

## What IS a Name? Reflections on Onomastics\*

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Onomastics, as the study of proper names, has been of concern to many branches of scholarship, including philosophy and history. The present paper takes the viewpoint of anthropological linguistics, as applied especially to personal names and place names among North American Indians. The question is raised as to whether terms which embody a DESCRIPTION can be considered proper names, e.g., whether a term meaning literally ‘man living by the stream’ can be a personal name, or whether a term meaning ‘rock standing by the stream’ can be a placename. Grammatical peculiarities of placenames are also considered, and examples are given from Karuk (California), Creek (Oklahoma), and Nahuatl (Mexico).

Key words: onomastics, toponyms, anthroponyms, North American Indians

“You are sad,” the Knight said in an anxious tone: “let me sing you a song to comfort you.”

“Is it very long?” Alice asked, for she had heard a good deal of poetry that day.

“It’s long,” said the Knight, “but very, very beautiful. Everybody that hears me sing it—either it brings the tears into their eyes, or else—”

“Or else what?” said Alice, for the Knight had made a sudden pause.

“Or else it doesn’t, you know. The name of the song is called ‘Haddocks’ Eyes’.”

“Oh, that’s the name of the song, is it?” Alice said, trying to feel interested.

“No, you don’t understand,” the Knight said, looking a little vexed. “That’s what the name is called. The name really is ‘The Aged Aged Man’.”

“Then I ought to have said ‘That’s what the song is called?’” Alice corrected herself.

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“No, you oughtn’t: that’s quite another thing! The song is called ‘Ways and Means’: but that’s only what it’s called, you know!”

“Well, what is the song, then?” said Alice, who was by this time completely bewildered.

“I was coming to that,” the Knight said. “The song really is ‘A-Sitting on a Gate’: and the tune’s my own invention.”

—*Through the Looking-Glass*

## 1. Terms and definitions

Many books and articles have taken as their title the famous line from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*: “What’s in a name?” I choose to raise a slightly different question: “What IS a name?”—not to answer the question definitively, of course, but simply to focus attention on some aspects of the problem. In doing so, I also want to focus attention on the field of *onomastics*, understood as the study of names. Such study is, in fact, carried out as part of several larger fields, including linguistics, ethnography, folklore, philology, history, geography, philosophy, and literary scholarship. In Europe, especially in Germany, it is a well recognized branch of philology, as witness the three-volume encyclopedic survey of the field recently published there (Eichler et al. 1996, 2,259 pp.) By contrast, in the US, onomastics is scarcely recognized as a scholarly field at all. To be sure, there is an organization called the American Name Society, which publishes a small journal called *Names*, but only a few linguists belong to the society, and most linguists have probably never heard of the organization or the journal. I myself have been interested in onomastics since my student days, and I have published articles in the journal *Names*; but even so, in 1992, when I edited the *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, it never occurred to me to plan for an article on names. Fortunately, the forthcoming second edition of that encyclopedia will repair my omission.

To begin with, the word *name* is often used to mean a term which can refer to anything, as when we say: “*Banana* is the name of a fruit,” or “*Murder* is the name of a crime.” In this sense, the word *name* is virtually synonymous with the word *noun*; indeed, in some languages, the same term can be used for both, e.g., French *nom*. In this sense, the relationship between a name and that to which it refers has been the topic of an extensive literature written by philosophers specializing in semantics (cf. Zabeeh 1968, Lehrer 1992, Lamarque 1994). These writers have had much to say about the material in the famous quotation from *Through the Looking Glass*. I must admit to ignorance of this large topic, and so I will go on to more limited aspects of names and naming.

Within the general category of names, people often use the word *name* for what we can more precisely call *proper names*. Within this subdivision, it is common to distinguish two principal types. One of these is *place names* or *toponyms*; another is PERSONAL NAMES, for which we have no commonly used term derived from Greek, but which are sometimes called *anthroponyms*. My discussion is limited to these two types, but it can be noted that other varieties exist, such as *ethnonyms*—terms referring to nationalities or ethnic groups—and *glottonyms*, referring to languages. An English example of both these types is *Chinese*, referring not only to the nationality, but also to the language that corresponds to the toponym *China*.

It is not easy to define the term *proper name* (Algeo 1973). In English and some other European languages, such words often appear in writing with initial capital letters; but obviously this cannot define the term for spoken language, or for writing systems like Chinese which have no capital letters. Are there grammatical criteria to identify the proper name?

In English, it is often observed that it is unusual for proper names to occur with *articles* — either indefinite (*a, an*) or definite (*the*). A sentence like *The George and a Henry come from England* is hard to interpret unless someone explains that it is intended to mean ‘The one person in this group named George, and one of the people named Henry, come from England.’

Such usage may be made clearer by the use of spoken or written emphasis: *He’s not THE George (who was King of England), he’s just A George (one of many people named George)*. But of course other languages have very different rules for using definite and indefinite articles; and many languages, such as Chinese, do not use articles at all.

It may be that, for a universal concept of the proper name, we must seek semantic and pragmatic definitions. To put it briefly, we may say that a proper name represents a social convention for brief reference to a *specific* entity, as opposed to a *class* of persons or places. For example, *George* may refer to ‘my cousin who is legally designated as George Baker; *the Bakers* refers to a family of people named *Baker* (as contrasted with *the bakers* ‘the people who bake bread’); *America* may refer to ‘the nation which is legally and politically designated as the United States of America’. Much more could be—and has been—said about this (cf. Lehrer 1994), but I only want to establish this simple understanding as a basis for further discussion.

As I’ve said, the types of proper names which are most often discussed are personal names and placenames. I wish to focus here, first, on a proposed characteristic of personal names, namely their universality; and second, on a frequently remarked characteristic of placenames, namely their descriptiveness. As we shall see, there is a relationship between these two topics.

Finally, at the end of this paper, I wish to point out that, in some languages, placenames may function not only as nouns, but also as adverbs. I believe that this may be the case in many more languages than have been reported.

## 2. Personal names and universality

There is a piece of folklore current among anthropologists regarding the question of whether personal names exist in all societies. So far I have not been able to trace this to a printed source, but it is somewhat as follows: Somewhere in the world there is a society where people live in very small, isolated communities. In such a community, people have no personal names; i.e., individuals have no name which other people use to refer specifically to them. Instead, they are referred to by descriptive expressions, e.g., 'the blacksmith' or 'the man who lives by the stream'. A woman will be referred to as, e.g., 'the blacksmith's wife'. Children will be referred to by expressions such as 'the blacksmith's elder daughter'; when this daughter gets married, she may be referred to as, e.g., 'the wife of the man who lives by the stream'. The question arises: Is there such a society? Or more to the point: Is such a society possible?

In discussing such a question, we need to realize that many people in the world do not have such highly organized systems of personal naming as we are accustomed to in our own societies. In European societies, as well as China and Japan, every person is assigned a public, legal name, in written form, around the time of birth; part of this usually reflects the child's father's name. The individual normally has that same legal name through life—with exceptions, e.g., where married women take on their husband's family names. In addition, a person may have informal "nicknames" during different parts of life. Sometimes these are used only by close relatives or intimates; in any case, they do not replace the public and legal names.

By contrast, in non-literate societies, where names remain unwritten, there is greater variety in naming customs (cf. the anthropological studies in Tooker 1984). A child may be given a "real" name at birth, but this may be kept a secret throughout life. Elsewhere, such a "real" name may be publicly known, but not used for everyday purposes; most of the time, a nickname—perhaps descriptive, e.g., *Shorty*—may be used. A person may be called by different names at different periods of life, or by different people under changing conditions. Use of certain names under particular circumstances may be forbidden by religious taboo; or then again, such names may be replaced by descriptive nicknames. Because of these factors, it may be difficult for the outside investigator of such a society to determine what a person's "real" name is, or even what name is commonly used in the community; taboos are likely to be especially strict when one is talking to outsiders.

I suggest then, that the apocryphal community I mentioned—in which nobody has a personal name, and people are referred to only by ad-hoc descriptions—does not exist. I suggest that any anthropologist who might have reported such a community was misled by the operation of taboos on uttering personal names. I suggest, in fact, that the use of personal names, having varying levels of descriptiveness, is a sociolinguistic universal of the human species. Of course, I will be glad if any colleague can provide evidence to prove me wrong. However, the concept of “descriptiveness” must itself be discussed, and I will do this in the following section, in relation to placenames.

### 3. Placenames and descriptiveness

In many parts of the world, it is a commonplace that some placenames have no etymologies that we can discover, e.g., European names like Rome, Paris, and London. It is possible that these were once descriptive expressions in European languages, but they became eroded, phonetically and semantically, so that their origins were no longer apparent. It is also possible that these names were borrowed in ancient times from other languages, of which we have imperfect knowledge, such as Etruscan in Italy or Gaulish in France, and this is why we do not understand their original meaning. But other European placenames have clear descriptive origins, in England, we find examples like *Newmarket* and *Whitechurch*.

In North America, many placenames were simply transferred from places in Europe, such as *London* and *Paris*—or, indeed, *Newmarket* and *Whitechurch*. Other American placenames do not have clear etymologies in English, but this is because they were borrowed from American Indian languages, in which they were descriptive formations. Examples are *Massachusetts*, meaning ‘big hill’, and *Connecticut*, meaning ‘long river’, both from an Algonquian language. In addition, however, North America has many placenames which simply describe the American locations to which they were applied, e.g., *Long Island* (New York State), *Great Falls* (Montana), and *Grand Canyon* (Arizona).

In other parts of the world, it is likely that placenames also have a variety of origins; some are transferred, some are borrowed, and many are descriptive coinages. However, the placenames of China and Japan present a special problem. On the surface, it seems possible to find etymologies for most of them in terms of the characters with which they are written; e.g., the Chinese placename *Taiwan* is written with characters meaning ‘platform’ and ‘bay’; and superficially, that might be a correct etymology. In fact, however, the name is a folk-etymology, based on the name of an aboriginal (Austronesian) tribe. Again, in Japanese, historical study reveals that some names were not formerly written with the same characters that are used today. For example, the

name of Mount Fuji has been written with a variety of characters over the centuries, and its original meaning is controversial; it may be derived from a language spoken in the area before Japanese. It seems possible that, in mainland China also, some placenames were borrowed from non-Chinese languages, such as Manchu (in the north) or Thai (in the south), and it may not be possible to arrive at precise etymologies for them.

### **3.1 American Indian placenames: Must every name have an etymology?**

I've worked for many years with American Indian languages, and I've been especially interested in the placenames used in those languages—many of which, as I've noted, have been borrowed into English. (For valuable recent studies of the sociolinguistics of placenames among American Indians and other peoples, see Feld & Basso 1996, Basso 1996; for etymological considerations, cf. Bright 2002.) However, especially when one reads discussion of placename origins, one finds the persistent bit of folklore that the meaning of words is, on some essential level, to be found in their histories, rather than in their use. Such belief in the covert significance of etymology is also especially common in discussions of Native American placenames.

One of the most prominent scholars in the field of American placenames was Erwin G. Gudde (1889-1969), a professor of German literature at Berkeley who became an authority on California history; he was the founding editor of *Names* (the journal of the American Name Society), and the author of *California Place Names*, one of the most respected among state placename dictionaries. Gudde's dictionary, published by the University of California Press, went through three editions between 1949 and 1969 — and the third edition was, surprisingly, translated into Chinese and published in Taiwan (1989). A fourth edition, revised by myself, came out in 1998. However, Gudde often seemed reluctant to examine possible American Indian etymologies for California placenames, and indeed his views of Native American cultures in general were often rather strange. Thus he stated, in his Preface: "The original inhabitants had very few geographical names, and practically all of these were descriptive... Mountains themselves were of no practical importance to the Indians and probably had no names."

This statement is remarkable, considering that Gudde was familiar with such works as T.T. Waterman's *Yurok Geography* (1920), which lists over 900 placenames (including mountains) used in the rather limited territory of the Yurok tribe and language, in northwestern California. For years I was puzzled as to how Gudde could have said that American Indians "had very few geographical names." Only more recently, while reading extensively on American placenames, I've realized that Gudde's statement reflects a long-standing attitude among onomastic scholars. In recent years, Leonard Ashley has written (1996:1403): "What we think of as placenames may differ

considerably from names Amerindians put upon the land. The red man [sic] considered himself a part of nature, not the master of it... The names he gave were more like descriptions: any large river might be ‘big river’... It is arguable that an Amerindian name that translates ‘where there is a heap of stones’ ... is no more a name in our strict sense than the expression ‘the corner grocery that stays open until midnight’.”

The ethnocentric message of these quotations seems to be that American Indians, seen by Whites as “children of nature,” did not have real placenames; to the extent that such names had clear etymologies, they could be regarded as mere “descriptions.” Of course, we might say the same of American English placenames like *Long Island*, *Great Falls*, or *Grand Canyon*. But two other points can be made. First, many Native American placenames were indeed morphologically complex and semantically “descriptive,” but they are not fairly represented by such translations as ‘where there is a heap of stones’. Thus the Karuk placename *asánaamkarak*, on the Klamath River in northwestern California, can be interpreted etymologically as ‘where a rocky flat place extends into the water’—but thanks to the “polysynthetic” character of the Karuk language, the native name is a single word and a single lexical item, and thus is as much a proper name as “Rocky Flats”.

At this point I want to return to the notion of what, in terms of grammar, constitutes a “merely descriptive” phrase vs. a “placename”. Obviously, in any language, one can put together a descriptive phrase to describe a place, like Ashley’s “corner grocery that stays open until midnight”. But abundant examples can be found, in Karuk or any other American Indian language, of placenames which, although descriptive, are not cumbersome phrases; rather, they are tight-knit words, sometimes quite short; thus the Karuk placename *inaam* means ‘place of performing the world-renewal ceremony’. In the Navajo language, spoken in Arizona, the placename *Chinli*<sup>n</sup> means ‘the stream flows outward’ (Wilson 1995).

Furthermore, Native Americans used many placenames that were not descriptive. They consisted of single morphemes, with no meaning except their toponymic reference. Among the Karuk tribe, village names included terms such as *Píptaas*, *Kiinik*, *Útkee*, *Tíih*, *Kúuyiv*, *Túuyvuk*, and *Vúpam*. These are just as unanalyzable, whether by the linguist or the native speaker, as European placenames such as *London*, *Paris*, or *Rome*. To be sure, all these names may have once been “descriptive”—but their etymologies, whether American Indian or European, have long been irrelevant to their usage. Their meanings are, to quote one of my favorite clichés, “lost in the mists of antiquity.”

The same principle applies to many names of Native American tribes and languages, such as those of the Cherokee and Choctaw, who now live in Oklahoma. (Some of these have also come to be used by whites as placenames.) It’s clear that English borrowed the first of these terms from the Cherokee self-designation *Tsalagi*, and the

second from the Choctaw self-designation *Chahta*. In their respective languages, these words mean nothing more or less than ‘Cherokee’ and ‘Choctaw’. However, some commentators on Indian ethnic names and placenames have strained their imaginations to propose fanciful etymologies. So it has been said that *Cherokee* comes from a word of the neighboring Creek language, meaning ‘people of a different speech’. However, the Creek word for ‘Cherokee’ is /calá:kki/, probably borrowed from Cherokee *Tsalagi*; whereas the unrelated word meaning ‘to speak a different language’ is /cilo:kk-itá/ (Martin & Mauldin 2000). As for the Choctaw word *Chahta*, it has been said that “its meaning is unknown”; but as my colleague Pamela Munro points out, one might as well say that the meaning of the Choctaw word *Chahta* is ‘Choctaw’. Of course such names must have had SOME remote historical origins; but those are lost to us, and they are irrelevant to the speakers of Cherokee or Choctaw. The same label, “Meaning unknown,” could be attached to European ethnic names such as *German* or *Greek*.

### 3.2 The case of Creek

The Creek or Muskogee language, a member of the Muskogean language in the southeastern US, presents interesting toponymic data, in particular because of a fact of recent history: the language was spoken in Georgia and Alabama until the early 19th century, but at that time the US government carried out a forcible removal of the speakers to the western territory which is now called Oklahoma. The results as regards toponymy are reflected in a recent Creek dictionary (Martin & Mauldin 2000), which is unusual in that it contains two sections on placenames: one on native Creek toponyms, the other on English placenames of Creek origin. The first of these gives not only geographical names currently used in Oklahoma, but also the hereditary groups called *etvlwv* /itálwa/, translated as ‘tribal town’ or ‘band’, which correspond to towns that existed earlier in Georgia and Alabama. Among American Indian languages, it is true that descriptive names often predominate, especially where certain language families are involved (e.g., Athabaskan); but the names of Creek tribal towns show a different pattern. Martin & Mauldin list 55 such names. Of these, 5 are “modified” derivatives of simpler names, such as *Yofalv-Hopayé* ‘Eufaula-distant’, comparable to English names like *West Virginia*. There are 16 clearly descriptive names, like *Tvlv-hasse* ‘town-rancid’ (Tallahassee in Oklahoma, Tallahassee in Florida), plus 5 which can be analyzed only in part. But 17 names are monomorphemic and etymologically opaque, mostly consisting of only three syllables, e.g., *Apehkv* (Eng. ‘Arbeka’), *Helvpe* (‘Hillabee’), *Kasihta* (‘Cussetah’), *Osuce* (‘Osochee’), and *Taskéke* (‘Tuskegee’). We may hope that future dictionaries of American Indian languages will also include sections on placenames, to give us further insights into Native naming patterns.

Recall now that the issue of “descriptive expressions” has come up in the discussion of both personal names and placenames. Let me summarize: All human beings can create such expressions, which may be long and syntactically complex. But I believe that all human beings also use *proper names*, which are typically shorter; these sometimes consist of single morphemes, but also often consist of morphologically close-knit, lexicalized terms. The failure to recognize this, as in the remarks by Gudde and Ashley, may in fact be thinly disguised racism.

#### 4. Placenames as nouns and/or adverbs

The first American Indian language that I studied, starting in 1947, was Nahuatl, spoken by the Aztecs of ancient Mexico, and still used by perhaps a million people. The Nahuatl language happens to have a very large number of descriptive placenames, many of which have been borrowed into Spanish, and some of which have become known internationally, such as the name of the volcano *Popocatepetl*, lit. ‘smoking mountain’, and indeed the name *Mexico* itself, from Nahuatl *Mexihco*, meaning ‘the place of the god *Mexihtli*’.

A feature of the Nahuatl language which surprised me from the beginning was that placenames seemed to have the characteristics of both nouns and adverbs. Morphologically, placenames normally end in locational elements such as *-c* (after vowels) or *-co* (after consonants), meaning ‘at, to’, as well as *-pan* ‘on’ and *-tlan* ‘near’; these then act like the case suffixes of Latin, or like the prepositions of Spanish or English. Such elements occur in clearly descriptive combinations such as *Atoya-c* ‘at the river’, *Anal-co* ‘at the opposite shore’, *Tlal-pan* ‘on the land’, and *Ati-tlan* ‘near the water’. Since these resemble locational case forms of nouns, one would expect them to behave like adverbial expressions, and indeed they do:

- (1) *Atoyac ihcac*, lit. ‘at-the-river he-is-standing’
- (2) *Tlalpan ihcac* ‘on-the-land he-is-standing’
- (3) *Atitlan ihcac* ‘near-the-water he-is-standing’

Note that the ordinary Spanish and English translations of these sentences would use prepositions: ‘*Está parado a Atoyac*, He is standing at Atoyac, at Tlalpan, at Atitlan’; the locational elements are PART of the Nahuatl placename, but they have to be expressed by prepositions in the European languages.

What surprised me about Nahuatl in 1947 is something that has been more recently pointed out in print by the Mexican scholar Miguel León-Portilla (1982): A

Nahuatl placename can not only function as an adverb, but also as a subject or object noun, like its Spanish or English counterpart. Thus we can say the following:

- (4) *Atoyac nican ca* ‘(The town of) Atoyac is here.’
- (5) *Tlalpan huey altepetl* ‘(The town of) Tlalpan is a big city.’
- (6) *Atitlan quittac* ‘He saw (the town of) Atitlan.’

That is, Nahuatl *Tlalpan* corresponds both to English ‘at Tlalpan’ and ‘Tlalpan’. Thus Nahuatl placenames are syntactically ambivalent in a way not found elsewhere in the language.

Another way of describing this would be to say that a Nahuatl form *\*Tlalpan-pan* does not occur. This could be called a kind of morphological dissimilation. It would be comparable to a Russian example: the city name *Tomsk* means ‘pertaining to the river Tom’; but the adjective *Tomskij* means both ‘relating to the River Tom’ and ‘relating to the city Tomsk’; there is no *\*Tomsk-skij*, just as there is no Nahuatl *\*Tlalpan-pan* (cf. Menn & MacWhinney 1984).

I received another surprise in the 1950s, when I was doing my dissertation research on the Karuk language in northwestern California. I discovered that this language had the same trait as Nahuatl, but with an extension: in Karuk, not just placenames, but ALL locational expressions are capable of functioning both as adverbs and as nouns. For example, the word for ‘door’ is *chivchaksurúraam*, lit. ‘closing-place’, as in 7; but it also functions as an adverbial meaning ‘at the door’, as in 8:

- (7) *Hôoy chivchaksurúraam?* ‘Where’s the door?’
- (8) *Chivchaksurúraam u’íhya* ‘He’s standing at the door.’

English has one word, *home*, which functions this way, both as a noun and as a locational adverb, as in *This is home* and *He went home*.

In fact, we may point to the example of a Karuk word which can either be a placename or not: The word for ‘bowl’ is *ásip*. The expression ‘in the bowl’ has a locational suffix *ásip-ak*, but this word is also the name of a native village, Asipak, so called because it’s in a bowl-shaped hollow; and the locational form can be used EITHER as a descriptive adverbial expression OR as a placename. Thus we have locational usage in a sentence like 9, and the locational expression can occur as a noun:

- (9) *Xuun ásipak u’íithra* ‘The soup is in the bowl’, or ‘The soup is in (the village of) Asipak.’
- (10) *Hôoy ásipak?* ‘Where is (the village of) Asipak?’

The Nahuatl and the Karuk languages are spoken about 2000 miles apart, and there is no known historical relationship between them. I have the impression that placenames in some other American Indian languages can function as both nouns and adverbs, but so far I have not found evidence; I will be grateful if any colleagues can point out such cases to me. I will also be grateful if colleagues can point out comparable phenomena in other parts of the world, e.g., Australia. I believe that placenames, and indeed personal names, have interesting and widespread properties, both grammatical and sociolinguistic, which make them deserving of linguists' attention.

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## 名為何物？——我對專名學的看法

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專名學是包含哲學、歷史學等許多學門關心的、研究專有名詞的學問。本文採用的是應用於北美印第安人名、地名研究的人類語言學的觀點。本文提出了一個問題：「專有名詞可不可以是描述性的詞語？」。例如，字面意義為“住在溪邊的人”的詞可不可以是個人名，而“溪邊的石頭”可不可以是個地名？此外，本文同時以加州的 Karuk 語、奧克拉荷馬州的 Creek 語與墨西哥的 Nahuatl 語的例子討論地名的語法特點。

關鍵詞：專名學，地名，人名，北美印第安人

「你很悲傷，」騎士擔心地說：「讓我唱首歌來安慰你。」

「這首歌很長嗎？」愛麗絲問道，因為她這一天已經聽夠了詩了。

「是很長，」騎士回答：「不過非常、非常美。每個聽我唱的人不是熱淚盈眶，就是……」

「就是怎樣？」愛麗絲問，因為騎士突然停了下來。

「就是沒有熱淚盈眶，你知道的。這首歌名叫“黑線鱈的眼睛”。」

「喔。那是這首歌的名字，是吧？」愛麗絲說，想盡力表現出感興趣的樣子。

「不，你不懂，」騎士看起來有點惱：「那是它被稱呼的名字。它真正的名字是“一個很老很老的人”。」

「那麼我應該說：『那是這首歌被稱呼的名字』？」愛麗絲更正自己。

「不，你不該，那根本是另一回事！這首歌叫做“方法與手段”，但那只是人們對它的稱呼而已，你知道的！」

「嗯，那這首歌到底是什麼？」這時愛麗絲已經完全被弄糊塗了。

「我正要說，」騎士說：「這首歌其實是“坐在大門上”，旋律是我自己創作的。」

——《鏡中奇緣》