper noun concerned is satisfied. The general convention arises as a result of particular conventions of the same type. The consequences are, on the one hand, that the original assignment of the proper noun for the entire referential class is in a certain way secondary or, if you want, motivated, in contrast to the assignment of the name for each particular entity forming the class. On the other hand, the denotation act is essential for proper nouns, being the factor that assigns individual entities, perceived as particular entities, to the same referential class. Therefore, if the negating the denomination doesn't lead, in the case of common nouns, to the disappearance of the class, given that it is formed based on the natural properties of the occurrences, for proper nouns, the test of negating the denomination cancels the very existence of the class, since its building principle is precisely the denomination feature shared by all of its elements, and not their intrinsic attributes. Negating the denomination of

BDD-A3722 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:53 UTC)

a common noun, as a unit of language, preserves the identity of the class, the denomination being independent of the manner in which the referential category was generated. On the other hand, the effect of negating the denomination of a proper name is the disappearance of the referential class, precisely because the denomination originates it: the class is named/ designated by the proper noun not directly but indirectly by virtue of the existence of a naming act for any of its members. The same is not true of occurrences designated by a common noun that do not require the existence of individual naming acts or, in other words, some particular denominative conventions. For proper nouns, the class is originally named / designated indirectly, through the denomination property that occurrences are assumed to have acquired, by individual assignment acts of the same name. We notice that the denominative connection has different anchoring points: for common nouns, it is conceived as applying between the noun and the class to be denoted by it, for proper nouns, it appears initially between the noun and each individual occurrence, and later on it involves the entire class denoted. But the most important aspect is that, whether it is the common nouns or the proper nouns, occurrences are virtual: at the level of the linguistic system, it is not things that are involved, but objects, i.e. things under observation. If it is true that the common noun *dog* does not bite, it is equally true that the proper name *Andrei* does not speak either. The referents are only potential, hence the virtual and open character of (or common or proper) nouns extension.

In other words, *Robert* is, in the current stage of language evolution, a proper noun not because there exists, in the real world, a specific individual (with an authentic *existential file*), to whom the label or the signifier without a signified *Robert* was assigned in order to distinguish him from all the other concrete individuals, but the individual in question could be designated by using the term *Robert*, only because that phrase is regarded as belonging to the specific lexical inventory of proper nouns, for which the language code postulates the presupposition of the existence of a prior naming act.

Any phonological string is theoretically allowed in the communication process. But, in order to refer to something other than itself, its mere presence is not sufficient, a convention to establish its reference being necessary. Circumscribing the referential field / area corresponds to the appearance of the meaning or the use conditions of linguistic signs, in the absence of which the sign could be applied to anyone or no one, which would contradict its reason d'être.

It is obvious that any particular entity can be designated by any proper name already existing in the language, or, on the contrary, a novel one, only because the particular entity is described as a nameable particular entity and because the phonological string is interpreted as a linguistic sign, categorized as a proper name, by virtue of constant correlation with some conditions of use, among which the condition of the existence of a prior denomination act is essential. What is important is that we can not assign a proper name to one entity or another, unless we treat it as an individual occurrence part of the extension of the name, because it meets the condition of prior denomination (either because it was already named as such, or thanks to the performative nature of the utterance, if it is a particular entity unnamed yet). The inventory of proper nouns of a language is subject to the same general demands as that of common nouns: the existence of a stable correlation between a phonological string and its conditions of use or, in other words, between the signifier and the signified. But, for common nouns, the necessary and sufficient conditions for a referent to belong to the extension are the presence of certain natural properties, and,

BDD-A3722 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:53 UTC)

for proper nouns, the presence of the denominative feature *to be called /N/ (x)*, acquired through a performative naming act.

Therefore, at the level of discourse, the truth conditions of the statements:

(12) This (particular) entity is called a table.
(13) This (particular) entity (private) is called Robert.

are different: in (12), the denomination is true if and only if it is true that the entity may be ascribed to the class designated by the linguistic sign *table*, because it has the property of being a *table*, in (13), the denomination is true if and only if the entity has the property of being called *Robert*, that is, if it verifies the requirement of the existence of the prior denomination *Robert*, solely responsible for ascribing it to the class designated by *Robert*.

In case (12) is a false statement, the falsity of the denomination only affects the degree of approximation of the linguistic system, since the information contained is placed at the level of language. In contrast, in (13), if the referent is not called *Robert* it means that we have wrongly considered him as having already been assigned the proper name *Robert*, therefore, as the bearer of the name. The error goes beyond the level of language, having an effect on the manner of presenting the referent, to which a feature that it may not have is assigned.

We notice that Martin's (144) claim that denomination is not an essential property for either common nouns or proper nouns doesn't hold ground: unlike common nouns, the denomination feature is essential for proper nouns, since it is the property underlying, at the level of language, the construction of the noun denotation and conditioning, at the level of discourse, the truth value of utterances (denominative or not), just as intrinsic attributes are essential for common nouns.

That such is the case is proved by statements (9) and (14), the former being taken from Martin (144)

(9) if chairs didn't have back rests, they would be stools, if they had arms, they would be armchairs.
(14) if Maria were called Sophia, she would no longer be Maria, but Sofia.

Furthermore, the denomination feature is essential, not only for modified proper nouns, as claimed by Kleiber, but also for modified ones: in the last statement, we can interpret *Maria* both as a potential proper noun, referring to some referent or another which has the feature of being the bearer of the name *Maria* (therefore it is an attributive use of the name in a referential position, see Donnellan), and as an actual proper noun, in a referential use (identifying a specified particular referent). Kleiber was probably influenced in his choice by the ambiguity created by the fragment "*what it is*" in the argument statements (15), (16) and (17), which refers either to the natural features of the referent or the denomination feature, on the one hand, and by the alternation *Maria* / *a Maria*, regarded as an indicator of the opposition actual / potential.

(15) If a Maria were called Sophia, she would no longer be what she is (namely a Maria) / she would be a Sofia.

BDD-A3722 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:53 UTC)

(16) If Maria were called Sophia, she would no longer be a Maria / she would be a Sophia.
(17) If Maria were called Sophia, she would no longer be what she is (? namely a Maria).

Strictly from the perspective of the denomination feature, *being Maria* means *being called Maria*, but as soon as you are called Maria, the name is vested with full power to designate you in all its manifestations, and hence the other interpretation for *being Maria*, which goes beyond denomination to cover your entire being, as in:

(18) Maria is Maria.

4. We have already mentioned that the main change made by Kleiber (1994) is imposed by the critical examination of Martin's tests (negating the denomination and negating the descriptive properties) and it consists in preserving the denomination predicate hypothesis only for modified proper nouns, the unmodified ones being interpreted as having an instructional denominative meaning.

In this way, Kleiber believes that he manages to save the option for postulating the existence of a meaning of proper nouns, in general, even if he is forced to abandon a unitary treatment. At the same time, he partially takes into account the objections raised to the denomination predicate. We must mention, however, that the changes made do not take away the reproach of not regarding proper nouns as lexical units, beyond any discourse actualization, either in the absence of determinants (unmodified proper nouns), or in their presence (modified proper noun). The statement that

> we can maintain the idea of a denominative meaning for canonical proper nouns represented by unmodified proper nouns, on condition that we no longer regard it as a descriptive or truth-conditional meaning, in short, on condition that we no longer consider the proper noun as a predicate. (Kleiber)

is at least ambiguous. The doubts arising out of it concern both the term *predicate*, and the opposition *lexical / discourse unit*.

The general context from which the excerpt was extracted argues for rejecting the interpretation that proper nouns as lexical items were not predicates, in the sense of not covering individual occurrences to which it applies, which would have led to the theory that the proper noun is an individual constant, vehemently rejected by Kleiber. It remains that unmodified proper nouns are not predicates, as opposed to modified ones, because they are regarded as designating a single particular entity, in an act of single definite reference and in the absence of determinants. Without taking up again the objections already raised in this respect, it should be noted that the single definite reference does not exclude the alternation

BDD-A3722 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:53 UTC)

between singular and plural reference formally marked by the grammatical opposition singular / plural, which is why we can not consider that proper nouns used to identify particular entities that they designate, based on a prior denomination, are not predicates, in the general interpretation of the term (of applying to individual occurrences they cover). The fact that proper nouns are predicates, at the level of language, is not an impediment for them to allow either a referential or a predicative use at the level of discourse, depending on the speaker's communicative intentions, as in the case of common names. Moreover, it doesn't mean that they should be denomination predicates, especially since we have already pointed out that the denomination feature *to be called /N/(x)* is not asserted, but presupposed by the proper noun. Furthermore, the denomination feature represents a pre-condition for the truth of the denominative utterances containing proper nouns. Therefore, we do not believe, like Kleiber does, that the denomination feature should not be truth-conditional: the truth value of didactic denominative utterances depends on the referent's property of being the bearer of the name, and, for all other utterances, this property is presupposed, thanks to the existence of a performative denominative utterance responsible for acquiring it.

We notice that, although Kleiber (1994) acknowledges that unmodified proper nouns, unlike modified ones, are not denomination predicates, neither the path to reaching this conclusion not the implications to be generated take into account the issues discussed above. Let us first consider the objections to the denomination predicate accepted by Kleiber. The first one is that "the solution of regarding the unmodified proper noun as an elliptical definite description of the type the x called /N/ is not iconically relevant" (23). On the one hand, because it neglects what Noailly (1987) calls "morphological specialization of prototypical proper nouns". On the other hand, because it offers a more complex structure than that of modified proper nouns, by the appearance of the iota operator of uniqueness, given that, as emphasized by Jonasson (1994), unmodified nouns are "more fundamental". The second objection, also raised by Jonasson, concerns the refusal to "accept the /N/ in I call you Paul as a proper noun, which still goes against "the immediate intuition" (cf. Jonasson). Kleiber seems to take into account only indirectly: as long as unmodified proper nouns are not denomination predicates, the status of / N / is no longer an issue, but for modified nouns, he does not abandon the idea that / N / is not a proper noun, but "the phonological or graphical string itself" (23). The third objection concerns the inadequacy of the denominative paraphrase to be called /N/(x), but not because it asserts what, in fact, the proper noun only presupposes, thus causing the groundless equivalence of two levels, distinct by definition, but because - via Jonasson (1994) and Gary Prieur (1994) - "most modified uses don't accept or marginally accept a paraphrase by the denomination predicate" (23), and "if we move on to unmodified proper nouns (...), in the Vocative or the copulative use they also represent some cases that don't support the predicate hypothesis" (24). With regard to the referential use, Kleiber noted that

> we are forced to acknowledge that the paraphrase the x called /N/ does not entirely match the intuition that we may have about the interpretation of a proper noun used referentially, even if it is still true that the proper name refers to one individual or another, since this individual is so called. (24)

BDD-A3722 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:53 UTC)

If the denominative paraphrase presents the referent only from the perspective of the property of being the bearer of the name, however, "the proper name is associated with the entity denoted as a whole, for which it is a condensed denominative expression, but a rigid one, in relation to the possible descriptive variability" (25). Therefore, the denominative paraphrase the x called /N/ does not represent the denomination itself, even if it is "a descriptive property of denomination" (25).

Starting from the premise of the existence of an instructional or procedural meaning, alongside the descriptive or truth-conditional meaning, part of the semantic content of lexical units, Kleiber postulates that, for unmodified proper nouns, the denomination feature *to be called /N/(x)* doesn't have the status of a description or property of the referent, but of "an instruction to search or find the referent that bears the name in question" (26). By analogy with indexical symbols represented by the markers, Kleiber proposes an analysis of proper nouns as "denomination symbols: they are symbols, at the same time, since they have a conventional meaning and denominative markers, since this meaning calls for finding, in the stable memory, the referent bearing this name" (27).

As far as we are concerned, we notice that the denomination feature *to be called /N/(x)* is a descriptive (denominative) property of the referent, to the extent that, as Kleiber himself states, the speaker must select, from the stable memory, the bearer of the name, i.e. the referent exhibiting the property of having already been assigned that name.

However, the denomination feature is not asserted, in the original naming act, because the statement *I call you /N/* is performative: it does not say that it is true or false that the referent is the bearer of the name, but it merely attributes the name /N/ to the referent. All further uses of the proper noun (referential or predicative) will presuppose the existence of this prior act of denomination and, therefore, in the didactic denominations *X is called /N/*, the truth of the statement will depend on meeting the condition of prior denomination.

What is constitutive for the proper name is the denomination feature *to be called /N/* occurring in the performative denomination, which lies at the origin of the causal chain holding between the name and the referent, and not the one present in didactic denominations (*the x called /N/* including) where it is asserted.

This is the reason why, in statements such as:

(19) Ion left.

the interpretation of the proper name *Ion* is not just:

(20) He is called the Ion.

but:

(21) I call you John.

where *I* refers to a discourse participant, ontologically linked to the original act of naming and not to the speaker of statement (19) or (20).

The referent of *Ion* is not designated indirectly, through the property of being called Ion, precisely because the denomination feature is presupposed, not asserted. Furthermore, any

BDD-A3722 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:53 UTC)

of the natural attributes of the bearer of the name can be introduced, through the inferences triggered for the correct interpretation of the utterances containing the proper noun, since they didn't form the denomination criterion: they are not part of the meaning of the proper noun, but of its content, being properties of the discourse referent. In other words, they do not characterize the proper noun as a lexical unit, but the state of being of one entity or another, denoted in the discourse by means of the proper noun.

If the unmodified proper name calls for finding, in the stable memory, the bearer of the name, this means that the proper name contains an existential presupposition of a particular entity, for which it is presupposed that there exists a prior denomination responsible for acquiring the status of being the bearer of the name. We notice that the definition of the denominative meaning of the proper noun put forth by Kleiber fails to cancel the descriptive character of the denomination feature, since the referent is described *a priori* as the bearer of the name, regardless of any predications conferred to it in the discourse. The interpretation of the proper noun, irrespective of its position in the utterance, will impose the identification of the initial referent, an operation performed based on its property of being the bearer of the name. Only if it is verified that there exists a performative denomination whereby the proper name was effectively assigned to a specific particular entity, can we refer to it, by using the proper noun in question, or use this name in an act of predication.

The denomination feature does not constitute a criterion to distinguish unmodified proper nouns from modified ones, as Kleiber argues. The author claims that the instructional denominative (therefore non-descriptive) meaning of the former becomes, for denominative modified proper nouns, "a descriptive denomination meaning, a transformation legitimized by the fact that the name of an individual is at the same time a property of this individual" (32). For modified metaphorical, metonymic, fractionation or exemplariness nouns, the denominative meaning justifies the introduction of a descriptive meaning, starting from the bearer of the name. Thus, the denomination feature is presupposed by any proper noun, regardless of the presence or absence of determinants, the referential or predicative position occupied in the utterance, its actual or potential nature, since it characterizes the proper noun as a unit of the linguistic system. The causal chain that links the name and its bearers is grounded on the denomination feature. Differences arise depending on the manner of conceiving the existence of the particular entities designated in the discourse [either a virtual existence (potential names) or a real existence (actual names)] or the interpretation type actualized by the proper noun.

We must ask ourselves how we could get to the interpretation of the statement *Paul drank Riesling*, in situations where we do not know the referent of *Paul*, therefore when we are not able to identify the bearer of the name (cf. the instructional denominative meaning), other than by identifying *Paul* as a referential unit presupposing the existence of an individual - whoever it may be – for whom the relevant linguistic feature is that of having already been assigned the name *Paul*. Although not known, the referent is described from the point of view of the denomination feature *to be called /N/(x)*, which is presupposed to belong to it, as a result of the original performative statement *I call you Paul*. The denomination feature is the only piece of information that we can recover from the given statement, just as, from the statement *The man drank Riesling*, in similar circumstances, we can only infer that there is a referent - whoever it may be - having the property of being a man. The denominative meaning of proper nouns is truth-conditional, since the prior

BDD-A3722 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:53 UTC)

denomination is a condition that must be satisfied by any particular entity in order to be designated by a proper noun, and it is descriptive, since the referent is previously identified as the bearer of the name. But this is not a referential description in terms of the intrinsic attributes of the particular entities, but a denominative description, achieved by means of an acquired property, through language. Nothing similar is found in the case of common nouns, where the naming act cannot have a direct impact on the referents, because they are never particularly named.

References

Conrad, B. "On the reference of Proprer Names". *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia*, 19, 1 (1985): 44-129.
Donnelan, K.S. "Reference and Definite Descriptions"**,** *Philosophical Review*, 75 (1966): 7.
Jonasson, K. *Le nom propre. Constructions et interprétations*, Paris: Duculot, 1994.
Kleiber, G. *Problèmes de référence: descriptions définies et noms propres*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1981.
- - -. "Dénomination et relations denominatives." *Langages*, 76 (1984): 77-94.
- - -. "Sur la définition des noms propres: une dizaine d'années après…" *Nom propre et nomination*. Ed. M. Noailly. Paris: Klincksieck, 1994. 11-37.
Kripke, S. *Numire şi necesitate*, Bucureşti: All Educational, 1972/1981/ 2001.
Noailly, M. "Le nom propre en francais contemporain: logique et syntaxe en désaccord imparfait", *Cahiers de grammaire*, 12 (1987): 65-78.
Martin, R. *Langage et croyance. Les <Univers de croyance> dans la théorie sémantique*, Bruxelles: Mardaga, 1987.

BDD-A3722 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:54:53 UTC)