

The social and political life of names and naming

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Concluding commentary

The social and political life of names and naming

Reuben Rose-Redwood

Abstract: This concluding commentary critically and constructively engages with the articles in this first multidisciplinary issue of the *Nordic Journal of Socio-Onomastics*. It does so in the spirit of affirmative critique, with the aim of advancing the ongoing dialogue on the social and political life of names and naming. The commentary concludes by arguing that the multidisciplinary field of socio-onomastics is best viewed as a contact zone, or space of convergence, for scholarship that examines the diverse ways in which names and naming shape, and are shaped by, worlds-in-the-making.

Keywords: naming, socio-onomastics, critical toponymy, gender, performativity, linguistics, geography, disease

Reuben Rose-Redwood (University of Victoria). Concluding commentary: The social and political life of names and naming.

The study of names and naming is a multidisciplinary endeavor, yet the approaches adopted to examine naming practices continue to be shaped by particular disciplinary histories, traditions and trajectories. My own intellectual trajectory in the field of human geography led me to develop an interest in the social and political life of names and naming as part of a broader focus on cultural landscape studies and the interrelations of naming, politics and place. Trained as a geographer, I came to the study of onomastics by way of a critical geographical analysis of the politics of place naming generally and street naming in particular (e.g. Rose-Redwood 2008; Rose-Redwood, Alderman & Azaryahu 2010). Given the common assumption in popular culture that the study of geography involves little more than the memorization of place names, many geographers have sought to distance themselves from onomastics in order to demonstrate the breadth of geographical scholarship. Yet, over the past several decades, there has been a growing recognition among geographers that place naming plays an important role in the social production of geographical space (Berg & Vuolteenaho 2009; Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch 2016). Toponyms, in other words, are not merely labels that designate pre-existing places; rather, naming is a performative practice of world-making that actively constitutes the spatial identities and ontologies of place (Rose-Redwood, Alderman & Azaryahu 2018).

This conception of naming has led some of us in the field of critical toponymy to move beyond the representationalist assumptions of semiotics and toward the more-than-representational approaches of speech act theory, performativity theory and pragmatics, focusing particularly on what philosopher Judith Butler calls ‘the reiterative and citational practices by which discourse produces the effects that it names’ (1993:2). From a performative standpoint, naming is understood as a form of embodied social action that brings into being the very things it appears to merely represent. Put simply, naming not only involves the signification of meaning but is also a mode of *doing* that plays a central role in the practices of identity formation, subjectification, boundary-making and the enactment of the worlds in which we live. This is true just as much with respect to the naming of human

and non-human individuals and collectivities as it is with the naming of places.

Naming is a relational practice that does not occur in a vacuum but is enmeshed in social relations, with various institutional actors – from municipal governments to the World Health Organization (WHO) – seeking to assert a ‘monopoly over legitimate naming’ (Bourdieu 1989:21). At the same time, the multiplicity of naming practices, and the material excesses of that which is named, can never be fully contained by efforts of standardization and the codification of official names. The latter efforts may seek to establish a hegemonic conception of an ordered ‘linguistic cosmos’ (Benjamin 1999:522), in which everything corresponds with its officially recognized name, but the uses of names in everyday life often diverge considerably from officially sanctioned naming practices – whether due to the inertia of habit and tradition or active resistance and subversion.

Given the importance of names and naming in both the ordinary and extraordinary circumstances of social and political life, the study of socio-onomastics has a relevance to society that extends far beyond the confines of academic circles alone (Ainiala & Östman 2017). The articles in this special issue demonstrate such relevance in spades through insightful analyses of everything from the history of titles of civility in colonial New England and the sociopragmatics of gender assignment in German dialects to the naming of places of affective power and economic capital as well as the (im)moral and political uses of naming diseases such as COVID-19. Although each of the articles has a different topical focus, on people, places or diseases, the collection as a whole nicely illustrates the importance of examining the social dimensions of naming and thus the need for multidisciplinary approaches to socio-onomastic scholarship. In this concluding commentary, I critically and constructively engage with the articles in this special issue in the spirit of affirmative critique, with the aim of stimulating further dialogue to advance the multidisciplinary field of socio-onomastics.

Adrian Pablé's contribution to this issue provides a useful overview of different theories and paradigms in the philosophy of language, semiotics and onomastics. Drawing inspiration from linguist Roy Harris's (2009) critique of the 'myth of reference' – that is, the notion that 'words identify entities in the real world in a stable one-to-one relation' (Pablé 2021:87) – Pablé advocates for an integrationist approach to linguistics and onomastics. Integrationism rejects the linguistic view that conceives of signs as abstractions disconnected from those who make or use signs. In this sense, the integrationist approach is situational and shifts attention from the semiotic question 'What does a sign or name mean or represent?' to the pragmatic question 'What does a sign or name *do* in the world, with what purpose, and to what effect?'

Although Pablé does not frame it as such in his article, this conceptual move aligns with critiques of the semiotics of meaning and the turn toward more-than-representational and performative approaches across the social sciences and humanities. Indeed, this should come as no surprise since, as Pablé & Hutton (2015) mention in their book, *Signs, Meaning and Experience: Integrational Approaches to Linguistics and Semiotics*, Harris's integrationist linguistics was inspired, in part, by the late Ludwig Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophers such as speech act theorist J. L. Austin, among others. The latter's work on performative utterances offers a devastating critique of representationalist conceptions of language (Austin 1962), even if many subsequent theorists have moved beyond the humanist underpinnings of Austinian speech act theory itself. It seems, however, that Pablé's integrationism is still wedded to the humanist assumption of a duality between 'humans' and the 'external world'. Pablé's (2021:102) claim, for instance, that 'human beings exist separately from the external world which they inhabit' is, ironically, one of the most *non*-integrative ontological positions one can imagine with respect to human–environment relations and is out of step not only with posthumanist thought but also with the vast majority of contemporary geographical

scholarship. The issue of human–environment relations aside, Pablé’s call for an integrational approach to linguistics and onomastics, and his critical reflections on different approaches to studying the gendered titles of civility such as *Goodman* and *Goodwife* in colonial New England, provide much food for thought.

Simone Busley and Damaris Nübling also consider the gendering of language in their study of the sociopragmatics of German dialects. Their work on the everyday use of feminine and neuter designations for women and girls in Luxembourgish and other German dialects is based upon a rich body of empirical evidence from interviews and an online questionnaire that informs their sociopragmatic analysis (Busley & Nübling 2021). As a geographer, I was particularly impressed by the authors’ documentation of how language use varies both within and across geographical spaces as well as the ways in which historical shifts in the structures of social power (vertical vs horizontal) relate to sociopragmatic changes in gendered language use.

One issue that Busley & Nübling do not address is treating what they call ‘the female referent’ as if it were a universally agreed-upon material foundation to which different linguistic gender assignments refer. At a time when binary conceptions of sex and gender identity are increasingly being called into question, sociopragmatic approaches to the gendering of language and naming cannot take the sexed body as a given in socio-onomastic studies. When reading Busley & Nübling’s article, I therefore could not help but wonder how the consideration of transgender, intersex, gender-fluid or other non-binary people would have enhanced our understanding of gender assignment practices among those who participated in their study. For instance, how did research participants’ conceptions of who is or is not ‘female’ shape their use of gendered language? The authors briefly gesture toward this question when discussing unisex names, but they fall back on the notion that ‘[r]eferential gender depends on properties of the referent’ (Busley & Nübling 2021:36). However, from a sociological perspective, gender identity is not strictly determined by the body (referent) but is rather performatively enacted through material and discursive practices of identification and subjectification. I suspect that the

authors are aware of this issue since the article's focus is on how gendered language is used in different ways among diverse populations, but it would have been helpful if it was explicitly addressed in the study itself. Similarly, while the authors discuss the influence of age, marital status, and the level of intimacy on gender assignment, the matters of race and class are left largely unspoken in their analysis. Does the racialization of gendered bodies influence gender assignment in German dialects, and did the racialized and classed positionalities of research participants themselves influence the results? Such questions are not considered in Busley & Nübling's study; however, they are crucial to bringing an intersectional lens to bear on the socio-pragmatics of gendered language.

The contributions by Terhi Ainiala and Pia Olsson as well as Guy Puzey, Jani Vuolteenaho and Matthias Wolny turn our attention to the relation between naming and place-making. Much of the literature on critical toponymies focuses on the contested politics of place naming (Berg & Vuolteenaho 2009). Ainiala & Olsson's (2021) study, by contrast, shifts the emphasis from how political power is exercised through place naming to how places of empowerment – or what they call 'power places' – are identified, named and experienced by individuals as 'affective places'. In doing so, they situate socio-onomastics within the broader context of contemporary theorizations of affect, emotion, the non-representational and materiality. Yet their conception of 'place' arguably bears more of a resemblance to the classic definition of place as space that has been imbued with meaning that we find in the tradition of humanistic geography (i.e. viewing places as 'socioculturally meaningful entities', as the authors put it).

The questionnaire data on participants' descriptions of, and attachments to, empowering places that Ainiala & Olsson analyze was collected just as the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning to gain global attention in late 2019/early 2020. One certainly wonders how the research participants' responses will have changed after a year of quarantine, self-isolation and travel restrictions. Have some of their 'power places' now become places of disempowerment? Or have people grown more attached to their places of comfort and security in the

face of global crises? I am intrigued by Ainiala & Olsson's discussion of the agency of places to affect the emotional experiences of people-in-place, but I would have liked to hear more about how the very same place can be a 'place of power' for some while simultaneously being experienced as a place of disempowerment for others. The authors hint at this issue when acknowledging that an overemphasis on the 'positive affect of place' can be problematic; however, this point is not explored in any depth in relation to the analysis of the data. Moreover, while I appreciate Ainiala & Olsson's consideration of how participants described and named their places of power, I was also left wondering how official and vernacular place names themselves become part of the 'material particularities' of places and generate a diversity of affects and emotions among different people. In other words, it is not simply a matter of material places arousing particular affects or emotions, which are then identified and named in different ways; rather, the naming process is itself an embodied practice that affects the production of place, which in turn provides the conditions of possibility for affective and emotional experiences of place.

If Ainiala & Olsson examine the affective and emotional aspects of place naming, Puzey, Vuolteenaho & Wolny (2021) focus instead on the economic dimensions of commodified namescapes. In particular, they provide an in-depth historical and comparative analysis of naming rights sponsorship of sports and entertainment venues in the European context from a linguistic perspective. The emerging scholarly literature on the selling of naming rights has primarily focused on the corporatization and privatization of public space (Rose-Redwood et al. 2019). Puzey, Vuolteenaho & Wolny's study extends this body of work by considering how such naming practices have influenced not only the use of specific corporate names as toponyms but the *generic* names that accompany them as well (e.g. stadium, arena, colosseum). The dataset upon which their analysis is based is a significant empirical contribution to toponymic scholarship on naming rights, yet their paper also makes an important theoretical contribution by proposing the concept of 'onomastic capital' as a framework for theorizing the 'value' of naming in both symbolic and economic terms.

Puzey, Vuolteenaho & Wolny conceive of onomastic capital as the capacity or potential to commodify a name as well as the perceived properties of a name that can increase its symbolic or economic capital. The authors trace the history of onomastic capital as it relates to the naming of sports and entertainment venues, but the concept is applicable to the commodification of naming rights more generally. The notion of onomastic capital is a conceptually innovative lens through which to understand the value of names and naming, and it raises a series of questions. In particular, if onomastic capital is a way of understanding the symbolic and economic value of names and naming, what ontology of value shall we employ to theorize the value of onomastic capital formation and circulation? In other words, how is the ‘value’ of onomastic capital produced, actualized, sustained and transformed? Shall we rely on the classic Marxian labor theory of value or is the value of onomastic capital a performative effect of the processes of symbolic and economic valuation itself? If the latter is the case, then onomastic value is less a matter of the inherent properties of names, or the labor time that went into their production, and more a question of *onomastic valorization* as the contested terrain that constitutes the political, economic and cultural arenas of naming.

The value of naming as a political technology of biopower is nowhere more evident than in the naming of diseases. At the time of writing, the world is still grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, and Elwys De Stefani’s (2021) study of the linguistic and onomastic history of disease naming nicely situates the naming of the COVID-19 pandemic within a broader historical context. De Stefani shows how traditions of disease naming have changed over time as medical scientists and professionals have sought to standardize the names of diseases, or nosonyms. At the same time, De Stefani also explains how non-experts (including journalists and politicians) often use alternative disease names, some of which are ‘morally questionable’, especially when they stigmatize specific peoples or places. Indeed, in some cases, even medical authorities such as the WHO continue to use potentially stigmatizing disease names despite guidelines recommending their disuse. De Stefani (2021:75) suggests that such names

are not ‘intrinsically racist’ since they sometimes serve a descriptive purpose, yet in practice they are often used in ‘morally charged ways that construct oppositions between communities’.

A prime example of the latter, which De Stefani examines in detail, is former US President Donald Trump’s derogatory use of names such as *China/Chinese virus/flu* and *kung flu* as a means of stoking anti-Asian xenophobia for political gain. Drawing on transcripts of Trump’s political rallies, De Stefani illustrates how disease naming is not merely an apolitical process of ‘referential designation’ but takes place within social and political contexts that shape the use of disease names in practice. De Stefani therefore concludes that disease names can themselves become ‘vectors’ of political conflict, framing the issue as a matter of (im)morality. Yet what conception of morality should underpin approaches to disease naming, and what is the relation between the morality and politics of naming? These questions are not answered in De Stefani’s article, but one useful starting point, of course, is Hippocrates’ famous dictum in *Of the Epidemics* to ‘do no harm’ (400 BCE, Book I, Section II). Given that this ethical principle has long been the basis of the medical profession, it seems reasonable to assume that it should likewise apply to the naming of diseases as well. Yet, as De Stefani’s study highlights, the principle to do no harm is by no means an agreed-upon basis for political life more broadly. On the contrary, the political arena is commonly framed in Manichean dualistic terms as a conflict between the morally righteous Self and the immoral Other, which is then used to justify dehumanizing one’s political opponents and thus causing them harm. Consequently, the use of stigmatizing disease names will likely continue to serve the aims of political propaganda among xenophobic demagogues and their acolytes, but De Stefani rightly argues that medical authorities should avoid using names that reference toponymic features and specific peoples when bestowing names for pathogens and diseases.

Onomastics may be a specialized field of study, but names and naming have a significance in most – if not all – aspects of human life and

our relations with the more-than-human world. Naming is not only a linguistic act, it is also an epistemo-ontological project of world-making and identity-formation, affecting and being affected by that which is named or left unnamed, and rendering the world legible through what Rancière (1999) calls the ‘partition of the perceptible’. It is little wonder, then, that the issue of naming has drawn together a motley crew of scholars across multiple disciplines – from linguistics to geography – who share a common interest in the social life of names and naming. However, as I noted at the outset, our diverse disciplinary backgrounds have provided us with different points of departure, conceptual tools, methodological techniques and styles of thought when it comes to the study of naming. This intellectual diversity can be disorienting, but it is also one of the greatest strengths of multidisciplinary approaches to socio-onomastic scholarship that are committed to engaging in dialogue across disciplinary divides. The ultimate value of socio-onomastics is serving not as a coherent body of socio-onomastic knowledge but rather as a contact zone, or space of convergence, for scholarship that examines the diverse ways in which names and naming shape, and are shaped by, worlds-in-the-making.

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