Where are the Limits of the Name? Some Remaining Issues with The Pragmatic Theory of Properhood[1]

Richard Coates

Abstract

The developing theory is the first radically new one since the classical dogma of the Ancient Greek grammarians (Dionysius Thrax, Aristotle) which is still in many respects the "gold standard". The issues to be addressed include: Are names maximally or minimally meaningful? What is the relation between a name's "meaning" and its "descriptive backup"? Are certain types of expressions, e.g. business "names", names or some other type of object? Where and what is the boundary between proper and non-proper expressions, what controls the observed transfers from one category to the other, and what is the theoretical status of deonymic expressions in general? I believe that these fundamental currently-discussed questions can be satisfactorily answered within the developing framework of The Pragmatic Theory of Properhood.

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I have been proposing for some years now a simple characterization of proper names (PNs), which is that a PN is any expression which, on actual occasions of use, refers without sense, and not just a member of the set of expressions which find their way into onomastica (formal name dictionaries). This approach is called *The Pragmatic Theory of Properhood* (TPTP) and it is presented in some detail in Coates (2006a, 2006b and 2009), foreshadowed in Coates (2000), and applied in a particular historical case in Coates (2011). In this approach, properhood is a mode of reference, not a structural category. Working within the established assumptions of TPTP, in this paper I want to explore answers to some difficult questions, especially about the relation between proper and common expressions: where the boundary is, if it can be determined; whether the boundary shifts and/or is permeable, the consequences of lexical transparency; and the relations between some key notions in theoretical onomastics.

Both the key semantic terms (*reference*, *sense*) may be controversial, but my viewpoint cannot be understood without distinguishing *reference* from *denotation*, and *sense* from other sorts of lexical content (as is done by Lyons 1977). I use the terms as follows:

- *reference*: The act of singling out an individual in a real, unique, spatiotemporal context; strictly speaking, only agents, i.e. beings with intentions, refer, but we may loosely say that when people refer, the expressions by means of which they do it also refer (hence the normal term *referring expression*); so *Maria* refers to a particular person called *Maria* when *Maria is over there* is spoken on an actual occasion.
- *denotation*: The state in which an expression is associated with a range of potential referents; so anyone and everyone (and even everything) with the name *Maria* is the denotation of *Maria*.
- *sense*: The network of lexical relations in which an expression participates; i.e. the set of its synonymies, hyponymies, antonymies, and so on; names do not participate in such a network; so nothing is synonymous with *Maria*; I do not reckon translation-equivalence to be an instance of synonymy.

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[1] The conference paper as delivered was titled: Some remaining issues with The Pragmatic Theory of Properhood. In the published version, I have preferred to highlight the main specific issue it addresses.

Even though sense is absent from names, there are other aspects of meaning which might be accessed to assist with the task of reference in a context of usage, including:

- etymological meanings (which are not the same as senses even when they are transparent)
- logically non-necessary expectations (as opposed to entailments)
- encyclopaedic associations (connotations)
- and of course most importantly the denotata (potential referents; often misleadingly called "referents") of the name themselves

The first three of these I call collectively *inferred* or *conveyed meanings*, and I understand these terms to mean 'meanings which are conveyed, not asserted, and which are the fruits of logically insecure reasoning'. But I do not claim that names are meaningless!

We shall need to remember at various points below that the process of becoming a name (*onymization*) can take place by one of two routes: *evolution* and *bestowal*. *Evolution* of names proceeds via the loss of sense from referring expressions during the course of, and by virtue of, repeated usage in contexts where there is one (relevant) potential referent or *denotatum*; and *bestowal* (or what Kripke 1980 calls *baptism*) is the formal act of associating a name with a referent, which normally results in the referent of the moment becoming the expression's *denotatum* or one of its *denotata*. Either process results by definition in the *abrogation or cancellation of the sense* of the expression in question, if it had one; the first may be (or may appear) gradual, the second is instantaneous.

Certain interesting propositions follow from, or are at least encouraged by, the characterization of properhood as 'senseless referring', and I want to pursue some of them in this paper. Most have to do with the boundary between names and non-names. I do not claim all the ideas as original, but they are all of particular interest in the light of TPTP, which was conceived in response to a perceived difficulty with establishing this boundary (Coates 2000). They can all easily be accommodated within it, provide a foundation for it, or be justified by it.

1. All referring expressions tend to become proper

That is, they tend to lose sense, i.e. they tend to be used in a way in which any sense their component words have is not accessed. There are clear cognitive advantages in using an expression as a PN (i.e. monoreferentially in context, without accessing sense and thereby increasing processing time), so the evolutionary bias lies in the direction of expressions becoming proper, i.e. losing sense. Thus the default interpretation of any linguistic string is a proper name (an idea which I have called The Onymic Reference Default Principle). What this amounts to in practice is that the semantics of lexical content is called upon as a guide to the identification of the referent only when no appropriate denotatum (potential referent) is evident; and of course many names have no such content anyway. It is interesting in this respect that preschool children interpret linguistic strings by default as proper names (Hall 1996; and cf. Hall 2009). Children thus make a related default assumption that any expression correlated with one and the same individual across contexts is a proper name.

2. Sense may be bypassed in monodenotational common expressions, i.e. they tend to become proper (or are equivocally/variably proper)

Certain linguistically articulated definite expressions are (as a matter of fact, but not necessarily) only ever used to refer to one and the same individual, even though they are constructed of general vocabulary using general grammar, and therefore might in principle have an unlimited number of referents. They are monoreferential when used in any context, and the referent is the same in any context, and they are therefore *de facto* also

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monodenotational. They are unambiguous, apart from a subset of them which are different in a way I shall mention later when considering the relevance of *prototypicality*. Examples of such expressions include: *The North Star*, *The Dead Sea*, *The United Kingdom*, *The Houses of Parliament*, *The World Wide Web*, *The Body Shop*. These definite expressions by definition have fewer denotata (just one each) than a typical proprial lemma[2] like *Joanna* or *Freiburg*, the existence of which demonstrates the trivial fact that proper names need not be monodenotational.

It is easy to confuse monodenotationality with properhood, and indeed there is a tendency for expressions with only one denotatum to function like or as proper names, but monodenotationality and properhood are not the same concept. If an expression is monodenotational, i.e. if it has the same referent in all contexts of use, it can be in that condition for purely contingent (non-necessary) reasons. At some point in 1914, on one interpretation,[3] *the passenger pigeon* could be taken to denote the single surviving member of this bird species *(Ectopistes migratorius)*, but that does not make the expression a name. The name of this bird was actually *Martha* (Schorger 1955). Nevertheless, a monodenotational expression can (not must) work in exactly the same way that the name of an identifiable individual person, place or thing works. Definite descriptions with just one denotatum may come to be used as or like names under certain circumstances. One is when the description has been onymized by a deliberate act as the sole or principal or official name or *kyrionym*,[4] i.e. a bestowal (*The National Lottery*), or perhaps by an internal cognitive decision made by an influential first user (*The Second Severn Crossing* [a bridge in the UK]). A second is when one particular individual achieves salience through repeated mention in such a way that the expression comes to be taken by default and prototypically as referring to it, and hence to denote it (*The North Sea*, *The Outer Banks*, *(Nguyễn) Ái Quốc* 'the patriot', adopted pseudonym of Nguyễn Sinh Cung, i.e. Hồ Chí Minh). In practice, the second may sometimes be difficult to distinguish from the first. A third is when a fully articulated descriptive expression has no competitor and the denotatum is unique (*The Equator*, *The Deep South*) or none at any one time (*The President of Slovakia*). A fourth is when a soubriquet or epithet is coined as a descriptor intended to be understood as uniquely characterizing a single denotatum (*The Man with the Golden Trumpet* [the stage soubriquet of the late trumpeter Eddie Calvert], *The Jewel in the Crown* [i.e. India under the British Raj]). It seems to me that some expressions of this fourth type may from time to time be used without a (full) appeal to lexical sense, as with, for me, *The Queen of Soul* for Aretha Franklin, or *The Green Desert of Wales* for a district in Powys, but for my readers that can be no more than a subjective claim, and it can be passed over here if they are not convinced.

Expressions such as *The Dead Sea* and *The United Kingdom* display, or appear to display, a particularly intimate relationship between the denotatum and the properties which are verbally expressed. Instead of the denotatum *exemplifying* a certain constellation of properties, as typical common (non-proper) definite referring expressions do, the denotatum *is* that constellation of properties, i.e. it is understood as if it exhaustively embodied them. But when that is so, there is no *need* to call on or call up those properties, amounting to the sense of the expression, to achieve reference, even though one might do so in principle. Therefore, when no such call is made, i.e. where there is no intention to appeal to sense, it literally is a name; that means that one accesses the referent directly rather than through the

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[2] For the term and concept, see Van Langendonck (2007: *passim*).

[3] It might of course also have referred generically, as in *The passenger pigeon had a red breast*, but that is not relevant here.

[4] This term is coined to be analogous to *kyriolex*, invented and fully explained by Householder (1983). I intend it to mean 'the subjectively-perceived real proper name for an individual (person or thing)'. I acknowledge that *real* needs further explanation –but not here.

sense of the expression. I can tell through introspection that in referring to The United Kingdom as a place, using those words, I generally *assert* or *intend to convey* nothing about whether it is indeed united. Whether monodenotational expressions are names or not is a cognitive or psycholinguistic matter: if the speaker *intends* to refer in a mediated fashion using the sense of the words, it is not a name; if s/he doesn't, it is.[5] *There is no escaping the psycholinguistic, even neurolinguistic, dimension to the distinction between names and non-names: it hinges on the user's intention to access sense versus the lack of such an intention.*

It is possible to imagine the senses of such expressions which have become (like) names being reactivated (repotentiated) for non-onymic usage. *The dead sea in the Caribbean where there was massive oil pollution. Iceland used to be a dependency of the united kingdom [i.e. of Denmark and Norway]. The world-wide web of lies which exists about UFOs.* Such usages will initially always cause surprise in the context of their utterance.

There is much of interest that might be said about the "names" of works of art, businesses, "cratylic" charactonyms in literature (Barton 1990), and soubriquets in general. There is no space to explore it here, but many charactonyms illustrate what we might call The Etymological Onomastic Turn. Such "names" may be understood with their etymological and arguably[6] semantic value remaining available whenever (or at least the first time) they are used to refer: take for example the names famous in English literature of Ancient *Pistol*, Mrs *Malaprop*, Becky *Sharp*, Gabriel *Oak*, Titus *Groan*, and so on. The point of names in the "cratylic" category is precisely to suspend or subvert the general separation of a name from the sense of its component parts; that is what any semantic literary naming actually consists of: the repotentiana or resemanticization of etymology.[7]

3. Monodenotationality of referring expressions may be absolute or par excellence

The point of this section is to develop more clearly an issue raised in section 2.
Absolutely monodenotational expressions include examples just introduced in section 2, e.g. *The North Star*, *The Dead Sea*, *The United Kingdom*, *The Houses of Parliament*, *The World Wide Web*. These are absolute as a matter of fact, but not necessarily so – there could be other dead seas or united kingdoms, as we have seen, but they are currently absolutely monodenotational as names, as far as I know. That could change.

Others, those in the second category mentioned in section 2, do something similar (i.e. achieve *de facto* a default-like monodenotationality), but they do it *par excellence* or prototypically, i.e. amid the acknowledged existence of other denotata that might in principle be referred to using the same expression. Let us call these *protodenotational*. They include: *The Lord* (as it were *par excellence*) – there have been and are other lords; *The Blessed Virgin* –Santa Margarita di Castello might be referred to as such, being blessed and a virgin; *The United States*, despite other historical entities contemporarily titled *the united states* such as Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela; *The Outer Banks*; *The White House/La Casa Rosada* which clearly need not be presidential residences; the epithet *The Dear Leader* need not be Kim Jong-Il; the epithet *She Who Must Be Obeyed* need not be Margaret Thatcher; and so on.

Either category – absolute monodenotationals or protodenotationals – might operate as names; it is probably impossible to make a rigid distinction between the two because in many cases there is likely to be variation in their status due to the life-experiences of the relevant language users, because that variation places restrictions on the denotata of expressions in their mental lexicon/onomasticon.

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[5] The same might be argued from the hearer's perspective as well as the speaker's.
[6] To be argued on another occasion.
[7] There are broadly three types of literary naming: *arbitrary* (not really a special type at all), *cultural* and *semantic*.

Of course, definite descriptions, which is what the above expressions are, are not of themselves names, even if monoreferential and even if monodenotational. Monoreferentiality is not a sufficient condition for properhood. In *Ask the boy with the tray*, assuming normal usage, correct identification of the individual concerned depends on decoding the sense of the words and the grammar of the expression. Such expressions may evolve into, or be bestowed as, names, as with *The Man with the Golden Trumpet*. I would argue that monodenotationality is also not a sufficient condition for properhood; the extra condition required involves the neural bypassing of a sense that might in principle be available (Coates 2005).

4. Sense may be bypassed by salience through institutionalized contextual monoreferentiality

This is essentially what happens when referring expressions evolve into true proper names. It may often happen with place-names; English *Newnham* has evolved from an Old English expression meaning 'at the new estate'. At some point, clearly, that expression must have become deprived of its sense, since the name can now be employed without its etymology (its previous sense) being available to an ordinary user of English without philological training. That is, on many occasions of use the expression must have referred to a single contextually salient denotatum, and accordingly that denotatum came to be accessed directly when the expression was used, rather than identified through interpretation of the words making it up.

5. Names do have meaning even though they are sense-free

The general meaning of any name is the bond it establishes with its referent, without the help of lexical sense, on a particular occasion of usage. It may generalize through repeated usage to have a core meaning, which is: any denotational, i.e. permanent and rigid, bond which has been established with its referent(s).

6. The relation between an individual, its essence, and its name

Some cultures conceptualize rigid designation (as Kripke 1980 calls it) differently: the name is not simply in a permanent bond with the denotatum, but is appropriate to the denotatum in modally interesting ways. A person's so-called "everyday name" in certain Australian languages describes a characteristic; that is, its etymology lives, creating a by-name[8] permanently associated with bearer by bestowal. A bestowed name may express a wish for appropriateness/semanticity, or a socio-religious commitment: for Muslims the Arabic '*Abd al-Rahman* 'servant of The Merciful'; the sacred name in Australian languages which expresses some aspect of a totem (*Jarriyi*, the name of a Yidiny user, < *jarri-n* 'disappear', "typically used to refer to the totemic rainbow sinking down out of the sky" [Dixon 1980: 27], which expresses an essential connection with the community's totem, i.e. its use appears to permit an entailment of a particular group-membership). Otherwise, naming may embody an ontological claim; the name merges with the denotatum, is the denotatum, such that it may not be used of another person alive at the same time; there are communities in which there could not be two individuals with the name 'possessor of a damaged foot' even if there were two people with a damaged foot. Such examples may appear to undermine my basic claim that names are senseless and/or that their relationship to their category of denotatum is not a logically necessary one. But they work like familiar nicknames: if someone is called by the

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[8] In English onomastic usage, the term *by-name* means 'an expression which is descriptively true of the bearer which is or can be then used as (if it were) a name', i.e. its sense is subverted in actual usage, e.g. if a person who is actually John's son comes to be called *Johnson*. A user of the name does not necessarily, in referring to him by this name on a particular occasion, intend to call to mind the fact that he is John's son: the expression may simply serve as an identifier.

by-name *Curly* rather than by their more official bestowed name, I cannot imagine that the sense of the etymon is accessed whenever the name is spoken, nor that referential usage of the name necessarily displays irony if Curly loses his hair. On the other hand, sacred names do pose a problem; it is as though a person called *Christian* was necessarily a Christian. There may be cultures in which such necessities exist, though as cultural rather than logical necessities.[9]

We have seen that uniquely-denoting expressions may work like names (see above). Equation or conflation of an individual and certain of the etymologically transparent properties of its name allows room for the metaphysical idea that name is part of an individual's essence. The most common Western academic view is that a personal name, for example, is detachable from its bearer (though people may behave as if that were not true), but many cultures view the link between a name and its denotatum as significant and non-arbitrary.

7. The relation between reference, unique denotation, and namehood

As we have seen, any meaningful expression which as a matter of fact has, or comes to have, or is taken to have, only one denotatum is pragmatically unambiguous and it can/may therefore be processed as a name (i.e. have its sense bypassed during reference); so for example *The Dead Sea* and *The Rocky Mountains*. A user of these names does not assert that the sea in question is dead, or that the mountains in question are rocky, though etymological understanding might give a listener who was previously ignorant of these places some idea of what they are truly like, and more clearly so in the case of *The Rocky Mountains*. It is not fully clear what might be legitimately inferred about the deadness of The Dead Sea, since there is no contemporary linguistically-encoded connection between death or deadness and salt.

Names (especially uniquely denoting ones) may acquire sense by losing unique reference through a trope, in which case they are no longer names but common nouns and can appear in indefinite expressions (*a bikini*, *a pair of Bermudas*, *hot Jupiters*, *soles occidere et reddere possunt* 'suns may set and return'). We might identify two tropes of referential expansion, hence denotational expansion:

(i) something denotationally unique is no longer so through discovery or different understanding (*sun*, *moon*, *Jupiter* examples). The result is that something namelike becomes a common noun.[10]
(ii) the indefinite article (in those languages which have one) + name means 'thing having a well-known (but not determinate) property of an individual named *X*': *we're not all Mother Teresa(s)*, *another Chernobyl*, *a new Jerusalem*. The result is that a name becomes a common noun when the user no longer experiences the metaphor as a trope, i.e. the metaphoric source is no longer accessed to ground the expression semantically in its etymological application.

8. Transparency, etymology and categoriality: issues arising from the question of transparent names

TPTP specifies that onymically-referring expressions have no sense, from which it follows that if one accesses the apparent meaning of transparent names one must be employing some other mechanism. I have suggested in earlier papers, and in an undeveloped way also in this one, that the mechanism involves accessing etymology, not sense. The etymology of a name

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[9] Though we are free to wonder whether even that distinction is culture-bound.

[10] Arguably this process is not properly viewed as a trope, but as some other kind of process.

may be transparent or recoverable, and therefore learnt. Etymology is fundamentally only recoverable through specialized knowledge to which language users have differential access. But etymology is not sense. Etymology can be manipulated alongside sense, but the cognitive mechanisms involved are different. A favourite example of the writer's to support this possibly counterintuitive view is *Peak's Tunnel*, in Grimsby, England, which was a bridge, not a tunnel. Its transparent generic cannot not lead to a correct identification of the referent; only real-world knowledge of an unpredictable denotational link can do that. We move immediately to the inclusive question of whether the category of a name-bearer can be deduced from the name itself. Metonymy and other sorts of often quite arbitrary appropriation stand in the way of such inferences. *Newcastle* is not a castle (or new); *The 1910 Fruitgum Company* was a band not a business. *Fatboy Slim*, the pseudonym of a British DJ, leads to a contradiction and is therefore incapable of referring successfully at all if its referentiality is sense-dependent.

Of course, despite *Peak's Tunnel*, it is quite typical for lexically- and grammatically-articulated names to express the category of their referent/denotatum through some generic term which forms part of the name: *Hudson Bay*, *The North Sea*, *The Gobi Desert*, *The Great Wall of China*, *The Book of Mormon*, *The Body Shop*. These name respectively a bay, a sea, a desert, a wall, and so on. But that does not allow us to believe that category can be inferred in a logically rigorous way, i.e. by entailment, from the name. A merely probabilistic assessment by analogy with known cases can be made, and the inferences made may turn out to be wrong. *The Great Wall of China* is a wall: everybody knows that. But *The Great Wall of India*? A nickname for the Indian cricketer Rahul Dravid. This can be understood as an extended, metaphorical usage of the Chinese *great wall*. But what can we say about *The Great Wall of Russia*? This is a Chinese restaurant in New York City. *Great Wall* by itself was (so far as I know, except by ellipsis for the Chinese entity) only the name of a well-known racehorse who was at his best in 1970.

To repeat, the only defensible position appears to me to be that one can, but need not, accesses the *etymology* of the expression, and that neither the supposed sense nor the etymology is necessarily of any decisive help at all with classification or categorization of the thing named (*pace* Van Langendonck). The case of the New York restaurant is a pure case of naming which does not allow logically secure assumptions about category. It follows from that that the relation of names to naming categories is at best fuzzy (even ignoring cases involving metaphor and analogical extension generally), and that the study of various sorts of names (the various -*onymy*s) is a matter of name-instances rather than of name-types. Proprial lemmas cannot be assigned with logical security to **classes** of entities. I develop this point in a paper elsewhere in these *Proceedings* (Coates 2012).

9. Transparency and encyclopaedic status: two test cases

a)   *I flew to Barcelona > I flew to {a city, the capital of Catalonia}*
b)   *Richard bought me a present. > A male person bought me a present*

Interpretation of this also depends on our encyclopaedic knowledge, not on an entailment from the linguistic categorization of *Richard* as a name for male persons, but on a deduction from a contingent truth about the way *Richard* is applied, with a variable level of probability (currently a high probability).

We should conclude that *Barcelona* is not a city-name (*qua* type or proprial lemma), but the (individual) name of a city. *Richard* is not a male given name, but the name of individuals, prototypically male humans. They are not precluded from being the names of other things, and if knowledge of the source of the commemoration disappears (the original denotational range of *Richard*), they will simply be the names of other things.

10. Are names maximally or minimally meaningful or informative?

This question is not usually appropriately phrased, and it cannot be answered as it stands. A name identifies a bearer which may or may not be unique. If the bearer is unique, use of the name carries with it, in principle, but subject to the user's knowledge, all the encyclopaedic information available about that individual. If the bearer is not unique, the name is polydenotational. Names lack all sense, but as we have seen they may carry a transparent or otherwise learnable etymology, and thereby suggest (not entail) category membership through prototypy or sheer force of numbers (or in the limiting case exceptionlessness). Names may carry a great deal of encyclopaedic information and they may connote a great deal. To the extent that they efficiently promote successful reference in context, they are maximally informative. To the extent that they fail to mean through systematic lexical relations (senses), they are uninformative. The answer to 10 as phrased is therefore: "Both".

11. Summing up

We have explored some consequences of a particular view (TPTP) of the relation between names, their referents and denotata, the amount of meaning which is inherent in them, and their capacities to mean or to convey meaning of different kinds.

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Richard Coates
University of the West of England
Bristol
United Kingdom
richard.coates@uwe.ac.uk