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A concise theory of meaningfulness in literary naming within the framework of The Pragmatic Theory of Properhood

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Proper names chosen for fictional characters, places or other nameable individual events or things can be organized into four broad categories, one of which might be seen as problematic from the perspective of The Pragmatic Theory of Properhood (TPTP), an approach to name theory which I have been promoting for some years now (Coates e.g. 2000, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2014). It is desirable to meet this potential problem for a developing general theory of naming head-on.

I shall use simple terms in this short article as follows: proper names are *names*; an *author* is any creator of a work of art, the *reader* is its perceiver/interpreter and *literature* does duty for any genre of creative artistic activity. An *individual* is any single character, place or other nameable individual event or thing.

Firstly, some key semantic terms need to be defined, because they have long been used inconsistently in the linguistic and philosophical literature. My use of these terms is essentially that of Lyons (1977).

> **Reference** is the act of picking out an individual **referent** in a **context of utterance** (which can be defined in relation to speech, signing or writing, or non-linguistically through gesture)
>
> **Denotation** is the range of potential referents of a word or other lexical expression; that is, it is an abstraction from reference and must not be confused with it
>
> **Sense** is the network of semantic relations in which lexical words and more complex expressions participate, such as synonymy, hyponymy, antonymy, meronymy, and so on, i.e. a set of relations among lexical items in a conceptual space or field.

An author may choose a name for an individual using one of four broad tactics:

(1) The name may be invented. If the author invents with no intention to convey any meaning (in the broadest sense) by the invented form, this does not amount to a choice or provide a reason at all, but it might be of interest to a critic with an interest in subconscious associations.

(2) The name may be chosen randomly from some pre-existing set, e.g. of (personal) given names, in which case the same applies as in (1).

(3) The name may be chosen commemoratively, i.e. to replicate deliberately the name either of a real individual known to the author or of one which is already present in some fictive world known to the author; or in some way to allude to such an individual. There is a potentially important distinction between commemoration and allusion (an individual's name may commemorate Jesus by actually being *Jesus*, or a name may allude to Jesus, as in the case of *Salvador*, 'saviour'); but the distinction does not play a role in what needs to be discussed here.

(4) The name may be invented but consist of or contain interpretable elements, and the author may intend to impose a meaning (in the broadest sense) on the reader by his or her invention; that is, the act of naming, and the name chosen, are non-random, and the lexical meaning of any expression that constitutes or is included in the name is relevant to understanding its significance in its context of use.

It is the fourth case that is of particular interest in this article, because an axiom of TPTP is that a name has no **sense**, i.e. no lexical meaning, and conversely that a referring expression with no lexical meaning is a name; a name is a **referential** device that comes to have a **denotation** only through an accumulation of acts of **reference** using the name to pick out the relevant individual.

Good evidence for the senselessness of names is that the rules of ordinary logic do not apply to them; there is no contradiction in saying that *[A girl called] Joy is unhappy*. Also, names continue to function as referring expressions when some element out of which they are formed becomes obsolete and therefore senseless; the *Ed-* in the name *Edward*, from an Old English word meaning 'prosperity, wealth', forms no part of the modern English lexicon, but in a continuous onomastic tradition persons are still called by a name of this form. And further, apparently meaningful elements can be reduced in the direction of unrecognizability. The *-ward* in *Edward* is in origin the common word *ward* 'guardian', but in the name it is now pronounced with a reduced vowel, unlike the vocabulary word. A major consequence of literary interest follows from this: if names have no sense, they cannot be used referentially in a way which draws on any sense; and it further follows that names are untranslatable (though they may have denotational equivalents in different languages: *la Manche* is *the English Channel*, but they are not translations of each other in any fully linguistic sense of the term). If a name appears to deliver lexical meaning in the context of its use, as many readers will undoubtedly believe, at least at first blush, another way of conceptualizing that meaning must be necessary if TPTP is to stand up in this respect.

There is much of interest that might be said about names in works of art in general, and especially about what Anne Barton, in her Alexander Memorial Lectures at the University of Toronto in 1983, called "cratylic" charactonyms in literature (Barton 1990: esp. 7-10). It seems to me there are broadly three types of literary naming: *arbitrary* (not really a special type at all, but covering (1) and (2) above); *cultural* (which trades on conveyed meanings, i.e. implicit meanings which may be fully recoverable in context, covering (3) above); and *semantic* (which trades on apparent senses or lexical meanings, covering (4)). *Cratylic naming* might be understood as covering aspects of both the last two sorts, but takes its most potent form in cases like (4).

Cratylic names (known also by the familiar German term *sprechende Namen*, literally 'speaking names', and alluded to by the ancient expression *nomen (est) omen* 'the name is a sign', i.e. 'can be understood as having literal relevance') are names whose form appears designed to require the reader to access or retrieve some meaning within some literary work. Many charactonyms illustrate what I have called, perhaps not very catchily, *The Etymological Onomastic Turn*. Take for example the names famous in English literature of Ancient *Pistol*, Doll *Tearsheet*, *Christian*, Mrs *Malaprop*, Roderick *Random*, Peter *Poundtext*, *Wackford* Squeers, *Rosa Bud*, Mr *M'Choakumchild*, Becky *Sharp*, Mr *Quiverful*, Gabriel *Oak*, *Ernest* Worthing, Titus *Groan*, Auric *Goldfinger*, and so on. Such names may be understood, at least in part, with their etymological and arguably therefore, in many cases, their semantic value remaining available whenever they are used to refer to the relevant individual. Or rather, more realistically from the reader's perspective, available at least on the first encounter, where they will help form the reader's perception of the individual's personality, but they need not be interpreted anew on each occasion of use, once their referent has been established, in the same way that a conventional word would need to be interpreted anew.

The point of names of this type is precisely to suspend or subvert the general separation of a name from the sense of its component parts that is implied by the axiom of TPTP mentioned above; that is what any semantically aware and intentional literary naming actually consists of: the *repotentiation* or *resemanticization* of etymology. To focus on what is perhaps the most straightforward example, *Christian*, we can presume that Bunyan's choice of name was intentional, that *Christian* was to be understood as being a Christian (whether literally or ironically is neither here nor there), and that that connection would be made as soon as the character was introduced to the reader. However, the reader is not required to access the sense of the word *Christian* every time the name appears in order to identify the name's referent in the text (and thereby the unique character whom the name denotes). The connection is there to be made at the reader's recall or effort or whim, but that means it is available when required for his or her literary understanding of the text, not for the primary task of "doing" reference. Of course, the repotentiation of an etymology fails in the face of ignorance. Activating the potential of the

connection, and therefore recovering the intended "meaning", is only possible if the etymology is transparent to the reader, and only then if she or he actually makes the connection. Putting it very starkly, a reader could understand when they meet him that *Christian*'s referent is a character and follow his progress without ever making the connection with the lexical word *Christian*, though evidently that reader will miss something of considerable authorial importance. Activating an etymology is obviously a very different linguistic skill from activating a sense; no-one will understand that *an old man*'s referent in *He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream* is a character with relevant properties of age and manhood without understanding the lexical senses of *old* and *man* – every time they are used.

By *translation* I mean narrowly the substitution of material in the target language for material in the source language having what is judged to be an equivalent sense. If charactonyms traded on some kind of semantic transparency amounting to having sense, it would follow from that that they could be translated. To understand this conditional clause fully, we need to take into account the *context* of name-bestowal. Literature is art, and it is legitimate to suppose that this fact cancels the assumption about name-bestowal which is normal, certainly within TPTP, namely that the act of bestowal itself annuls the sense of any words which appear in the expression chosen as the name. Literary name-bestowal, on the other hand, invites the reader precisely NOT to annul the connection between usage and etymology, but to perform the balancing-act of maintaining both the form of a name and its significance – in cases of type (4) like *Christian* the pre-bestowal sense of the word that constitutes it – active for the duration of the literary event, whether it is watching a play or TV program, reading a novel, or whatever. For that reason, in apparent defiance of the strictest application of TPTP, something like charactonymic translation is *in a restricted sense* possible. *Crookshanks* in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels appears in German as *Krummbein*, a literal equivalent with the exception of the loss of the English plural suffix; *Dörchen Lakenreisser*, in German, is literally and etymologically '(pet form of) Dorothy sheet-ripper' for the tart *Doll Tearsheet* in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, part II; "Proogle Sheel" [sic] is Newmark's (2004: 529) somewhat odd example of a hypothetical German translator's solution to the dilemma of handling *Wackford Squeers* in Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*, trading on the possibly suggested lexical elements in Dickens' charactonym via *prügeln* 'to whack' and *scheel* 'squinting', picking up *squint* and *queer*, according to Newmark himself. As these examples indicate, such "translation" may be either purely lexical and literal, or idiomatic and suggestive, just like all other translation. That said, it can still be argued that the act of translating charactonyms is exactly like all other non-literary onymic "translation" in TPTP, and therefore that it accesses the **etymology** of the name in question rather than any **sense** which might be detectable in its linguistic form. One does not after all (have to) investigate a charactonym cognitively for sense every time it is used referentially (recall *Christian*), as one does for the senses of ordinary words and other expressions in a text, although the possibility of such a cognitive reconnection during the act of reading is not foreclosed. A reading of charactonyms for meaning or "translation" therefore differs from a reading of ordinary lexical items for meaning or translation; whilst **sense** is necessarily accessed in the case of lexical items, it is **etymology** in the case of names, perhaps amounting to something resembling **sense** on the first encounter if the etymology is transparent. We might adapt a remark by Hermans (1988: 12)[1] that "the translatability of proper names is a function of their 'semanticization'" – asserted in the context of a discussion of names' becoming common nouns – by saying that "the translatability of proper names is a function of their etymological transparency to the would-be translator".

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[1] I owe this reference to a reading of Dukmak (2012).

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