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A dichotomy in the diachronic structure of family names

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Abstract: Usually, four categories of family names are distinguished: patronymics, names of origin, occupational names, and bynames in a very large sense. Here, there is a problem. This looks like the wastebasket! The idea of bynames, in a large sense, does not indicate a motivational category. Instead, I will propose a dichotomy, namely a major division into "relational" and "characterizing" names.
In relational names, there is a relation between the name bearer and an entity outside of that person, for instance, a family or another entity outside of this person, a place or time. This concept of relation essentially applies to the meaning of the genitive in a broad sense, namely origin, human or geographical, where two entities are related, e.g., *Robin-s, -son*.
On the other hand, we have characterization, which refers to one and the same person, where some or other property of the name bearer is named, e.g., names such as *Smith, Brown*, etc. Here, a continuum can be set up.
Keywords: anthroponymy, dichotomy, relational, characterization.

0. Introduction

In this paper, I would like to propose a dichotomy in the diachronic semantic and formal structure of family names.

The extensive book by Silvio and Andrea Brendler on European personal names in seventy-seven languages shows that, by and large, in all of Europe, the same system is used.

As a rule, *four categories* are distinguished: patronymics, names of origin, occupational names, and bynames, or nicknames in a very large sense, i.e. the wastebasket (Pitz 2007). Indeed, in vain do we look for a semantically and formal coherent classification. In any case, the idea of "byname" in a larger sense does not indicate a motivational category.

In order to avoid the "wastebasket", I will propose a dichotomy, where the two categories, each, form a uniform group of motivations with further subdivisions. I will, as usual, account for the first etymology. The so-called suffixes, prepositions and articles are in fact fossilized.

I will adduce some English, Dutch, French and German examples.

Thus, in the classification of personal names, I propose a major division into *relational* and *characterizing* names.

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In the *relational* names, there is a relation between the name bearer and an entity outside of that person, for instance: a family or another entity outside of this person, a place, or time.

This concept of relation essentially applies to the meaning of the *genitive*, namely origin, human or geographical, where two entities are related; for instance: the name *Robin-s, Robin-son,* 'son *of* Robin' (Reaney 1979).

On the other hand, we have *characterization*, which refers to one and the same person, where some property of the name bearer is named, for instance: names such as *Smith* or *Black*.

First, I will deal with relational name-giving, subsequently with characterization.

1. Relational name-giving

In *relational* name-giving, the motivation can largely be captured by the different polysemous content of the *genitive* case, or the meanings of the preposition corresponding to *of* (Goossens 1999: 24–25; 2011). Here, the name bearer has a stable relation to another entity, a person or family, a place, or a point of time. It concerns a *binary* relation, in which the name bearer is linked to an external entity, for instance: the son or the daughter linked to the father. Thus, these binary relations are not characteristics of the name bearer as such.

1.1. Names referring to a familial relation, such as "father – son" *or* "father – daughter"*, among others*

As a rule, family names referring to a familial relation belong to the well-known type "father – child", especially "father – son". Numerous are the names ending in *-son*, *Robert-son, David-son, William-son, Richard-son.* Less so, beginning with *fitz-* ('son'): *Fitz-gerald, Fitz-robert.* A genitive we find in *William-s, Robert-s,* and so on. In French: *A-Georges* 'son of Georges', *AU-Jean* 'son of Jean', *A-LA-Marie* 'daughter of Mary', hence a matronymic (Rateau, communication). In Dutch, we encounter, for example: *Saereman(s)* 'husband of Sarah'. Thus, we could speak of "human origin". In recent times, we encounter, in Dutch, the preposition *van* 'of, from', as in *Van Geert* '(son) of Gerald'.

1.2. Toponymic names referring to topographical features, or even a house name

In some cases, we encounter family names derived from names of cities: *London*, *York, Washington,* as a rule without prepositions; French *Bergerac,* or *De-Lille* ('from Lille'). Anglo-Norman used the ancient preposition *de*: *de Barton, de Asseby*, etc. Dutch often uses the preposition *van* in *Van Leuven* ('from Louvain'), *Van Brussel* ('from Brussels'). German does not use many prepositions: *van/von Wien* ('from Vienna') (Nübling and Dammel 2007: 148).

In another subclass, *topographical names* derived from a feature of the landscape are encountered. Some are based on houses, and the like. We find such topographical names as: *Field, Ford, Heath, Lake, Bridge, Green, Mill, Pitt, Orchard* etc. (McKinley

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1977: 42). In German (cf. Nübling and Dammel 2007), very frequent names are used in topographical contexts, for example: *Busch* ('forest'), *Berger* ('on the mountain'), *Zumbach* ('on the rill'), *Von-dem-driesch* ('from the meadow'). In Dutch and French, these family names are often construed with preposition, with or without definite article: *Du-Camp* ('from the field'), *De-la-vigne* ('from the vineyard'), *Des-champs* ('from the fields'). In Dutch, we encounter especially, for instance, *Van-den-berg* ('from the mountain'), *Van-de-velde* ('from the field'), and also without article: *Van-dries*.

Equally, we encounter *house names*: Dutch *Kelder-man(s)* ('from the cellar'), and French *Du-château* ('from the castle'), *Du-moulin* ('from the mill').

Foundlings (in the 18th and 19th century) were often found on the threshold of houses: Dutch *In 't Portael* ('in the porch'). Without any attestation we could never surmise that the name *Temmerman* ('carpenter') meant, in this case, 'found at the doorstep of citizen Temmerman'!

In French, we encounter prepositions plus article: *du* and *de-la – Du-pont* ('from the bridge'), *De-la-rivière* ('from the riverside'). It appears that French and neighboring West Flemish form a kind of "Sprachbund" (Pitz 2007: 222), sharing their prepositions plus article.

Finally, we encounter names related to *time*, especially with *foundlings*. A relation may originate between a baby and the month when it was found, for instance: Dutch *Januari* ('January'), *November*, *Paeschen* ('Easter'); German *Freitag* ('Friday'); French *Lundi* ('Monday'), *Juin* ('June'), *Vendémiaire* ('revolutionary month name'), and so on.

2. Characterizing name-giving

As I said before, the analysis of the two major categories of personal name-giving (namely: relational and characterizing) proves to be a significant distinction.

While the relational entities of this subclass point to the name giver as somebody who is related to another entity, person, place or time, in the second subclass, the person as such is characterized by one or another property or an activity, which is more often than not, metaphorical or metonymical.

We see a continuum of activities like professions to purely physical properties. It can be sketched as follows:

> Professions → occupations → social status and behavior → personality features → psychological properties → special physical characteristics..

Usually, these are lasting or repeated features, which are positive or negative, of a metaphorical or metonymical nature. In historical contexts, the interpretation may cause difficulties. When somebody is called *Stone*, it can refer to a mason, but that is far from sure.

Let us start with the description of occupations, which show the greatest prestige, namely professions, which are numerous and are in probably all European countries the main motive for naming (Nübling and Dammel 2007: 144). But this "prestige"

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is often a mockery, in all languages. We find offices like *Mayor, Guardian, Bishop*, in French *L'évêque*, in Dutch *De Meyer*. Further, there are denominations for servicemen like *drivers* and *clerks.* Better known are the names that indicate handicrafts such as *Fisher, Farmer, Shepherd, Taylor, Baker, Miller, Carter, Thatcher, Cook, Butcher, Smith, Mason*, etc. Metonymic denominations of the type *Stone*, probably for a mason, or *Meal* for a miller probably show a lesser appreciation. At least, I know that it is like this in my dialect, for instance: *Miel Gazet* ('Emile newspaper') for a door-to-door vendor of newspapers, which is not a highly appreciated occupation.

In the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking areas we encounter in the "Sprachbund" the fossilized definite article as the first syllable, such as Dutch *De-smet* ('the-smith') and French *Le-fèvre* ('the-smith'), but of course not the prepositions *van* and *de*, which we found for such relational names of origin, as Dutch *Van Leuven* or French *De-la-rivière*. This situation is to be expected. It is a formal indication of the dichotomy sketched in this paper: relational (occasionally with preposition) and characterizing names (occasionally only with definite article).

We will now go on with our continuum of characterizing names. We encounter all kinds of occupations or activities like *Robber*, etc. Such names are often of a pejorative kind. This frequently applies to sentential names (so-called *Satznamen* in German), which are of a verbal nature, such as the famous name *Shake-speare* ('shake the spear'), *Drink-water.* But we also find these names in the whole of Western Europe, for instance in Dutch *Breck-pot* ('break' + 'pot'), in German *Storte-becher* ('shed' + 'cup'), in French *Tu-chat* ('kills' + 'cat'), *Boi-leau* ('drink the water').

An affiliated activity is shown by so-called *delocutives*, which point to the habit of the name bearer of using the same conspicuous word or expression. In family names, which go back to centuries ago, it is difficult to find these delocutives. Yet, favorite names are the Latin ones in an ecclesiastic context, such as *Deogracias, Cristus*, and *Ergo*.

Certain habits show a social behavior, a certain characteristic, or a psychological property. Surely, such names are, as a rule, pejorative (Nübling and Dammel 2007: 145), like the famous writer's name *(Oscar) Wilde, Hauteyn* (French 'haughty'), French *Sauvage* ('wild'), Dutch *De-wilde* ('the wild'). Metaphoric denominations are animal names like *Hare, Ass, Sparrow*. Sometimes, we observe positive characteristics in names such as *Welikemt* ('well combed'), *Gay, Wise, Friend*; Dutch *De Vriend* ('the friend'); French *Le-bon* (the good), also possessive pronouns as in *Mon-ami* ('my friend'). Rarely are found [preposition + article] like Dutch *Met-de-penningen* ('with the pennies', i.e. rich), but never *van/von*, which is the preposition of relational names.

Physical properties are encountered in *Long, Short, Small, Black, Brown*; French *Lebeau* ('the handsome'), *Legros* ('the fat'); Dutch *De Langhe* ('the long'), *Decort* ('the short'). These bodily characteristics are the most conspicuous ones. They are also the most static ones.

With these we have come to the end of the continuum of names, consisting of characteristics of the person himself or herself.

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3. Conclusions

The dichotomy of the diachronic structure of family names is founded on semantic and formal criteria.

Starting from the *semantic motivation*, we have observed, in the case of *relational* name-giving, a *genitive-like* relation between the name bearer and the entity, another person, place, or time.

In the case of *characterizing* name-giving, the name bearer is represented as the person who displays a striking characteristic of himself/herself, without another entity involved. This is not seldom metaphorical or metonymical.

But young people in Flemish schools (I got it from memoirs of my students) use nearly only characterizing denominations. They seldom use relational naming. They aim at physical, psychological and behavioral features, for instance, not seldom in English *Jaws*, *the Queen*, *Bitch*, *Calamity Jane*, and so on. Also, they like to play with word-forms and sounds. Relational name-giving does not interest them.

On the *formal* side, for the *relational* name-giving we have, in English, the genitive *-s* and the affixes *-son* and *fitz-* for patronymics.

In toponymic names, we encounter in English almost no endings.

In contrast, we find in French *du* ('of the' – *Du-château* 'of the castle') and *de-la* ('of the'): *De-la-rivière* ('of the river'). Likewise, Dutch uses *van-den* in *Van-den-berg* ('of the mountain'), *van-der* in *Van-der-bruggen* ('of the bridge'), and so on. Rarely, more recent anthroponyms such as *Van Geert* ('of Gerald') are encountered.

In French and Dutch *characterizing* names, we find only the article, for instance: French *Le-beau* ('the handsome'), Dutch *De-langhe* ('the long'), and so on.

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