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Proper Names in Language as a System

Имена собственные в языке как системе

Abstract

The paper studies the attitude of linguists and philosophers to the lexical meaning in proper names. The paper presents a range of views on the issue, many of which express skepticism as to the presence of the lexical meaning in proper names and their role in language. However, since the late 20th century, studies show a change in such an attitude and present proper names as an integral part of not only speech but language as a system. To explain the nature of the dispute on the lexical meaning of proper names, the paper shows the differences between the two-side model of a sign by Saussure and the triangle of reference by Ogden and Richards.

В статье анализируется отношение лингвистов и философов к лексическому значению имён собственных. В статье показаны разнообразные (в том числе, скептические) точки зрения на проблему наличия у имён собственных лексического значения и их роль в языковой системе. В то же время, с конца XX в. наблюдается изменение тенденции в подобном отношении, и имена собственные всё чаще представляются как неотъемлемая часть языковой системы. Для дискуссии о наличии лексического значения у имени собственного в статье демонстрируются различия между двусторонней (Соссюр) и трёхсторонней (Огден и Ричардс) концепциями языкового знака.

Key words

proper names, lexical meaning, language as a system, two-side model of sign, triangle of reference

имена собственные, лексическое значение, языковая система, двусторонняя модель знака, семантический треугольник

Proper names still do not have a unanimous interpretation, though the tradition of their research dates back to ancient times. The disputes concern presence of a notion in proper names, their properties, and presence of lexical meaning. As a result, an opinion has been formed that proper names lack lexical meanings, which affects their status in the language as a system. In particular, they are not often included in explanatory dictionaries. However, their occasional mentioning in dictionaries presumes the status of a unit in the language as a system.

The paper is devoted to the problem of lexical meaning of proper names, their place in the system of language and the discussion of these points in the works by Soviet and Russian linguists. We define proper names as lexical units denoting an individual class of objects. At that, objects may be real and imaginary, concrete and abstract.

At the same time, personal and given names without reference to the bearer are treated as proper names though they are just a bulk, a repertoire of names if they do not belong to any bearer. Proper names, anthroponyms in particular, require rigid designations to register the names in passports and other documents. The designation especially the one which is original in its form assists the search of an object on the Internet.

The attitude to proper names as units without meaning can be found in Karl Marx' *Das Kapital*: "The name of a thing is something distinct from the quantities of that thing. I know nothing of a man by knowing that his name is Jacob. In the same way with regard to money, every trace of a value relation disappears in the names pound, dollar, franc, ducat, etc." [10, 45].

Some remarks on the quotation may be required. Marx is right that a thing and its name are not connected by nature. He refers the name of *Jacob* not to proper names but to common nouns, since the name is compared to monetary units of different countries. Common nouns instead of proper names are discussed in Marx' work as the name of *Jacob*, as well as any other common noun creates a plural class, e.g. *table* or *bulb*.

On the whole, the problem of the lexical meaning of the proper name may require some additional speculation. If an object is treated as a notion, a class of things, it acquires a separate designation and this designation is a proper name and even if this designation is identical to a

common word it may be connected to it only as a homonym or metaphor. Since a proper name designates an individual class, each new designation of a new thing by means of an already existing word will be a new notion.

A suggestion can be made that the lexical meaning of proper names is not acknowledged, for many linguists treat individual classes or individual denotations in the language skeptically. Lexical meaning is still associated with plural classes. As Russian linguist Prof. Aleksandra Superanskaya (1929–2013) put it, “A proper name is not associated with a class but with an individual object (which may consist of a certain plurality of parts, but they are considered as a unity) or even with several objects of the same name each of which is treated individually” [7, 113].

Such a view may be grounded by the postulate that the word must generalize, and generalization arises in case of plurality. However, the presence of meaning of an individual class is acknowledged both in logic and philosophy. Here is a quotation from the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on names: “Any notion (including, inter alia, an individual) is a generalization in its form, so it cannot be the subject of judgment that is one of the most important functions of notion in thinking” [8, 316]. In *The Dictionary of Logic*, the individual class is also mentioned among other classes: “Classes may be finite (e.g. the class of planets of the Solar system) and infinite (e.g. the class of all dioecious plants) and empty when a class has no element, e.g. the class of ‘athletes who have run 100-metre sprint in 8 seconds’. The class may include one element (e.g. Alexander the Great)” [3, 214]. The recognition of the meaning of an individual class started being established at the turn of the century, in particular, Prof. Vilen Komissarov (1924–2005), a Russian linguist and expert in the theory of translation studies, stated that linguistic signs might denote individual objects. He writes, “The meanings of linguistic signs may correlate with the denoted reality in different ways. They may designate classes of actually existing objects (a house, a tree, a dog), unreal objects (mermaid, wood-goblin, the Fire-bird), individual objects (Napoleon, Moscow, Africa), abstract properties (whiteness, loudness, hardness) and abstract notions (eternity, uncertainty)” [2, 40].

The presence of meaning of an individual object does not contradict by any means the definition from *The Dictionary of Linguistics*: “The lexical meaning of a word is a content of a word that reflects and fixes in the mind the image of the object, characteristics, phenomenon etc.” [1, 261]. Nothing is said there on the priority of the plural class over the individual class. The sign designating a plural or individual object is bilateral. It has a signifier, a form, and a signified, content. The signified contains properties expressed by a word (a lexical sign) of an object which are given in the dictionary. Lexical definitions exist both for common nouns and proper names. The significata of common nouns (definitions) are given in explanatory dictionaries as definitions but significata for names of famous people are in encyclopedias and special reference books.

It is clear that to include all proper names in the vocabulary of the language is impossible due to their sheer numbers; besides, it is unnecessary, since language, in contrast to speech, encompasses only frequently used and necessary lexical units. All their designations cannot enter the language in full. In everyday communication, meeting new people, getting new information, translated from foreign language, we constantly come across new designations, neologisms, many of which are proper names. Among the name bearers there are famous people whose names are part of the language vocabulary. However, many proper names acquiring the features of a linguistic unit for a while then disappear completely. That often happens to the names of places where something occurred, a trouble spot or a territory affected by a disaster or to people who are in the news during an election campaign. Names become part of common vocabulary inside certain communities but outside them they lose frequency. As any word from the passive vocabulary, the pragmatic aspect of such proper names is weak. Thus, most proper names are neologisms of a kind as objects have designations but these designations due to their infrequency are not absorbed by the language.

Another factor that adds to the controversy on the lexical meaning of proper names is the interpretation of a linguistic sign as a two- or three-component unit. The conceptions share many commonalities, but a significant difference is that a three-component pattern – a triangle – involves a **thing** that shows traces explaining the application of a word to a concept.

According to Saussure (1857–1913), a linguistic sign represents a two-sided concept: the signified and the signifier, namely concept and form respectively. The connection of these two components is not subject to obligatory motivation but should be known to community [6, 69]. The representatives of logic semantics who studied the correlation between names and objects proposed a three-side model referred to as the triangle of reference or semiotic triangle incorporating a sequence of sounds or characters, an object (referent) and a concept or idea about this object (significatum). Semiotic triangles were proposed in several versions by Gottlob Frege, Charles Ogden and Ivor Richards, and Aleksandr Reformatzky. The prototype for the three-component model may be seen in the theory of nomination developed by Plato in *Cratylus* [12, 251] where a thing, an idea and a name were analyzed. The first conception of this sort, which is also the most widespread in modern logic, was proposed by Frege (1845–1925) in the paper *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* [9]. The scholar developed his conception on the axiom that names signifying the same object do not necessarily reflect its characteristics completely. The example used by him was *Morning Star* for planet *Venus*, but the idea of the former is that it is seen in the morning, which does not cover the entire concept [9, 26].

The three-component model got its development in the works on semiotics by Ogden (1889–1957) and Richards (1893–1979). Their book *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism* (1923) [11] proposed a similar three-component model – a triangle of reference in which the connection between the symbol and the object is drawn by dashed line.

The versions of triangles show that an object should be experienced by sensory organs, otherwise the object would not become part of the model, which shows a commonality with the theory of two signaling systems by Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936). According to Pavlov [4, 336], the consciousness may reflect the environment by two signal systems. The first signal system perceives the reality through senses. The complex of senses and signs of an object acquires an idea of this object by means of the second signal system (ideation).

Thus, the incorporation of the third component – an object – interpreted broadly as animate, inanimate, concrete or abstract, contrasts Saussure's two-side approach with the semiotic

triangle model. However, an object may be learned about not only by means perceiving with senses but as a result of speculation or communication. When comparing these two approaches, the advantages of the Saussurean conception become more evident. It is common knowledge that one of the major linguistic functions is cognitive and the advantage of thinking to experience is seen in the fact that it allows obtaining knowledge and making conclusions without sensorial perception. Even after obtaining some idea from experience, the major information on an object is received through communication. Besides, the sense organs do not perceive all concrete objects in particular fictional ones. Abstract concepts lack material form such as being, concept, explanation, etc. and they have a lexical meaning. Hence, language is able to denote concepts of not only the objective but subjective reality.

The three-component model is applied to justify the absence of notion and hence inability to acquire a permanent lexical meaning in language as to proper names or to show their differences from the lexis belonging to language. Considering proper names under the three-component model, the major attention is drawn to the link between the object and the signifier without a concept, which is supposedly missing in proper names as unlike common nouns, proper names are unique and thus cannot generalize a class of objects. In particular, Reformatsky (1900–1978) uses an example in which a proper name does not correlate with a signified thing and uses a common in Russia dog name *Sharik*, ‘little ball’. The linguist writes that a puppy was named so for its looks resembling a little fluffy ball. When the puppy became a dog and lost the mentioned signs, the dog name lost the correlation with the concept. The object (dog) and concept (round) are connected loosely by a dashed line, while the constant concepts thing and word are connected by a regular line. In this example, Reformatsky does not primarily take into account the signs of an object but rather the signs suggesting its name – the inner form. However, the form does not suggest any dog but a small one. The explanation of the name may be different, for instance, it can be allusive if the name is referred to that of the stray dog from the Mikhail Bulgakov novel *Heart of a Dog*. At the same time, it is worth noting that the main requirement to any linguistic symbol is a permanent link between word and concept [1, 261], not the correlation between name and object.

The example with the name *Sharik* shows that in that particular case, the name lacks a linguistic meaning as the object is not known to the community in general as a singular class and it lacks a stable concept unless it is known as a typical dog name. However, if we take a well-known dog, for example a St. Bernard dog named *Barry*, who rescued forty people in the Alps of the early 19th century, or Richard Wagner's Newfoundland dog *Russ*, or *Kashtanka* from the eponymous short story by Anton Chekhov, the particular animals known from history or literature will possess both the concept and lexical meaning.

A conclusion on the basis of the two conceptions may be that in terms of the Saussurean two-side model, proper names may possess lexical meaning if they meet the requirements of a linguistic sign that is they have a signifier and a signified and the associations are fixed by the practice of communication in a language community as the meaning of a proper name develops under the pattern of any lexical sign.

The semiotic triangle allows showing the association of the signifier, the signified, and an object for which a linguistic sign is formed, which has met wide application in the research of nomination. However the all-purpose nature of Saussure's two-sided model of a sign is applied to both abstract and unique objects and, consequently, shows that the concepts of concrete objects may be formed without perceiving by senses.

Communication is carried out by means of common words and proper names. In speech, they are mutually complementary. Proper names fill up the gaps that appear in case of designating objects by means of common nouns. They promote localization and identification of place. The names of famous people accumulate the information of their bearers and extra-linguistic information; see [7, 136].

In communication, if an object is designated by a common noun, it is characterized as an ordinary object of a class. If an object is characterized as something special, having properties of its own, it acquires a proper name and turns an ordinary object into a class of its own.

Proper names belonging to countries, cities, notable people have fixed lexical meanings. They are frequently used in speech and referred to in dictionaries. It is of note that the lifespan of frequently used proper names in the language as a system, compared to common nouns, is

much shorter anyway, for the denotation of proper names is individual, therefore affecting its existence in the language. When the object exists and is used in communication it is an active linguistic sign, but as soon as frequency of usage decreases, its denotation becomes a part of the passive vocabulary. For a name denoting a well-known object, fixedness of meaning arises due to the fame of a person (*Napoleon, Caesar, Leonardo da Vinci*). Famous literary characters, so called “eternal images”¹, characters from the Bible and classical mythology have fixed lexical meanings as well, though many of the names become obsolete.

For most objects of reality, the individual designation is not obligatory. The presence of proper names among inanimate objects is an exception then a rule. Sometimes, well-known inanimate objects (chrematonymy)², such as weapons, wares, jewelry, musical instruments get individual names. Proper plant names are called phytonyms: *Methuselah* (Earth’s oldest living tree). Other inanimate individual objects demand obligatory individual designation, i.e. a geographical object, vessel, work of art, a planet, star, constellation. Individual names are given to world famous, interesting architectural monuments, interiors and halls, museums: *the Hermitage, the Louvre, the Pentagon, the Capitol*.

Among anthroponyms, the repertoire of personal and last names is largely settled and frozen. They have additional semes of a common class. In particular, the name *Ivan* points at the class “person” and ethnicity (Slav, predominantly Russian). Personal names belonging to the nomenclature are (or previously were) used used in this function (e.g. *Ivan, Vladimir, Nikolai, Yevgeny* are Russian names; *George, William, and Andrew* are English).

The use of typical names characteristic for the individual objects belonging to one group as designations of individual objects from another group is understood as discrepancy (cat *Boris Nikolayevich* having an anthropomorphic and allusive name, cow *Murka* with a typical Russian cat’s name, a Russian person going by a foreign name *Tomas*, i.e. *Thomas*). The same concerns the components of names taken from different languages (*Tomas Belousov*). Phrases like *two*

¹ The term *eternal images* to be used in Russian linguistic literature means literary characters whose ultimate fictitious generalization and spiritual profoundness emanate a common to all mankind and epochs meaning (Prometheus, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Hamlet, Dr Faustus) [3, 216].

² A proper name of a unique object created or extracted by people: *Koh-i-noor, Cullinan* (diamonds), *Excalibur* (King Arthur’s sword).

brothers Franz and Vanya from novels of the early 20th century bewildered Russian readers pertaining to what was the ethnicity of a family described – Russian or German; see [7, 123]. Hence, in literature, proper names, apart from the designation of the name-bearer, convey additional information or characteristics, also having an aesthetic function.

Proper names as lexical signs demand thorough research. Names must be treated not as something additional to common nouns but as a part of the lexical system. Not all proper names are language signs but any of them may become its part. Proper names the broadening of knowledge, development of cultural relations with foreign countries, an understanding of peculiarities of mentality of different nations.

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