

# Named entities, naming practices, and their meanings – linguistic types and cultural contexts

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Although names exist in all languages of the world, their formal and functional manifestations show great diversity. Due to their embeddedness in socio-cultural and historical contexts, an anthropological-linguistic approach that brings together linguistic and cultural facts is required to capture the full meaning of names and naming practices. Overall, names are given to entities of cultural importance and of significance for humans in social life; name usage and name-giving practices reflect social beliefs and cultural values; and their meaning is strongly shaped by cultural and historical contexts. This paper provides a typological, cross-linguistic overview of named entities, kinds of naming practices, and types of meanings associated with names, name giving, and name usage, which are illustrated with numerous examples from Australia, Europe, and Africa. Therefore, it also offers a structural framework for the contributions in this issue.

**Keywords:** onomastic typology, name usage, naming taboo, name-giving practices, etymological meaning, classificatory meaning, social history of names

## 1. Introduction

The existence of names (proper nouns) is a cross-linguistic universal (Hockett 1963: 21), i.e., in any society people give names to certain kinds of entities and use names to address or refer to specific entities (e.g., persons or places) within this class of entities. However, names also show a broad range of variation in form, social meaning, and function as well as in the ways they are given and used across languages and cultures. Thus, from an anthropological-linguistic perspective, names are by no means “arbitrary labels” of reference, nor is naming a “simple pragmatic phenomenon of reference fixing”, but they are powerful and deeply

“context-bound” social markers (Rymes 2001: 158). Their meaning is socially constructed in a particular context (Aceto 2002). As phrased by Kostanski & Puzey (2016: xiii) who also emphasize the embeddedness of names and naming in their historical and cultural setting: “[names ...] reflect community mores and social customs [; ... they are] manifestations of cultural, linguistic and social heritage”. From this interdisciplinary and cross-linguistic perspective on onomastics, this paper focuses on the following fundamental aspects: What entities are given names, what kinds of names are given, what are the social practices of name giving, how and in what contexts are the names used, and what social meanings and values are reflected in the names and naming practices?

To provide a broad overview of onomastics as a context-bound and socio-culturally shaped linguistic phenomenon, the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 gives an overview of named entities and types of names; Section 3 deals with acts of naming, including name-giving practices and manners of name usage; the meaning of names is then addressed in Section 4, followed by a conclusion in Section 5. Apart from the basic cross-linguistic features of names and naming, the range of linguistic variation and the embeddedness of language in its cultural context becomes evident. To illustrate this, the paper mainly draws on examples from Oceania, Europe, and Africa. It also refers to examples of naming and labelling contexts of cultural importance in Africa which are described in this issue and puts them in a theoretical framework.

## 2. Named entities and types of names

Cross-linguistically, names can be defined on pragmatic-semantic grounds as “definite nouns with unique denotation that display an inherent basic level sense” (Van Langendonck & Van de Velde 2016: 17). This means that names refer to single entities (mono-reference) and not to a group of entities as common nouns do, and that they have no literal meaning but refer directly to an entity (direct reference), as summarized by Nübling, Fahlbusch & Heuser (2015: 27). Names have the fundamental pragmatic function of identifying single entities within a semantic class of items (e.g., one particular person called *Paul Miller*) with less articulatory effort than descriptive expressions, i.e., noun phrases consisting of common nouns with modifying elements such as articles, adjectives, and relative clauses (e.g., ‘the tall woman who lives in the red house at the end of our street’). The cognitive effort involved in learning and remembering names of single entities, however, is much higher than that required for the acquisition of a finite number of common nouns which refer to an entire class of entities (e.g., ‘women’, ‘teachers’, or ‘grandchildren’). For this reason, we do not give names to everything; **only selected, highly**

**relevant entities get names** (Nübling, Fahlbusch & Heuser 2015: 22–23). Thus, a basic question is what entities are precisely named in a specific language and what are the cross-linguistic commonalities or differences regarding the spectrum of named entities. To put it more precisely, what semantic classes or subclasses of items get named, are these all or just some items of this semantic (sub)class, and do these (sub)classes have a specific proper onomastic inventory?

Generally speaking, we only name what is important to us, and from a social perspective the most important entities are our conspecifics, as Nübling, Fahlbusch & Heuser (2015: 18) point out. That's why no society is known in which humans are not given names. Or, to phrase it differently, there are no languages without **personal names (anthroponyms)**, the most prototypical type of names in this regard. Furthermore, all people are given names, often even stillborns, to acknowledge their existence and show their importance to others (such as the parents and other family or community members). However, Alford (1988: 52) mentions extremely rare examples of nameless individuals, such as, traditionally, Guarani women and married Korean women. Within the class of personal names, a basic distinction can be made between given or first names and family names or surnames. While one-name or monominal systems are more likely to be found in smaller societies (e.g., Icelandic), larger societies (e.g., German, French, Russian) often have two-name or binominal systems (consisting of first name + family name) or even three-name systems (first name + middle name + family name). This correlation between the size of the society and the complexity of the name system results largely from the identifying function of names. The larger the name inventory in relation to the number of people in a society, i.e., the higher the denotation/denotatum ratio (name/person), the better people can be identified by a single name. Amha, Slotta & Sarvasy (2021) who describe name tune systems in Oyda (Ethiopia) and in Yopno (Papua New Guinea) mention that people can better be identified by their unique “name tune” than by their given name which they often share with multiple other individuals. These name tunes (i.e., short sung or whistled melodies unrelated to the given name) are denotations for individual people which they get in addition to their given names, just like nicknames. Nicknames are less official or less conventional names which might have either a positive or a negative connotation and which indicate a close emotional relationship.<sup>1</sup> They generally develop in specific contexts of social

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1. Nicknames can be diminutives of the first name or the family name (e.g., in German *Paul* > *Paulchen*; *Herr Schmitt* > *Schmitti*), they can refer to personal characteristics (e.g., *Sommer-sprosse*, lit. ‘freckle’) or aspects of shared experience (e.g., *Pinky* for a boy who once came to the swimming pool with pink swimming shorts because they had been in the washing machine with a red napkin).

interaction and shared experiences (see also playful names in Nassenstein, this issue). Another striking name difference in many languages is between indigenous and non-indigenous names resulting from language and culture contact, in particular colonization and proselytization (see for instance Völkel 2023 for an example from Oceania, and Blount 1993 and Koopman 1999 for examples from Africa). However, the social realities and histories of names are often more complex than this binary opposition may suggest, as (major) changes in the naming systems often cannot be reduced to one point in time and one particular contact scenario. Linguistically, indigenous personal names often consist of content words and sometimes even grammatical particles (i.e., single lexemes, compounds, or even entire phrases and sentences) of the language concerned (e.g., Völkel Forthcoming on Tongan). Their meaning is discussed in Section 4. Family names have usually developed from name additions (for differentiation) to epithets and then to fixed family names (Nübling, Fahlbusch & Heuser 2015:145). Names of social units such as clans or lineages are similar to family names, as they also indicate membership of a descent group. Māori people, for instance, express their genealogical belonging by giving the name of their *whānau* ('family, household'), their *hapū* ('sub-tribe, clan'), their *iwi* ('tribe'), and their *waka* (the first 'canoe' the ancestors arrived with in Aotearoa/New Zealand) at the beginning of speeches or when introducing themselves to new acquaintances (Harlow 2001: 28–29; Reilly 2004: 61–64). Western contact brought about major changes in the personal naming system of many cultures. In Tongan, for instance, Christian names were adopted as given names, and with the introduction of official registration, the binominal name system consisting of given name(s) plus family name was introduced (see Völkel 2023). Cross-linguistically, it is a wide-spread phenomenon in the development of family names that, in a first step, people used their father's first name as surname, and in a second step, this system was frozen, so the patronym became a hereditary surname (see Hanks 2006: 299). In most societies, the establishment of surnames in a western sense has to do with colonial power and control (through registration). A more detailed description of the etymological meaning of surnames is presented in Section 4. In conclusion, it can be said that not only do all people have a name, but they are generally also known by several kinds of names.

Apart from personal names, other basic semantic classes of names are god names (theonyms), animal names (zoonyms), plant names (phytonyms), place names (toponyms), object names (ergonyms), event names (praxonyms), and names of/for natural phenomena (phenonyms). Overall, these are named entities which play an important role in or have a high impact on people's lives, such as natural phenomena which cannot be controlled by humans (e.g., storms), objects which have been created by humans (e.g., boats), events that have been caused

by humans (e.g., wars), or animals which are used and/or bred by humans. This human-centric relevance seems to be a common characteristic of named entities across languages and cultural environments. However, what particular classes or sub-classes of entities are named is more culture-specific and depends on what is regarded as important by the people of a society. Figure 1 provides a typological overview of named entities.

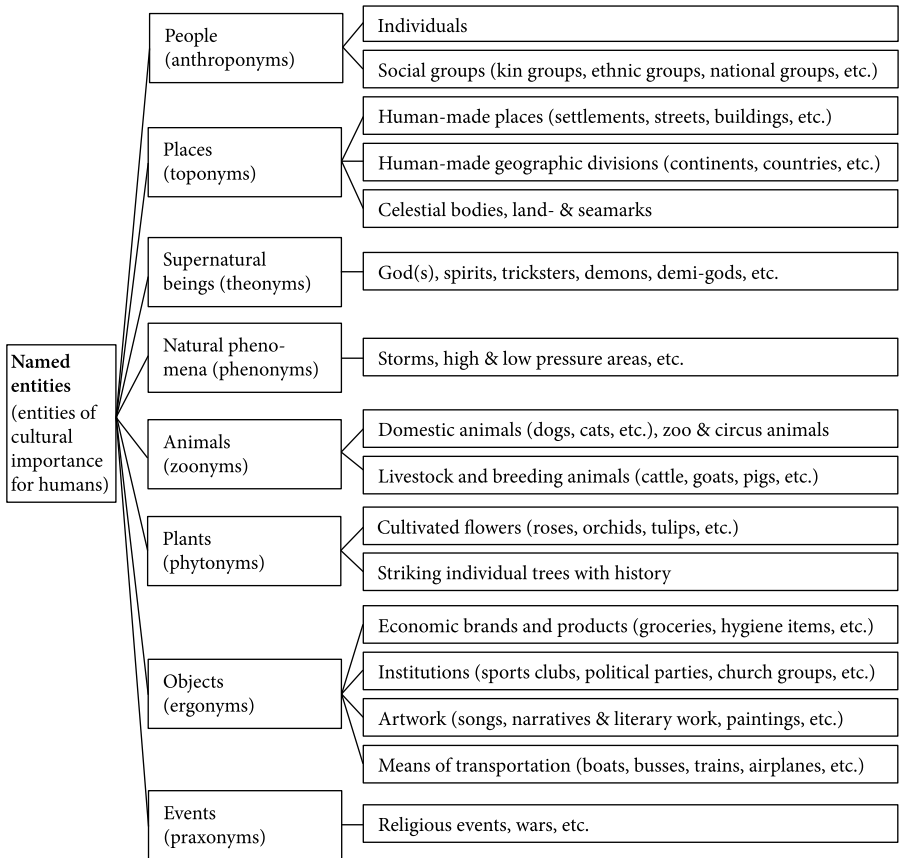


Figure 1. A typology of named entities

**God names (theonyms)** do not only include the names of god(s) as the name may suggest, but also the names of other supernatural beings or beings ascribed supernatural power, such as spirits, tricksters, and demons. In cases of witchcraft and spirit possession, the transition from person to supernatural power is often indicated by the use of different names (anthroponym → theonym). In the case of demigods, the categories of gods and humans merge into one another. God names describe entities that can be classified as highly animate, that are regarded

as having even more agentive power than humans, and that play an important role in human explanations of existence and being. Supernatural beings are considered to have a severe impact on human life. This is a characteristic they have in common with natural phenomena. **Names of natural phenomena (phenonyms)** denote events which are not man-made and which are beyond human control but, depending on worldviews, that may be within divine control (e.g., sunrise, rain, wind, and tides). Names are generally only given to those phenomena that affect people's lives, primarily in a severe and often negative way, causing damage and fear (such as storms and floods).

**Place names (toponyms)** denote geographical or cosmological sites. Along with anthroponyms, they are the most studied name types (see, for instance, Hough 2016 and Puzey & Kostanski 2016). A reason for this is certainly that they are also extremely widespread in the world's languages, making them more prototypical than other types of non-human names; however, in contrast to people, not all places are named. Toponymic subclasses are names for human-made places (such as settlements, streets, buildings, and bridges, although buildings and bridges could also be regarded as object names), human-made geographic divisions of areas (such as countries and states, regions, landscapes, and continents), and important landmarks (such as mountains or hills, valleys, lakes, rivers and other waters, star constellations, stars, and other celestial bodies). The geographic environment strongly determines which landmarks or seamarks are salient. In the Pacific area, for instance, seamarks such as currents, reefs, and fishing grounds are of great importance. In addition, islands and star constellations are equally relevant orientation marks at sea. Gifford (1971) has compiled a comprehensive list of Tongan toponyms which includes names of islands, settlements, island groups, districts, reefs, channels, hills, caves, beaches, landing places (of boats), roads, and other salient geographic features, as well as stars. Drawing mental maps of habitat and descriptions of movement profiles are good methods to obtain information about prominent orientation marks and spatial descriptions including place names (see, for instance, Völkel 2010: 124f, 129f).

Place and event names facilitate a location in space and time (e.g., on *Good Friday* in *Cape Town*), although place names are cross-linguistically more common than event names. One explanation for this is certainly that names are given to concrete rather than abstract entities. Place names denote entities which are visible to everybody, while events only continue to exist through shared stories and may not be equally known by people. Another explanation may be the development and use of numerical systems for orientation in space and time, such as calendars and GPS coordinates. While the use of tools for measuring time in daily life (e.g., clocks) and for specifying temporal information through numerical systems of "metric time" is widespread, the use of localization devices is less common or

is limited to specific contexts such as navigation in shipping. In contrast to western societies, however, there are other societies in which calendar and/or clock time is non-existent, less precise, or subordinated to so-called “event-based time” systems which are “organized as complex systems of lexicalized indices” (Da Silva Sinha 2022: 275). In several Amazonian languages, for instance, metric time is not conventionally lexicalized and people use event-based expressions which generally relate to natural phenomena (e.g., at sunset, in autumn, after the rainy season, at low tide) (Da Silva Sinha 2022: 292).<sup>2</sup> **Event names (praxonyms)** are also used for event-based temporal reference (e.g., during the *Second World War*, after the *French Revolution*), although these seem to be comparatively rare in contrast to generic event terms.

**Animal names (zoonyms)** are relatively widespread in the languages of the world, but again not all kinds of animals are named. First, named animals tend to be animals which are larger in size and smaller in number (such as mammals) as opposed to animals which are larger in number and smaller in size (such as insects). Second, people give names to animals that are important to them, with whom they have a dependency relationship or a close connection. In western societies, these are first and foremost domestic animals, zoo or circus animals, and livestock or breeding animals, but in some cases also wildlife (e.g., wild animals which are the object of research). Pets are at one end of the scale; they not only get names (a sign of individualization) but often even nicknames (an expression of great emotional closeness). At the other end of the scale are animals that are not given a name, just a number/code (for identification) or not even that; these are primarily wild animals (Nübling, Fahlbusch & Heuser 2015: 191–193). If the giving of animal names reflects the relationship between humans and animals in a society, and given the great variety of human-animal relations in different parts of the world, variation is also expected with regard to zoonyms: which animals are given names, under which conditions, and what kind of names. An extensive zoonymic inventory speaks for a high degree of individualization, and zoonyms, which correspond to anthroponyms or theonyms, indicate a strong connection between humans and animals or the idea of animals as spiritual beings. In many

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2. In this context, it should be mentioned that several grammars include so-called weekday lexemes or month lexemes (which are popularly referred to as ‘weekday/month names’) within the section on proper nouns or names (e.g., Mosel & Hovdhaugen 1992: 97–99; Harlow 2001: 29), although these are not onomastics in the strict sense; i.e., referring to weekdays or months, they do not identify a specific individual entity through mono-reference. In many societies, however, weekday/month/season lexemes are used as names, not as praxonyms but as anthroponyms (e.g., Tongan: *Sāpate* < ‘Sunday’; Akan (Ghana): *Kofi* ‘Friday born’); in this case, they generally refer to the time of birth (for more examples from West Africa see, for instance, Minkailou & Abdoulaye 2020).

societies, the idea of pets in a western sense does not exist. The importance of breeding animals and wildlife also varies across societies (e.g., agricultural versus hunter-gatherer societies) as well as the assignment of animals to animal category (e.g., cows as source of food and work animal, or as sacred animal). This suggests that societies differ greatly in the extent to which they assign animal names.

Greater linguistic variation, based on the great diversity of social and cultural contexts, can be found in **object names (ergonyms)**. Object names generally denote entities which have been created by humans. They include brand and trade names, names of institutions (e.g., schools and sports clubs), artwork names (e.g., paintings, songs, and literary works), and names for means of transportation (e.g., trains, boats, and airplanes). In general, object names obviously exist for items which are owned or used by the community rather than by individuals (e.g., means of public transport in contrast to private cars).<sup>3</sup> These are smaller in numbers and they cannot be identified by their individual owner but only by numbers and/or names (e.g., trains and buses are given numbers and/or names, while cars are distinguished by the owner, colour, type, or make and model). Brand and trade names are a special subgroup of ergonyms, also called NITE (names in the economy; see Kremer & Ronneberger-Sibold 2008). They are given to sales products in order to distinguish them from other products of the same product category and to build product loyalty. In today's global economy, brand and trade names are often internationally known and used (e.g., *Coca Cola*, *Microsoft*, or *Samsung*). Since a name can evoke different associations in different languages, when developing product names for the international market, companies must ensure that they do not have a negative meaning in any language.

Apart from real-life entities, names are also given to fictional entities in literary works (e.g., animals in fairy tales and fables). These are called **literary onomastics**, although in the broadest sense they also include names of fictional entities in narrated myths and other oral genres, as well as in films, plays, and other performative genres (e.g., Chinese puppet theatre). The line between fiction and reality can even become blurred. Entities with names are generally those that play a prominent role in the story.

Overall, names can be summarized as serving to identify and even individualize entities, i.e., they express a social relationship between speaker and entity. They are given to entities which are considered important from a human-centric perspective in a particular society. The less prototypical the type of name is, the more cross-linguistic variation occurs. The number of named entities falls in the range between maximum communicative efficiency (informativeness) and mini-

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3. This is also the case for place names such as buildings (e.g., community houses such as the *wharenui*, the meeting houses of the Māori, in contrast to private houses).

mal cognitive effort (economy/simplicity; see Hawkins 2004). For more detailed information on cognitive versus articulatory effort in relation to names in contrast to descriptive expressions, see, for instance, Nübling, Fahlbusch & Heuser (2015: 22–27). Less prototypical name types also tend to draw on names from the inventory of more prototypical name types, e.g., personal names as phenonyms (for storms and high/low pressure areas) and names of famous personalities as toponyms (for streets) in European contexts. The manner of naming, as well as the types of names and their meanings, depends heavily on the socio-cultural context, as the following sections will show.

### 3. The act of naming

The naming of entities refers to different speech acts which can be distinguished (see Figure 2): first, the act of **giving a name to an entity** (a so-called baptizing event), and second, the act of **using a name** (name reference). Name-giving events can be further subclassified according to the existence of previous or additional names. Names can be given to hitherto unnamed entities, or an already named entity can be given a new name – as an additional name or as a name change.<sup>4</sup> Events of name usage include the introduction to an entity by its name (denotation/denotatum mapping) as well as subsequent name usages, i.e., using a name **requires knowing the entity by its name**. Instead of calling an entity by its name, the usage of a particular name can also be avoided, systematically and most extremely in cases of naming taboos. Alternative linguistic forms of person reference (e.g., personal pronouns or descriptive noun phrases) may be used instead. Another basic pragmatic distinction in name usage is made between address and reference by name. While this distinction is crucial for the use of personal names, other named entities (particularly non-animate entities) cannot be addressed and their names are thus only used referentially. Entities which are sometimes also addressed by their names are animals, deities, and even natural phenomena (e.g., in animistic contexts). The introduction with names can coincide with name giving but this is not the case if we are being introduced to an entity at a later point in time. Then the entity can be officially introduced by name (self-introduction, e.g. “I am NAME”, or introduction by others, e.g., “This is NAME”), or the denotation/denotatum mapping can take place casually (e.g., reading a product name on its packaging).

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4. Branding describes name-giving practices in the economy, more precisely the development of brand names as part of marketing strategies to evoke associations with the product (e.g., Storch, this volume). For more information on brand names, see, for instance, Danesi (2011).

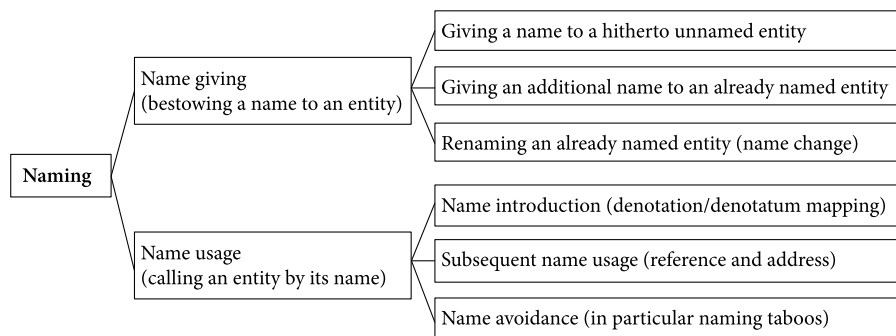


Figure 2. A typology of naming acts

**Name-giving practices** are social events which differ largely across cultural environments and languages, and across time. This includes aspects such as who gives a name to whom, in what way, and with what implications. A commonality, however, is the fact that giving names to entities means that single entities are so important to people that they are individualized by being given names to distinguish them from other entities of the same kind. Events of naming, particularly the giving of names to hitherto unnamed entities, are often ceremonial acts. Religious baptism events, including sprinkling people with water or dunking them in it and the declarative speech act “I baptize you in the name of ...”, are a good example of this. There are also examples of ritualized naming events for other entities, such as ship christenings. However, naming events can also be less ceremonial, e.g., the administrative act of registering a newborn child with the local authorities.

In the case of anthroponyms, giving a name to a person is a symbolic act to build a social relationship, or, more precisely, to welcome the person as a new member of the social group (e.g., the family, the society, or a religious community). The official registration of a name, for instance, means that a person becomes a national citizen, and with religious baptism people enter the community of believers. Similarly, giving someone a nickname/pet name (which is generally an additional name) means that they are part of an emotionally close group (e.g., close family or friends). Thus, a name is a marker of social identity and belonging. As Pina-Cabral (2015: 183) phrases it, “names carry within them specific, localized histories of personhood and belonging [...] they reflect our collective belongings, how they position us by relation to other people”. This is also evident in situations of name change. To give a new name to an entity already known by a name usually results from the fact that the previous name is no longer perceived as appropriate or is less appropriate than the new one in terms of its meaning (for the meaning of names, see Section 4). In this sense, replacing the name is a stronger sign that the former name is perceived as inappropriate than

adding a new name. Name changes are usually caused by major changes related to the entity. In the case of anthroponyms, these are life-changing situations which include changes in group membership such as weddings (name change as an expression of family belonging: e.g., maiden name > spouse's last name), cases of conversion (name change as a sign of religious belonging: e.g., non-Muslim name > Muslim name), or cases of transgender (name change indicating a new gender identity: e.g., female name > male name). In the latter cases, people usually no longer identify with their previous name and rename themselves (Rymes 2001: 159). In the first case, however, the name change is due to social conventions and indicates family affiliation. In any case, new names are a symbol for a new identity in terms of belonging, but also in terms of other personal characteristics or roles within a social group, as the following example shows. In traditional Tongan society, people were given new names throughout life in the following situations: (a) New personal names generally made semantic reference to great (mis)achievements or dramatic experiences of the person (Völkel 2023: 304); (b) Upon the death of a chiefly title holder, the successor receives the title, namely the office and the name (*hingoa fakanofu*, lit. 'an appointed name') (Völkel 2023: 303–304, 309). To summarize with Nübling (2021): Life stage names are markers of biographical transition. Apart from people, other entities such as places or objects can also be renamed. Changing the names of settlements and states, for instance, is often a sign of serious political change or power shift (e.g., St. Petersburg > Petrograd > Leningrad > St. Petersburg). It was very common that colonial powers replaced native place names with western names and that in the course of decolonization places may get their original names back. Another example of re-naming as a political statement in a historical context is the naming of sugarcane farms resettled by Black farmers in Chiredzi, Zimbabwe (see Wasosa & Mazuruse, this issue). Commercial products are often renamed for marketing reasons (e.g., the chocolate bar named *Raider* in Germany became *Twix* for global standardization).

It is generally considered a privilege to give a name to an entity. In Tonga, for instance, patrilineal relatives who are '*eiki* ('higher') in status have the honour of choosing the name of a newborn child (Morton 1996: 50–51; Völkel 2023). The name can even be regarded as part of a gift exchange process in which the child itself is regarded as a gift from the mother's side to the paternal kin, who in return bring a gift to the maternal kin and give a name to the child; finally, the child's father's sister gets the most valuable goods (Douaire-Marsaudon 1996: 147–149). In this naming process, the newborn child becomes part of the kin group, called *kāinga*. In various societies of Papua New Guinea, personal names are viewed as belonging to the clan, and the assigning of a name indicates clan membership (e.g., as described by Godelier 1992 for the Baruya, or Wassmann 2001 for the

Nyaura). Thus, it is considered important to prevent names from disappearing. Among the Hinihon, for instance, name givers can pass on their own personal names to a clan member of the same gender and rank in terms of sibling birth order. Along with the name, love, care, and affection, as well as food, knowledge, and abilities, are transferred from the name giver to the name recipient. For the name giver, the name remains an empty shell (Meinerzag 2023: 48–51). The privilege of giving a name to non-human entities generally lies with their discoverers, creators, or owners (e.g., newly discovered stars, newly developed commercial products). In some cases (e.g., stars), it is even possible to buy the naming rights. However, the renaming of an entity by external powers (e.g., colonial place names or the personal names *Sara* and *Israel* for Jews in the Nazi regime) is generally a symbol of political dominance.

**Name-using practices** strongly depend on cultural conventions, the social constellation, and the situational context. These aspects determine who addresses or refers to whom and before whom, by what name, in what context, and for what purpose (Silverstein 2014: 147). Beyond the introduction of an entity by name, using a name generally means that the speaker and the hearer are familiar with the particular entity and know it by name. Generally, we only know the names of people with whom we have a social relationship of some kind, be it in terms of kin relationship, friendship, acquaintance, political or social relevance, or even enmity. By being introduced to a person, we get to know their name. Knowing a person's name often also means having power over the person, and languages and cultures differ greatly in how they deal with the announcement of names. Among the Hinihon (Papua New Guinea, Melanesia), for instance, the personal names or so-called *unim ate* ('meaningful/big/true name') are only known to a very limited group of people, they remain within the clan (in-group), and they are hardly used. Instead, people are called by imprecise birth-ordinal designations (so-called *opu ondik* 'speech without sense/meaning'), e.g., *Ipuhak* (a first-born woman) and *Akom* (a second-born man), which are carried by several people and which require knowledge of the kin network (or more precisely, the sibling situation) for the identification of a person (Meinerzag 2023; for other Papuan languages, see also Keesing & Fififi 1969 on Kwaio, and Aikhenvald 2021 on Haruai). Such a way of avoiding the use of personal names and keeping them secret is a kind of naming taboo which has the function of preventing someone from having power over the name bearer. By keeping personal names secret, the Hinihon avoid their feared use in magical manipulations to harm or kill a person (Meinerzag 2023: 52f). Thus, anthroponyms do not only refer to people, but they also represent the named persons themselves (e.g., power/control over a name means power/control over the person). This idea of having power over a person by knowing their name is also known in European contexts, as the fairy tale of

Rumpelstiltskin illustrates (Nübling, Fahlbusch & Heuser 2015: 19). The children's novel series "Harry Potter" shows another form of name avoidance. In this case, the name *Valdemort* is well known but is not used by those who fear him, instead being replaced by the distance-keeping phrase "you know who". Naming taboos are a way of maintaining a respectful distance, often accompanying other politeness strategies such as honorific registers. People are not addressed or referred to by their personal names but by meaningless substitute names, by formal titles, or by descriptive terms. In Tongan society (Polynesia), for instance, people of higher rank are *tapu* (taboo, lit. 'sacred/forbidden'), as are their names. This becomes apparent in honorifics (respectful chiefly/kingly registers to avoid direct reference), speech precludes (a kind of advance apology for addressing/naming higher ranked people), and the use of chiefly/kingly titles instead of personal names. In addition to the avoidance of physical contact through taboos, these are linguistic means to maintain a respectful distance vis-à-vis the *mana* ('spiritual power') of high ranked people (Völkel 2021, 2023). Multiple Australian Aboriginal societies are known for avoidance relationships between affines, such as between parents-in-law and children-in-law. This includes, among other strategies, the prohibition of direct address and of the use of the name (Foley 1997: 326ff; see also Haviland 1978 on Guugu Yimidhirr, and Dixon 1980: 58ff on Dyirbal). The names of deceased relatives, as well as similar-sounding lexemes, may also not be used for a certain period of time after their death.<sup>5</sup> This taboo is a way of showing respect and of creating an emotional distance to reduce the pain of grief. However, the person can still be referred to in a descriptive way, people with the same name get substitute names for the avoidance period, and the similar sounding lexemes are replaced by synonyms (Dixon 1980: 28). This system of name avoidance even has an impact on the size of the name inventory. Traditionally, Aboriginal people lived in smaller communities and name duplication was less common, minimizing the cognitive effort of name substitution if a person with the same name were to die. As Aboriginal people live in larger communities today, they have expanded their name inventory to include exotic and rare names in order to handle the logistic effort of name avoidance.<sup>6</sup> Name avoidance is also a common practice in numerous African contexts (e.g., Ameka & Breedveld 2004 on name-using taboo among the Fulbe; Anchimbe 2011 on name-using taboo in Cameroon). In order

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5. Mitchell (2015, 2018) described a similar avoidance register to show respect and maintain a social distance to in-laws in Datooga, a Nilotic language spoken in Tanzania. This includes the non-use of their names as well as lexical components of their name which are replaced by an enregistered set of alternative words.

6. For a brief overview of Australian Aboriginal avoidance practices, see [https://kids.kiddle.co/Australian\\_Aboriginal\\_avoidance\\_practices](https://kids.kiddle.co/Australian_Aboriginal_avoidance_practices) (accessed 10/09/23).

to maintain a respectful distance towards certain people (e.g., Fulbe relationships involving *yage* ‘shame, respect, proper behaviour’), the use of their given names is considered impolite and avoided; instead, alternative forms of address are used (e.g., alternative nomenclatures, pseudonyms, or teknonyms). Among the Zafimaniry in Madagascar given names of young babies are not used in public to distract evil forces (generic terms are used instead), and after giving birth to a child, it is impolite to call parents by their ever names (from then on, teknonyms are used to honour them as members of society; Bloch 2006). Although all these examples show that there is great variety in whose names are taboo for whom (e.g., affinal kin, chiefs, deceased relatives, or babies) and for what particular reason, the basic function of all types of name avoidance is to create distance out of respect or a feared negative impact. Linguistically, Fleming (2011) distinguishes between three forms of name avoidance: name avoidance in address, name avoidance in any kind of reference, and avoidance of names, homophones and similar sounding words. Regarding the motivation of name avoidance, Nübling (2023) makes a distinction between not being allowed to pronounce a name (extrinsic/social inhibition, i.e., systems of name taboo), not being able to pronounce a name (intrinsic/individual blockage, e.g., avoidance of the name of people you fear such as *Valdemort*), and not wanting to pronounce a name (intrinsic/individual will, e.g., avoidance of the name of people you don’t like as an expression of ignorance) based on Western European examples.

The use of anthroponyms, conversely, expresses a social relatedness or even creates an interpersonal closeness and personal connectedness. This becomes evident in examples such as personal address (e.g., “Thank you!” versus “Thank you, *Peter!*”) or the use of names for entities (e.g., “I like my sofa.” versus “I like my (Ikea sofa) *Jättebo.*”). Thus, names do not only identify specific single entities, but they also individualize them (i.e., they stress their personal individual uniqueness for the speaker). Nübling, Fahlbusch & Heuser (2015: 20–22) compare naming to the numbering of entities with regard to their function. While people can also be identified by given numbers instead of by their names for impersonal administrative purposes, numbers/codes can also be used to deny people their individuality for inhuman and degrading purposes. In this sense, numbers function as a kind of name avoidance. Nicknames, on the other hand, strongly emphasize the aspect of individualization and emotional relatedness, even more than other kinds of names.

When an entity is known by multiple names (as is particularly the case with humans), the use of one name or another depends on the nature of the social relationship (e.g., in terms of social proximity, emotional closeness, or status difference) and the specific situation of name use. In most European languages, social closeness in terms of intimacy or solidarity is generally expressed by the use of

first names (*Peter*) and informal pronouns (French/Spanish: *tu*; German: *du*), while greater social distance is expressed by the use of title plus family name (*Mr. Miller*) and formal pronouns (French: *vous*; Spanish: *Usted*; German: *Sie*). For a more detailed description, see Foley (1997: 313–318). The choice of name for address or reference indicates not only the nature of the social relationship between speaker and named entity, but it can also highlight a particular aspect of the relationship (i.e., the name used creates contextuality). In Moroccan society, for instance, people are referred to by *nisbas*, names which identify them by their country, town, or family, and the name used depends on which aspect is considered relevant in a particular situation (Geertz 1983). In Tongan society, people of chiefly rank are addressed by close family members in private (off-stage) contexts with their personal names, whereas official (on-stage) contexts require the use of their titles. Name references to non-human entities known by different names (e.g., *New Zealand* versus its Māori name *Aotearoa*) can indicate political attitudes, social belonging, origin, or other aspects of the speaker vis-à-vis the entity. Thus, the name used also provides information about the name user, their relationship with the named entity, and the context of name reference.

Overall, the basic function of naming entities is the identification of individual entities which are considered important to people and therefore are to be distinguished from other entities of that kind. This relational meaning in terms of belonging, connectedness, or ownership becomes particularly evident in name-giving events which celebrate the beginning of the relationship between the name giver or the entire social community and the named entity. Likewise, the reference to entities by their name or a specific name expresses or even creates relatedness or degrees of relatedness, while naming taboos or name avoidance has the opposite function, serving to maintain a distance, out of fear or respect. The exact practices of name giving and name use (i.e., ceremonial procedures of name giving and social conventions of name use or name avoidance), however, vary greatly across languages and societies (as do the exact entities that are given names). More examples of naming in different cultural settings, including African contexts, can be found in Vom Bruck & Bodenhorn (2006); Kroskrity (2020), and Ndlovu (2023), while Dimmendaal (2022) provides African examples of name avoidance and endearment. Beyond the powerful social function of naming practices, names also have other meanings which are rooted in their social history and linguistic emergence, as described in the following section.

#### 4. The meaning of names

So far, the paper has illustrated that names indicate the importance or relevance of the named entities to humans. The naming of entities points to or even establishes a special relationship between the name giver or name user and the named entity, which is regarded as specific and individual (i.e., to be distinguished from other entities of this kind). But what meaning lies in individual names?

From a linguistic perspective, names do not have a lexical meaning but only a referential function, i.e., they are used to identify single entities within a semantic class of items, as mentioned before (see, for instance, Van Langendonck 2007: 84–85). However, this does not mean that it does not matter what name is given to an entity or that naming is an arbitrary assignment of a name to an entity. Names themselves (e.g., *Mr. Smith*) might not have lexical meaning, because neither is every *Mr. Smith* a smith, nor does every smith have this name; however, the lexeme used as name can have a lexical meaning, as, in this case, ‘smith’, i.e., a person who works metal. This lexical origin of names is called the “**etymological meaning**” of names (e.g., Nyström 2016: 40). Basically, the majority of names have the following origins. First, most indigenous names are semantically motivated and have evolved from descriptive expressions (i.e., single lexemes or even entire phrases) of the language itself; second, most non-indigenous names are borrowed from the name inventory of contact languages. In the latter case, names can of course have a semantically motivated etymological meaning in the language of origin, but this is usually not known anymore; however, the name can still have other meanings, as will be illustrated below. In European languages, the vast majority of names have developed from appellatives, i.e., common nouns or lexemes for a class of entities (e.g., Peter, the smith > *Peter Smith*; the new town > *Newtown*; German: *ein Wagen fürs Volk*, lit. ‘a car for the people’ > *Volkswagen*). For a detailed description of the onymization process in German, see Nübling, Fahlbusch & Häuser (2015: 49–60). As soon as an entity is assigned a fixed appellative (denotation/denotatum mapping), this descriptive expression solidifies, and the semantic features are erased (e.g., Newtown is not considered to be a new town any more), then the appellative has turned into a name. Depending on the transparency or opacity of the name lexeme, the speakers of a language may still know its lexical meaning or not, but even if they do still know it, they often cannot tell any more the story or motivation of how the entity got its name; see, for instance, Gifford’s remark in his collection of Tongan place names (Gifford 1971: 27). This loss of lexical meaning is a clear indication of a name, but names can still be associated with their literal meaning. In Africa, for instance, it is common for clan names to be animal lexemes, such as *Ndlovu* ‘elephant’ or *Dube* ‘zebra’ in Ndebele, a Bantu language spoken in Zimbabwe (Lindgren 2004: 184).

These animals represent totems, i.e., they are revered as sacred ancestors and special behaviour applies towards the totem animal (e.g., food taboos). Thus, the clan names express a human–animal relationship, their meaning characteristics of the animals and of the name bearers (clan members) which can be seen in the praise poetry of the respective totems. Another wide-spread phenomenon in Africa are so-called death-prevention names, i.e., personal name lexemes that denote despicable things in order to distract the underworld forces and thus prevent death (e.g., Mensah 2015 on Ibibio in Nigeria, Minkailou & Abdoulaye 2020 on Songhay in Mali, Mamvura 2021 on Karanga in Zimbabwe), a sign of social care similar in function to personal names expressing good wishes. Since in these latter examples the lexical meaning of the onomastic lexemes is still clearly linked to the name, it is debatable whether “etymological meaning” which implies a diachronic detachment from the lexical meaning is an appropriate label in this case.

In his cross-linguistic study on anthroponyms, Alford (1988: 60) distinguishes four major classes of “semantically meaningful names”: (a) “names describing physical traits”, (b) “names describing traits of character or personality”, (c) “animal names”, and (d) “names describing incidents at the birth of the name recipient”. For German family names in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, Nübling, Fahlbusch & Heuser (2015: 149) identify five semantic classes: (i) patronyms, (ii) jobs, (iii) places of residence, (iv) places of origin, and (v) nicknames referring to personal characteristics. These semantic classes basically correspond to the etymological classification of surnames in European languages by Hanks (2006: 303ff), where type (i) also includes other kinds of “surnames derived from the forename or status of a relative” (such as matronyms), and type (iii) and (iv) are summarized as “names derived from a locality”. Overall, semantically meaningful names (particularly anthroponyms and toponyms) refer to characteristics of the named entity (e.g., personal characteristics or features of the locality) or to circumstances or events associated with this entity (e.g., circumstances at people’s birth or events that took place in a location). Table 1 provide some anthroponymic and toponymic examples from Oceania, Africa, and Europe for the major semantic classes. The most creative and innovative type of names, with an extremely wide range of associated meanings, is ergonyms. If they contain, for instance, place names (e.g., African toponyms as described by Storch, this issue), a connection is made between the commercial product (in this case a perfume) and associations with the place. For marketing reasons, ergonyms are intended to evoke positive associations.

Table 1. Etymological meaning of name lexemes \*

Type of names	Etymological meaning	Language & examples
anthroponyms: first names	concepts denoting good wishes	GERMAN: <i>Ger-trut</i> < ‘spear’ + ‘power’ TONGAN: ‘ <i>Ofa</i> < ‘love, affection’, <i>Fehoko</i> ‘joined, wish to succeed’, <i>Koloa</i> < ‘wealth’ SONGHAY (Mali): <i>Bonkaano</i> < ‘lucky’, <i>Gomni</i> < ‘fortune’
	place & time of birth; circumstances at the time of birth	TONGAN: <i>Ata-māhina</i> < ‘rise’ + ‘(of) moon’, <i>Pō-hiva</i> < ‘night’ + ‘sing’, ‘ <i>Eva-i-pō-mana</i> < ‘walk’+ LOC + ‘night’ + ‘thunder’ SONGHAY (Mali): <i>Atalaata</i> < ‘Tuesday’ (slave name), <i>Cipsi</i> < ‘last month of the Islamic calendar’, <i>N’Cirji/Baanahari</i> < ‘rain’ (slave name)
	plants & animals as metaphors or symbols (human–nature relationship)	TONGAN: <i>Ika</i> < ‘fish’, <i>Lupe</i> < ‘fruit pigeon’, <i>Siale</i> < ‘gardenia’, <i>Maile</i> < ‘myrtle shrub’ SONGHAY (Mali): <i>Farka</i> < ‘donkey’ (an “ugly” name as survival desire; to fool death by pretending the baby is not cherished)
	personal characteristics: physical traits and character/ personality traits	TONGAN: <i>Luani</i> < ‘(be) equal’, <i>Muli</i> ‘foreigner, stranger’ SONGHAY (Mali): <i>Bibi</i> < ‘black’, <i>Haŋa-kuku</i> < ‘ears’ + ‘long’
	kinship relations	SONGHAY (Mali): <i>Hasay</i> < ‘mother’s brother’ (expression of love and remembrance)
anthroponyms: last names (including clan names) [= expressions of genealogical belonging]	professions  place of origin or residence  first names (patronyms, matronyms, or teknonyms)	GERMAN: <i>Müller</i> < ‘miller’, <i>Schneider</i> < ‘tailor’, <i>Fischer</i> < ‘fisherman’, <i>Bauer</i> < ‘farmer’ GERMAN: <i>von der Lippe</i> < ‘from the river Lippe’, <i>Limburger</i> < ‘from the city of Limburg’, <i>Berger</i> ‘from the mountains’ GERMAN: <i>Ludwig</i> (patronym), <i>Jakob(i)</i> < ‘(Latin: GEN) Jakob’ (patronym) SWEDISH: <i>Svensson</i> < ‘Sven’s son’ (patronym) FRENCH: <i>Laurent</i> (patronym), <i>Catherine</i> (matronym)
	animals as characterizing feature	GERMAN: <i>Hase</i> < ‘(someone being timid and shy like a) rabbit; (someone hunting) rabbit(s)’, <i>Fuchs</i> < ‘(someone processing the fur of, someone hunting) fox(es)’ NDEBELE (Zimbabwe): <i>Ndlovu</i> < ‘(someone

Table 1. (continued)

Type of names	Etymological meaning	Language & examples
		with the) elephant (as totem), <i>Dube</i> < ‘(someone with the) zebra (as totem)’
	other characteristic features	GERMAN: <i>Schwarz</i> < ‘(someone with) black (hair)’
toponyms	APP + features of the locality (in terms of soil material, colour, cardinal direction, flora & fauna, etc.)	GERMAN: <i>Erz-gebirge</i> < ‘ore’ + ‘mountains’, <i>Schwarzbach</i> < ‘black’ + ‘stream’, <i>Westerwald</i> < ‘west’ + ‘forest’ TONGAN: <i>Mó’unga-one</i> < ‘mountain’ + ‘sandy’, <i>Ana-funga-vai</i> < ‘cave’ + ‘surface’ + ‘water’, <i>Tonga-tapu</i> < ‘south (island)’ + ‘sacred’
	APP + events or persons associated with the locality	GERMAN: <i>Königstädten</i> < ‘king’ + ‘town/place’ (settlement in an area known for royal hunting) TONGAN: <i>Nuku-‘a-lofa</i> < ‘land’ + POSS + ‘love’ (based on a story, the settlement was so named by shipwrecked Samoans who were given food here)

\* See Nübling, Fahlbusch & Heuser (2015:113, 147, 211) and [www.namenforschung.net](http://www.namenforschung.net) for more examples from German-speaking countries (accessed 18/11/23). More examples for Tongan can be found in Gifford (1929:237–276) and Völkel (2023:305–306) on anthroponyms and in Gifford (1971) on toponyms. Traditionally, Tongan had a monominal system (see Völkel 2023); hence the table only includes Tongan first names. Minkailou & Abdoulaye (2020:49) include more Songhay anthroponyms that “tell about the place and period of birth of the bearers, their social status, gender, the birth order in the family, etc.”

Furthermore, names can express indexicalized features of the named entity. This is what Nyström (2016:47) calls “**categorical meaning**”, i.e., based on onomastic patterns, assumptions are made about the type of name and the category of entities (e.g., people, places, or objects, or more precisely, female people or settlements). For instance, we know that German names ending in *-furt* (‘ford’, i.e., a shallow place in a river where it can be crossed), such as *Frankfurt* or *Schweinfurt*, are usually toponyms, or more precisely, names of settlements that are located on rivers or streams. Another example is subcategories of personal names: They can be gender-neutral, but in many instances, they are associated with one gender or the other (e.g., name inventories for male versus female persons) or with the people’s social status (e.g., titles versus common names in Tongan, or slave names in Songhay). As a German native speaker, for instance, I expected *Paula* (with the typical European female ending with *-a*) to be a female person, but during my research in Tonga I learned that it is a man’s name there (Völkel 2023) – so I had to correct my assumptions. Apart from name components and name inventories, information about frequency patterns of name occurrence (across regions and

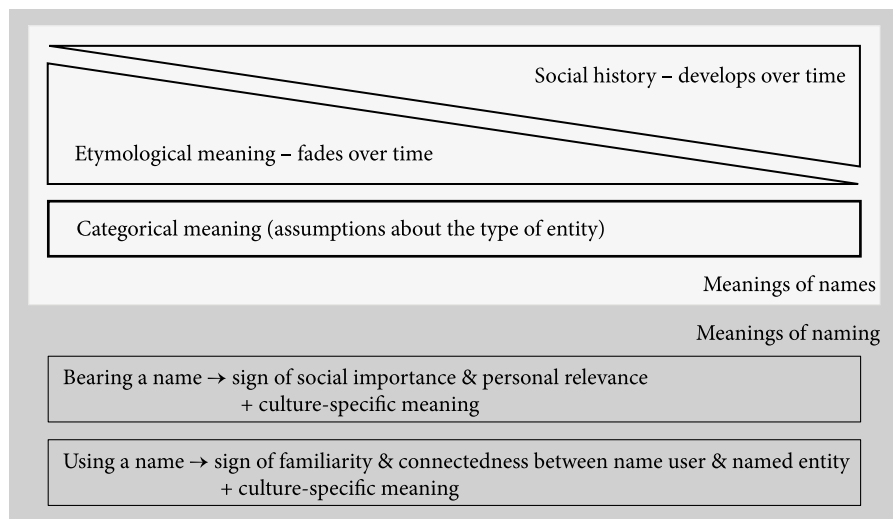
times) also leads to categorical assumptions, e.g., the age-group of people with old-fashioned versus modern names. Birth order names also provide information about gender and relative age, or, more specifically, the number of older siblings (e.g., Minkailou & Abdoulaye 2020 on Songhay, and Meinerzag 2023 on Hinihon). Altogether, there are two kinds of categorical meaning: categorical information encoded in names (e.g., relative age as indexicalized feature in birth order names, gender as indexicalized feature in gender-specific anthroponyms) and categorical assumptions resulting from statistical patterns which can prove to be right or wrong (e.g., old-fashioned names as markers for relative age, gender-neutral names with high frequency in one gender as markers for this gender).

Finally, names have what Rymes (2001: 158) calls a “social history”. These are associations with a name, such as historico-political connotations, socio-cultural attributions, or personal experiences and sentiments. One example is associations with other previous name bearers, such as a given name in memory of an ancestor with that name (*Peter Jr.*), a name in honour of a celebrity with that name (e.g., *Obama Institute*), or the avoidance of a name due to negative connotations related to previous name bearers (e.g., in Germany, the first name *Adolf* since the Nazi regime of Adolf Hitler, or first names like *Kevin* and *Chantal* since a study showed that they are associated with behavioural problems and poor performance in school). Another example is western or religious names (e.g., Christian or Muslim personal names, and places named after European explorers), which are associated with colonialism and missionary history in many societies. In this case, the choice of name giving and name use (e.g., western or Christian/Muslim personal name versus more indigenous personal name, indigenous versus colonial place names) can indicate social belonging, religious beliefs, political attitudes, or ownership claims, but that doesn’t necessarily have to be the case. In the paper by Wasosa & Mazuruse (this issue), the names given to sugarcane farms in Zimbabwe express the celebration of success in the process of decolonialization and reclamation. In cases like this, the name givers and name users consciously want to evoke associations with the name. In the economy, product and brand names are chosen particularly for their positive associations (see Storch, this volume; see also Section 2). In other cases, such as the playful use of names in Langila (see Nassenstein, this issue), the associations evoked mislead people who are not familiar with this use of names – a kind of secret language obscuring the actual meaning.

Overall, names have a referential function and no lexical meaning, but that does not mean that they are meaningless at all. In addition to etymological mean-

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7. The German film „Der Vorname“ (English title: “How about Adolf?”) by Sönke Wortmann (2018) shows an interesting provocative debate on whether it is appropriate to name a child *Adolf* and what giving this first name or avoiding it entails.



**Figure 3.** Meanings of names and their development in a socio-historical context

ing, names also have a historical record, and they contain categorical meaning (indexical information or statistical assumptions on features of the named entity). While the etymological meaning is often forgotten in the development process from a semantically motivated to a conventionalized system (Nübling, Fahlbusch & Heuser 2015: 112–118), the historical record of names only develops over time. Once we get to know an entity and its name does not fulfil the expected meanings or associations, they are instantly deleted in relation to this entity, and name associations may fundamentally change as a result. Figure 3 provides an overview of the diverse meanings of names; at the core are the different meanings associated with the names which are embedded within the context of the fundamental general and culture-specific meanings associated with naming. Thus, understanding the complex meaning of names requires knowledge of their socio-cultural context and historical development.

## 5. Conclusion

As the paper has shown, names are not arbitrary labels of reference, nor is naming merely a means of identifying individual entities. Rather, names indicate the cultural importance of entities for humans, while the act of naming expresses or even establishes a relationship between name user or name giver and the named entity. Although the existence of names is a cross-linguistic universal, there is variation in terms of which entities are given names, in terms of their form and meaning, and

in terms of naming practices across societies and time. This makes onomastics an interdisciplinary research area bringing together social sciences and humanities (see, for instance, Bramwell 2016). Names emerge in particular cultural and historical contexts, and naming practices reflect a society's beliefs and values.

For a better cross-linguistic understanding of names and naming we need to acknowledge their context-bound nature and to consider more non-European examples in onomastic studies. This issue is therefore dedicated to Africa-related onomastic topics on naming contexts of cultural importance, for which this paper is intended to provide a typological anthropological-linguistic framework.











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