

## On the typology of proper names

### Oral presentation

Proper names (PN) are a universal type of expressions. There is no language that has been reported to lack proper names. Therefore, it is quite astonishing that this class of expressions has been largely ignored by language typology with a very few exceptions (e.g. Van Langendonck 2007). The reasons for this neglect may be found in some misconceptions about PN. First of all, PN are usually considered solely as lexical units of a language without any syntactic dimension. This is, however, only half of the truth. PN can be complex syntactic constructions (up to the size of full relative clauses as for instance in Siouan languages) and are frequently enriched by different kinds of titles or additional names in their usage. Secondly, PN almost always pose problems with regard to their assignment to a certain part of speech, for instance to the class of nouns, in individual languages as well as cross-linguistically. For some authors, PN are deviant non-prototypical members of the class of nouns (e.g. Langacker 1991), for others, PN are the most prototypical nouns (e.g. Van Langendonck 2007) and for others they are rather indexicals and closer to personal pronouns (e.g. Anderson 2004). In addition, there is no PN-specific morphological category (with a few exceptions, e.g. in Hocank (Sioux)) which makes them less attractive to typologists. Thirdly, there is an old and fundamental disagreement about the meaning of PN taking them either as meaningless or purely referential (Kripke), or as containing all information of the referent (cognitive approaches). In either case, meaning is considered to be almost exclusively pragmatically conditioned which poses an obstacle for typologists who are looking for form-meaning pairings. What hasn't been sufficiently acknowledged is that PN have semantic content with a classifying function (sex, class, caste, clan etc.). And fourthly, data on the form and usage of PN is hard to obtain since PN are rarely dealt with in grammatical descriptions. These are certainly obstacles for linguistic typology. On the other hand, there is a linguistic sub-discipline, onomastics, which investigates exclusively names, however, mostly in a historical-etymological perspective.

The overall goal of the present paper is to demonstrate that PN can be fruitfully investigated in a cross-linguistic perspective, and more specifically in the framework of modern language typology, if PN are not analyzed as isolated lexical items but as constructions which vary formally and functionally depending on their usage in various speech act situations, i.e. depending on who refers to whom in which speech act situation.

More specifically, it will be argued that it is the social distance between the speaker and the referent (or between the hearer and the referent) which plays a major role in the choice of the naming construction by the speaker. It will be shown that there is a universal markedness scale predicting that the wider the social distance between the speech act participants is the more marked will be the naming construction chosen by the speaker. Data from a few European and non-European languages supporting this hypothesis will be presented.

The parameter of "social distance" which determines the formal shape of naming constructions is the same or a similar one found in personal pronouns, more precisely in the domain of the so called politeness distinctions in personal pronouns. Hence, the third part of the paper will present a discussion of the theoretical consequences of this observation. It will be shown that PN have a lot of properties in common with personal pronouns so that the formal sensitivity of naming constructions to the parameter "social distance" can be interpreted just as one further commonality between PN and personal pronouns. Some general conclusions about the relation of common nouns, personal pronouns and PN will be drawn from this discussion.

### References:

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Langacker, Ronald W. 1991. *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. Vol II: Descriptive Applications*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.  
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