

A Theory of Name

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DOI: 10.2436/15.8040.01.18

Abstract

Onomastics - the science of proper names - holds out the possibility that we can get to the bottom of names and naming. However, what we have is 'onomastic sciences' rather than a science or theory of name. Part of the reason for this plurality without connection is the requirement of modern science and academia for specialisation (MacIntyre 2009). This paper argues that without addressing this structural problem of producing knowledge we will not be in an adequate position to situate the variety of work on names and naming in fields such as philosophy, social sciences, linguistics, and anthropology. Is there a scientific method common to these areas? This seems unlikely, and thus onomastics exists as an umbrella term for incommensurable approaches and outcomes. What is the aim of onomastics? Is it to measure 'names' in some way? That seems unlikely. Does it offer predictions on names and naming? Again, this seems unlikely. What we have therefore is descriptive discourse, which, I will argue, would benefit from an underpinning such as a theory of name could provide.

Having established this context, the paper has three elements: 1. it will suggest that personal names and proper nouns are not part of the same discursive field regarding reference, (as philosophy and linguistics largely assume, e.g. Kripke on rigid designators [Kripke, 1980] and the subsequent debate); 2. Personal names are 'something and nothing', always caught up in human signifying practices, and yet semantically empty (Coates, 2009, 2006a and 2006b); they mean and don't mean, they intend and evade intention: they are, in essence, the emblem of our immersion into self, identity, and our relationship with others and the world. This makes a theory of name crucial to underwriting the project of onomastics, and will have significant consequences for related areas; 3. onomastics presupposes the boundedness and comprehension of names and naming. There remains a possibility, especially in the light of (2), that the use, production and meaning of personal names will always outrun any attempt to capture it via scientific methods, whichever methods are chosen. A look at how literary texts and how culture experiment with name might be instructive, e.g. Thomas Pynchon's 'V'; narratives with nameless narrators; celebrities; factual names in fiction. This would open onomastics itself up to an experimental engagement with names and naming as part of its ongoing project

Introduction

Proper names appear in greatly diverse situations and attract attention from widely diverse disciplines. However, there is no general agreement across or within disciplines as to how to conceptualise 'proper names'. The question addressed in this paper is whether there is 'a theory of name' which could account for the variety of uses of proper names, and which would satisfy different disciplinary requirements. I will mainly be talking about personal names in this presentation, initially to simplify the discussion, but also for reasons to do with conceptualisation of 'proper names' which I will touch on at the end of the paper.

Benefits of a theory of name

Amongst the possible benefits of a theory of name we might list the following:

1. It would give a shared understanding across disciplines of the way language works, and hence the relationship between language and world. Contemporary philosophical discussions of the nature of language often focus on problems around proper names.¹

¹ Philosophers of language often take their cue from Frege's puzzle over proper names at the end of the nineteenth century (see for example Soames, 2010).

2. It would help understand the way the brain organises conceptual knowledge, which in turn could securely underpin cognitive and neuropsychological research.² A robust theoretical underpinning would therefore help research and treatment of the condition *anomia*, a difficulty in retrieving names.
3. It would give better understanding of social relationships and the sense of individual identity. Social constructions of identity are dependent upon names and naming.
4. If successful, it would provide a model for working across disciplines.

Examples and Puzzles

It is worth reminding ourselves of just how diverse are the situations and problems associated with names:

Everyday usage: ‘Can Andrew from Mothercare come to reception please?’

Philosophy: ‘That the name “Kepler” designates something is just as much a presupposition for the assertion

Kepler died in misery

as for the contrary assertion’ (Frege, 1892).

Religion: the Jewish Festival of Purim partly consists in blotting out the name of ‘Haman’ when it is read out. ‘Haman’ is an arch-enemy of the Jewish people. The name itself may be inscribed on a gragger (a type of rattle) or written on the soles of shoes and then stamped on, or written on two blocks of stone which are then banged together until the name is erased.

Personal identity/phenomenological view: ‘At the University it is my task to impersonate “Joyce Carol Oates”’, writes Joyce Carol Oates. (Messud, 2011: 11)

Any theory of name has to account for all of these uses and problems, and many others.³

Fundamental Approaches

Just as there are many scenarios in which personal names can occur, there are different disciplinary attempts to capture and explain these usages. These ‘fundamental approaches’ putatively offer fundamental ways of thinking of ‘a theory of name’ which in themselves would appear to offer some fundamental way of considering what proper names are. If we could find a fundamental approach with a universally agreed theory we would indeed have our ‘theory of name’. A breakdown of the approaches might look something like this:

² ‘Questions about the organization of conceptual knowledge in the human brain can be addressed by studying patients with category-specific semantic deficits’ (Caramazza and Mahon, 2003).

³ Examples from other areas might be the way legal systems rule on proper names and the cultural transmission of proper name instances. In relation to the former, in 1982 Sweden brought in a law requiring approval of all names for children. Many have objected to this and given their children illegal names, the most famous of which is ‘Brfxxccxxmnpccclllmmnprxvclmncckssqlbb11116’, pronounced ‘albin’ (reported for example in “Nonsense” name given the thumbs down’, *The Toronto Star*, 30/5/1996). Regarding cultural transmission, ‘I am Spartacus’ has been appropriated in a number of interesting ways, including ‘I’m Harry’ (British soldiers in Iraq, 2007) and the Twitter campaign in support of the convicted Paul Chambers using the hashtag #iamspartacus (Collins 2010). For sociological approaches to names and naming see *The Language of Names* (Kaplan and Bernays 1997) and Chapter 6 of *Freakonomics* (Levitt and Dubner 2005).

1. **Language:** linguistics; semiotics; semantics; communication.
2. **Brain:** neuropsychology; cognitive psychology.
3. **Philosophy:** philosophy of language: reference; semantics; phenomenology.
4. **Anthropology/ethnology:** social and cultural systems.

Could any of these provide the master theory? Yet approaches multiply within each of these approaches, often offering mutually exclusive ideas about what proper names are, or how they function, or what they mean, or if they mean at all. Added to this is an endemic difficulty in relating discussion of what is ostensibly the same topic between the major disciplinary fields. As Jerome Kagan says: ‘The critical point is that the vocabulary biologists use to describe the brain’s properties does not, at least at present, correspond closely in meaning to the vocabularies used by social scientists and humanists’ (2009: 11).

There is undoubtedly a tendency to regard science as the master domain, but there are problems if we adopt this for something like a component of language. For instance, within neuropsychology, a proper name is sometimes regarded as a linguistic item, of the same order as nouns, and sometimes as a conceptual category in the same way that ‘animate’ and ‘tool’ are seen as special cognitive categories, or there is an undifferentiated mixture of the two.⁴

Phenomenological or subjective experience of names is hardly regarded at all by science. I suggest that we need to view the problem holistically, attempting a theory which can address the concerns of these disciplines and subdisciplines, as well as accounting for all usages. It would also need to take into account the different vocabularies. Is this possible?

Approaches: Prime Candidate

If proper names are in essence linguistic items of some description, a prime candidate for offering a theory of name is the discipline ‘philosophy of language’. Proper names are a topic of considerable debate in this field because they appear to be purely referring expressions, that is, without semantic content, and therefore not like the majority of words in language: I cannot look up the meaning of ‘Andrew’ in the phrase ‘Andrew from Mothercare’ in the dictionary, for instance. Richard Coates suggests that despite certain differences, there *is* general agreement: ‘There is still no single settled understanding of what a proper name ... is, although the general lines of a solution have long been known’ (Coates, 2009). However, such an overview might seem rather optimistic when compared with the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*’s entry for ‘Names’: ‘Proper names are familiar expressions of natural language. Their semantics remains a contested subject in the philosophy of language, with those who believe a descriptive element belongs in their meaning ... ranged against supporters of the more austere Millian view’ (2009), in which a proper name simply points to a referent. If any meaning is to be assigned, it will reside in the referent, not the proper name. However, I will persist with Coates, since he offers a clear view on proper names and operates from a belief that this is largely an agreed-upon perspective, and also because he makes links between his own work on proper names and research done in neuropsychology on proper names. Thus looking at Coates here provides an opportunity to work through an instance of interdisciplinarity within proper name research.

⁴ Caramazza conceives of proper names as a category, e.g. research into ‘category-specific semantic deficits’ [2003], looking at ‘animate/inanimate’, and Semenza & Zettin also see them as ‘a distinction made in the brain’ but possibly with a philosophical/linguistic base when proper name anomia is viewed as a ‘category specific aphasic disturbance’ which ‘indirectly confirm[s] the role of proper names as pure referring expressions’ (1989: 678).

According to Coates in a recent paper (2009)

- (1) Names are words for individuals (singletons of any kind).
- (2) Names have no meaning.
- (3) Names are to be classified as either proper or common.

Coates accepts these three features of names, with some caveats which he explains in that essay. I will come back to the direction of those caveats, but for now let us accept that philosophy of language provides the fundamental approach which might explain all instances and uses of proper names, and that the main accepted ideas of this approach are as Coates describes them here. An example of this majority theory being accepted by another discipline is in the work of the neuropsychologist Carlo Semenza. His essay 'The Neuropsychology of Proper Names' appears in the same issue of the journal *Mind and Language* that Coates's essay appears, so this seems promising (Issue 4, 2009).

Semenza researches 'proper name anomia', a condition in which people have problems in generating or recalling proper names. Coates refers to the work done by Semenza, suggesting that Semenza's neuropsychological findings provide a possible neurological basis for his own arguments, and Semenza, although not referring to Coates, says that it is philosophy and linguistics which underpin his work: 'Although driven by the observation of clinical cases, this empirical effort has been guided, from the very beginning, by essentially theoretical notions coming from philosophy and linguistics, rather than by notions stemming from the realm of psychology', and Semenza accordingly accepts the Millian view, as does Coates.

However, I think that the main assumption of the theory of language in relation to proper names here in both Coates and Semenza is insufficient, and that a different set of assumptions would satisfy the conditions of their work and perhaps provide us with a more adequate 'theory of name'.

Semenza's Neurolinguistic Model

The model that Semenza provides for proper name processing is shown in Figure 1.

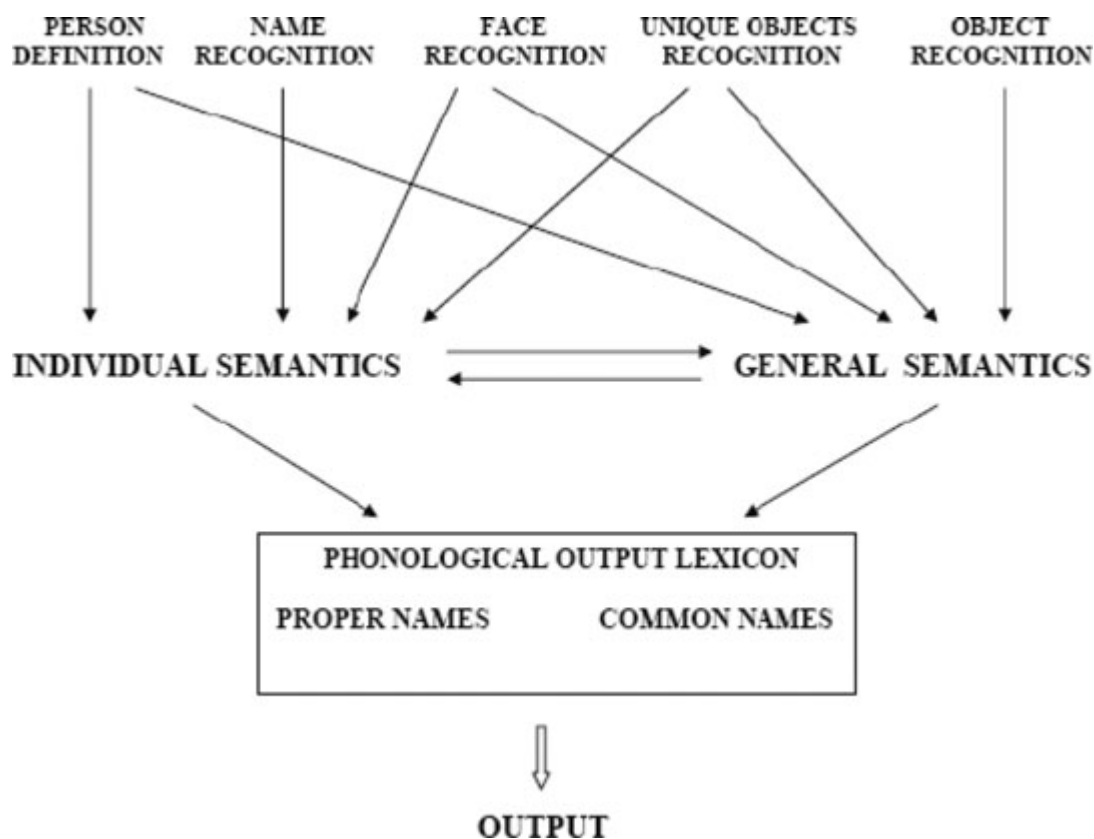


Figure 1. An information processing model for proper name production and understanding (Semenza, 2009, fig. 1).

So, why might this need revising? On my understanding of the dominant model of reference in philosophy in relation to proper names, that is, the Millian-Kripkean view, this is not a compatible model, since the underlying presumption presented here is a *semantics-based* framing of information processing. I do not see that this could account for a Millian view of proper names since in the strictly Millian view – Coates's feature number two for names – 'names have no meaning'.⁵ A processing model based on a Millian-Kripkean view of proper names would need to show how proper names could be generated without semantic processing taking place. Is it possible to test for somebody saying a name without understanding it in this model? If a person says the name, how do we know which process it has gone through? It would need to look something more like Figure 2 perhaps.

⁵ This is also the main thrust of the more modern version that descends from Saul Kripke in the 1970s and 1980s.

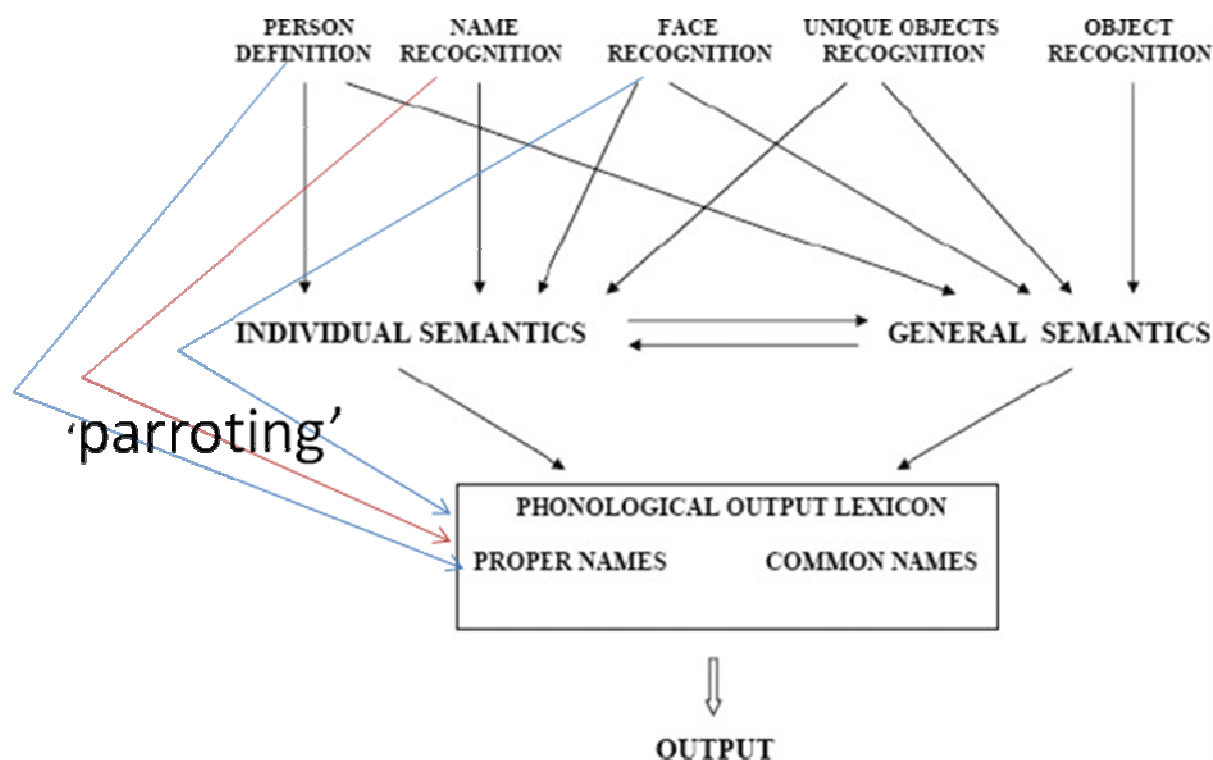


Figure 2. Revised version of ‘An information processing model for proper name production and understanding’, incorporating idea of semantically empty proper name (Semenza, 2009, fig. 1).

The additional arrows here indicate the processing that would have to occur within Semenza’s model if names are to be outputted after recognition without semantic ‘work’, that is, such processing would have to bypass the semantic system completely. I’ve called this ‘parrotting’. If a person is producing, or repeating, a string of phonemes which to that person has no semantic content, then that person is surely ‘parrotting’.

Are Semenza and Coates talking about different things, or the same thing without really taking into account the view from the other discipline? ‘Direct reference’, the Mill-Kripke view that names have no meaning and the view to which both Semenza and Coates ostensibly subscribe, entails the manner in which a proper name refers. If it is ‘the proper name’ that refers, does this mean it is a theory which does not posit a referrer or agent, i.e., it argues that the proper name intrinsically refers (one of its properties), and that this is agent independent? In that sense, it treats a proper name as part of an abstract linguistic system impervious to human agency.

What this suggests to me is that proper names, more specifically personal names, rather than being pure referring expressions and thus semantically empty, are held in a neural architecture which assigns semantic significance. But where, and at what level? Interestingly, Semenza cites Miceli’s work, another neuropsychologist, but doesn’t seem to take his theoretical point about conceptualisation into account for his own acceptance of the Millian view, for Miceli states: ‘proper names must be considered as a semantic category’ (2000).

If that is the case, if for neuropsychology ‘proper names’ are to be considered a semantic category, that seems to refer us back to philosophy of language but with a non-Millian understanding.⁶ It is also the case that some information-processing models of the brain like to put in a level termed ‘conceptual preparation’ prior to further processing (Levelt et al, 1999). We should also add in ‘consciousness’, ‘the desire to name’, something akin perhaps to neuroscience’s and cognitive psychology’s prevalent use of the term ‘central executive’. This would help us account for phenomenological aspects of personal names, including emotional components.⁷ A revised model incorporating these features would look something like figure 3.

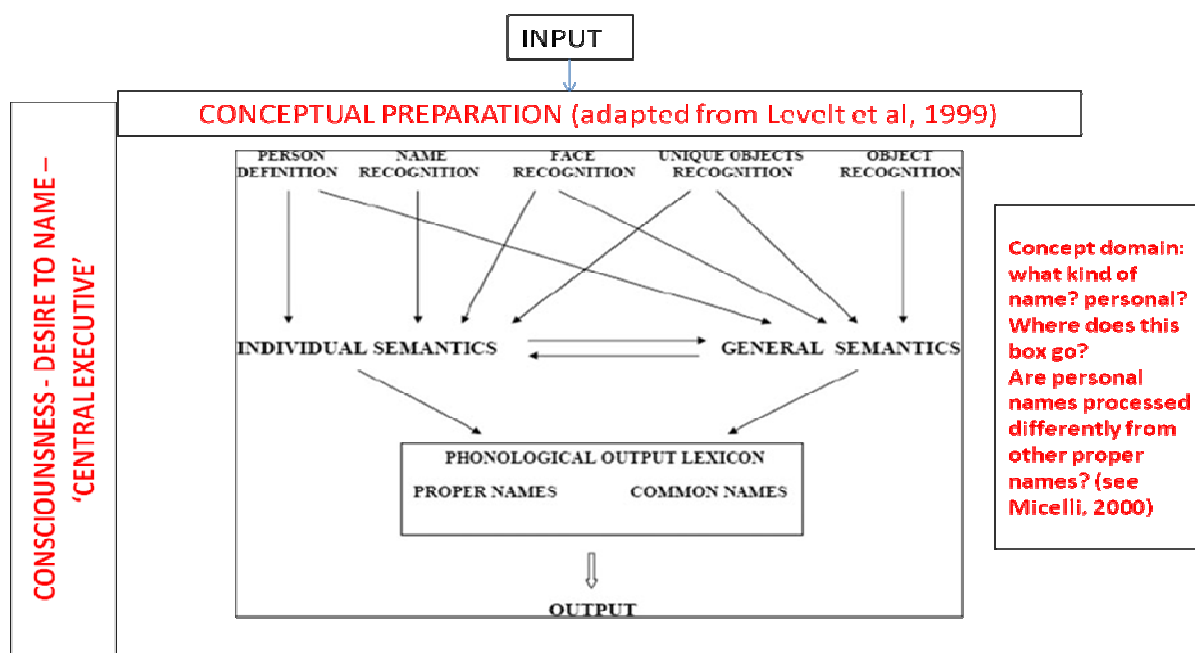


Figure 3. Revised version of Semenza’s model incorporating Miceli’s ‘domain specific reference’ (2000; concept accepted by Semenza, 2009), and introducing ‘conceptual preparation’ (Levelt et al, 1999) and ‘consciousness’.

A counterargument might be that such ‘meaning’ as I am talking about here for ‘proper name’ is trivial, even in this semantic context. Coates (2009: 435) argues that some things are known by virtue of linguistic structure, e.g. the fact that it is ‘a proper name’ conveys a meaning of sorts, but Coates says that this is to ‘equivocate’ about meaning. However, if neuropsychological research demonstrates that conceptualisation is part of the processing of proper names, at least from the neural point-of-view, semantic ‘work’ is done of necessity on processing a proper name. It only remains ‘empty’ (without meaning), although still a recognisable string of phonemes, in the same way that a new word might be initially ‘empty’ before it has undergone semantic processing (which here includes conceptual processing), but I would think it reasonable to assume that part of that processing is ‘semanticisation’. It may be then that a default position for names is, both neuropsychologically and linguistically speaking, semantic-conceptual, and that a proper name can only not have meaning in a trivial sense, in the same way that *any* string of phonemes may have no meaning. A proper name

⁶ A conceptual-based model of processing would seem to be backed up by Neil Smith et al in *The Signs of a Savant*. ‘For the linguist, *The Signs of a Savant* is noteworthy because it argues for a mental architecture that includes “quasi-modules” or specialized cognitive sub-systems which, unlike “classic” Fodorian modules, have conceptual rather than perceptual input and can access information stored elsewhere in the mind’ (Hoge 2011: 23).

⁷ Semenza notes in passing a possible role for emotion in proper name processing.

before semanticisation is a phonemic string awaiting meaning – it is not fundamentally empty.

Again, a counterargument might be that I have taken the idea that a phonemic string may or not have meaning too far. When talking of the kind of meaning that linguistic structure offers, a proper name forms a basic semantic role that indicates to the user and recipient how that proper name might be used but does little else, whereas, the same argument would go, other, non-proper-name lexical items necessarily have meaning in an *a priori* or intuitive manner. But at what level then is a proper name ‘empty’ or without meaning, according to this logic? This brings us back to Coates’s caveats.

Coates’s Caveats

In dealing with the puzzle of how proper names work, within a Millian framework, Coates asserts that ‘proper name’ is best viewed as *performance* (the act of referring): ‘All reference, as a human activity, is judged by its success or otherwise, not by its correctness or otherwise. Properhood, *onymic reference*, is therefore successful if it picks out an intended individual in context’ (Coates, 2009). This argument moves proper names into the realm of social communication where phonemic strings must surely have a semantic context: as soon as you place phonemic strings in ‘context’, you are basically assigning a semantic framework (at least as a default position). I do not think this conceptualising of ‘proper names’ as performance is consistent with a view that proper names exist as phonemic strings without meaning, or with an *inconsequential* semantic default. The fact that selective impairing or sparing of proper names occurs in patients with anomia is surely evidence that proper names are processed as a semantic-conceptual category. The caveat that defines properhood in terms of performance rather than denotatum also suggests a pertinent semantic-conceptual context is a requisite for proper names.

Thus, if we return to Coates’s caveat it now seems to be the wrong way round. The act of referring is a meaningful act, and so the linguistic constituents of the act (e.g. lexical items, proper nouns) are bound up in meaning (or making meaning) in a way which cannot be subtracted out to say that ‘names have no meaning’. The idea that proper names are meaningful only in a trivial sense within the structure of language appears to me to be the wrong conclusion: it is the idea that proper names have no meaning which is true *only* in a trivial sense, in the sense that any phonemic string is without meaning until constructed meaningfully within the system of language and communication.⁸ In other words, it is possible to adopt the view that proper names are performatives, as Coates does, but only if there is an acceptance that this is within a framework where ‘meaning’ is the default position. For this reason, I would also suggest that we start to consider personal names separately from other kinds of proper noun, as some neuropsychological testing does: they are conceptually different.

⁸ I would take the following statement from a recent book to be consistent with Coates’s view of proper nouns as performance (within a philosophy of language approach): ‘In discussing deixis, we assumed that the use of words to refer to people, places and times was a simple matter. However, words themselves don’t refer to anything. People refer. We have to define *reference* as an act by which a speaker (or writer) uses language to enable a listener (or reader) to identify something. To perform an act of reference, we can use proper nouns ..., other nouns in phrases ... or pronouns’ (Yule, 2006: 115).

Conclusion

If the philosophy of language theory of proper names is the master theory, we are faced with the problem that this dominant theory of reference does not help us understand phenomenologically, for it does not require a sentient referrer or agent, and will not help us understand cultural practice and difference, all of which are bound up with meaning-framed processing. If this Millian-Kripkean strand prevails the use of a gragger will forever remain a mystery. Similarly, if neuroscience is the master domain, studying neuronal activity in itself will not help us understand the phenomenological experience of proper names, other people's or our own, and likewise we will have difficulty with cultural practice and difference. A negative conclusion would be that 'theory of name' is not possible because there is a structural difficulty in the organisation of knowledge and research; uses of proper names in different scenarios are incommensurable; and research approaches are fundamentally incompatible. A positive conclusion however suggests that 'personal names' and non-personal 'proper names' are to be treated differently, as a category-conceptual-based neuropsychological model might suggest; we accept that language is fundamentally social and cannot be ultimately abstracted to a logical system without humans; that science does not offer a complete picture or master domain; we opt for 'name' as a semantic field and attempt to make theories cohere within it.

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