Personal Names: Meaningful or Meaningless

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Abstract. Personal names are among most controversial problems in linguistics because of the status of these language units. The article discusses the problem of the meaning of proper nouns and attempts to prove that names are not meaningless and cipher interesting information either used as separate language units or employed in special functions as slangy personal names. The article assigns a special reference to personal names and their meaning in slang context. Such features as polysemy, synonymy, allusiveness and ways of developing a new meaning are discussed in the article and help to prove the significance of proper nouns. Many proper nouns in slang derived from the names of famous politicians, writers or well-known personages, the meaning of which, especially in rhyming slang, may not always be motivated, are analyzed as well. Various examples are used to illustrate the meaning of personal names and reject the idea of meaninglessness.

Urgency of the problem. There is a great number of proper nouns "nomina propria" in all the languages. However, the question of how to decipher any name here arises. Many treat personal names as a pattern of words, while linguists such as S. Potter, J. Dillard and others claim that personal names have different lexical meaning. Moreover, if personal names are used in slang context, they acquire new connotations and perform special functions.

Research object. Personal names in slang context, and multifarious information that is encoded in slangy personal names.

Research aim. To prove that proper nouns in the language include interesting information and are not meaningless.

Research objectives. To reveal different information of the meaning of personal names; to analyse such features of the language as polysemy, synonymy, allusiveness and ways of developing new meaning.

The problem of meaning. If we open any telephone directory and read through a list of names we will notice that a lot of names have some semantic meaning. Name or a proper noun "is a symbol pointing to one and only one person, animal, place or thing" (Potter, 1964: 142). Name is usually used to define individual properties, not taking into consideration various features of a particular thing. A proper noun is often conceived as a relationship between a symbol and a referent.

Though a name denotes some particular object and has a certain meaning, still it is open to discussion. The meaning of a personal name is the subject of theoretical controversy. The linguists S. Ullman, A. Gardiner believe that proper words have no lexical meaning and do not designate any concepts. While other linguists such as S. Potter, H. Mencken, claim that names have clear and very important lexical meaning. According to J. Potter, vocatives perform a very significant role because in early stages of a language the first words were names - proper nouns. Even "a primitive man felt that the relationship between name and thing … was close and intimate. The frivolous or malicious handling of a name in speech might imply insult or injury to the person bearing that name. The very name was hollowed" (Potter, 1964: 142).

Egyptians also believed in the power of a personal name. It was regarded as an inseparable part of man's essence in this life and life after death. A man, according to Egyptians, lives till people repeat his name.

From what has been said above, it is clear that proper nouns are not meaningless and provide a lot of important information. First of all names and surnames are the source revealing man's origin, because personal names are a kind of a code, containing the information about a person's origin, social status, character features, occupation. In connection with this we can quote H. Mencken who writes that people, especially in the United States of America, where diverse nations are mixed "show their alien origin … in their very names" (Mencken, 1955: 476). For example, a predominantly frequent personal name **Smith** in the United States comes from German **Schmidt; Warner** originated from **Warner; Johnson** comes from Holland **Joanis, Gianis**, etc. (Mencken, 1955: 507).

Hence, according to their meaning, Potter arranges personal names into four categories:
1. Patronymic
2. Occupational
3. Descriptive
4. Local

The first group includes such names as **Anderson**, son of Andrew, **Collinson**, son of Nicholas**, Dawson**, son of David (Potter, 1964: 146).

Proper nouns, which signify and testify profession of a man or any art or craft he specialised in, belong to the second category. It is obvious that **Salter** means "salt maker"; **Pitcher** denotes "one who covers or caulks with pitch"; **Spenser** names "dispenser, steward of a household"; **Warner** means "game keeper in a park or preserver"; **Latimer** - "Latiner or interpreter"; (Potter, 1964: 147).

Vocational and avocational names carrying some information about man's features, outlook and appearance are enlisted in the third class. **Black** implies "a dark

brunette"; **Sharp**- "discerning, alert, acute person". There are many insulting names; belonging to the same category, which would have clung to a man's children. For example, **Cameron** denotes "crooked nose"; **Kennedy** means "ugly head" (Potter, 1964: 149). The same group contains comparison between men and birds or animals. Here we can cite names like **Bull, Squirrel, Dove, Sparrow**. The similarity between a man and an animal, or some peculiarity of mind or temperament, eccentricity of conduct or behaviour might cause a man or a woman to be called by such names.

The last group embraces many proper nouns that originated from diverse place names. As for instance, the personal name **Simpson** indicates that once a family lived and had a house in the ancient village of that name in Berkshire, in England (Potter, 1964: 145).

Accordingly, many proper nouns acquire a new lexical meaning and become common names and thus pass into non-standard layer of words. The same name **johnson** whenever used in a slang context denotes "any thing" or **jackson** becomes a term of direct address signifying that the addressee is aware and well informed (used to express group acceptance or approval) (Flexner, 1975).

Moreover, a great number of personal names become insulting and have a derogatory connotation, having been applied as slang phrases. **Joe Schmo** is applied to name a fool; **Gange Kange** or **Jim Crow**, used to call "negro", expressing derogation towards this race.

Further on, many substitutes are coined from proper nouns for naming drugs. Marijuana can be called **Maui Waui, Mary Warner, Mary Jane, Marijane, Mary, Aunt Mary, juana, johnson**, etc. (Flexner, 1975). These slang phrases are created based on the similar pronunciation of the word marijuana.

Therefore, from what has been said above, it is possible to deduce that personal names possess a certain lexical meaning that depends on the context in which a proper noun is employed. Besides, many names - slang words are polysemantic, having a wide range of implications, which entirely defeats the theory that names are only symbols for naming a particular thing or a person.

Multifarious information in slangy personal names. As it has been mentioned above, employing various personal names and surnames can form numerous slang terms and phrases. There is a great number of proper nouns "nomina propria" which have different lexical meaning when they are used as slang words, for example, **Irvine** denotes "a policeman", **Jackson** stands for a term of direct address signifying that addressee is accepted by the group, **Machu Pichu** codes "very strong marijuana", etc.

Usually members belonging to underworld groups employ proper nouns with changed meaning. Especially many personal names are supplied for naming drugs and drug addicts and thieves use most of them.

Phrases of rhyming slang are frequently formed on the basis of proper nouns as well. Therefore personal names employed in different context undergo various lexical changes and form new configurations of connotations, which will be presented in the following chapters. These and other aspects of personal names in slang will be presented and discussed in the following chapters of the article.

Personal names in rhyming slang. According to M. Chomekov, there are two kinds of slang: common slang and special slang. Special slang is subdivided into jargon and cant. Cant embraces back slang, medial and rhyming slang (Chomekov, 1971: 53 - 56).

Rhyming slang is a very interesting phenomenon, because of its humour and secrecy. Expressions like **mother and daughter** standing for "water", **pig's ear – "**bear", **war and strife** – "wife", **Chalk Farm** – "arm" and others always sound funny and amusing and are used not only for the play of words but also for coding a message. E. Partridge claims that, rhyming slang "consists rarely of one, generally of two, rarely of more than three words, the last of which rhymes or nearly rhymes with the word in question" (Partridge, 1979: 267). For instance:

> **china plate** - "mate";
> **flea and louse** - "a bad house"**;**
> **box of toys** - "noise";
> **sorrow tale** - "three months in jail"
> (Partridge, 1979)

The origin of the rhyming slang is obscure as the origin of slang itself. Partridge assumes that it appeared before World War I; Hotten points a more exact date of the beginning of the rhyming slang, claiming that it appeared in 1844-1847. Rhyming slang is formed using various ways and personal names become one means of constructing it. Rhyming phrases carry great irony and humour, but they are not motivated, hence it is hard to explain their etymology because it is never transparent. There is no logical explanation why **Barnet Fair** denotes "hair"; **Charley Howard** stands for "coward"; **Cain and Able** - "table"; **Even Steven** - "even"; **Betty Lee** - "tea"; **Pat Malone** - "alone"; **Uncle Dick** - "sick"; **Billy Button** – "mutton"; **Jack Horner** – "corner" (Flexner, 1975). One thing is obvious that rhyming phrases, created by replacing stylistically neutral words, evoke a certain comic effect whenever used in a text or a dialogue. The formation of the comic and ludicrous connotation of speech is one of the functions of the rhyming slang, but the main feature of the rhyming slang is to make the language cryptic. On the basis of this, some linguists identify the rhyming slang with the cant. However, J. Franklyn stresses the difference between these two kinds of slang, claiming "there is a striking difference in fundamental character between the cant …, evolved and used by thieves and vagabonds, and the rhyming slang which they adopted. The former is grim, harsh and humourless; the latter, gay, frolicsome and amusing" (Franklyn, 1969: 20).

It is said that the rhyming slang is most frequent in London as Cockney dialect. According to J. Franklyn, the Cockney created the rhyming slang as a means of mystifying and humour. It is interesting to observe that the usage of the rhymed slang was spread in different parts of the world. "No other form of slang has travelled so far both socially and geographically as rhyming slang has" (Franklyn, 1969:

20). It is especially popular in Australian slang. Their personal names get a completely new meaning. Therefore, the British rhyming slang cannot be identified with the Australian rhyming slang. Nobody would understand the phrases of Australian rhyming slang in Great Britain. The following expressions are peculiar only to Australian slang:

Captain Cook - "look";
Joe Blake - "sneak"
Ned Kelly - "the belly";
Sydney Harbour - "barber"; etc.

<div align="center">(Partridge, 1979)</div>

From Australia, especially from Sidney, where the Cockney element is very strong, the rhymed slang reached the United States. Though Mencken objects to this idea stating that the rhyming slang is not very characteristic to the American language. Still it is spread in colloquial language because of its comic effect. Accordingly, the rhyming slang becomes a regional dialect, being noticed in various regions. Therefore, the phrases of rhyming slang become polysemantic, for example, *Rory O' More* means 1) whore, 2) door, 3) floor in England; in California it stands for a "door", while in Australia it substitutes "floor".

Thus in conclusion it can be said that personal names developed a new lexical connotation and became very significant items of the rhyming slang. They are used to build up secret lexis and become the basis of metaphors, metonymies and other stylistic devices, employed to coin numerous rhyming slang phrases.

Synonymy of personal names. Most slang words are homonyms of standard words and are spelled and pronounced just like their standard counterparts, but different in meaning. The following words may serve as means of illustration: *umbrella* denoting "parachute", *syrup* - "money", *witch*, *mouse* - "girl", *pot* - "marijuana" (Flexner, 1975). The vocables *umbrella, syrup*, *witch, mouse, pot* sound alike in their ordinary standard and non-standard usages. Heterogeneous slang terms appear as a result of diverse language because people from various parts of the United States or England speak differently and create new slang substitutes for already existing words from standard layer. What this proves is that slang becomes a regional dialect and at the same time it provides numerousness of synonyms for varying form phrases. Many synonyms are expressed with the help of proper nouns. There are various personal names that can serve as examples: "a policeman" can be coded as *John Law, big John, Charlie Irvine, Johnny-be-good, Peter Jay, Sam and Dave*, etc. (Flexner, 1975). The following names *jane, Mrs*. *Murphey, John* denote "a restroom" for male or female. Moreover, a lot of convertible terms are used as appellatives for drugs: *Mary, Mary Jane, Mary Warner, Maui Waui, Aunt Mary, Machu Pichu* (Flexner, 1975). These synonyms become a secret code for disguising important information, delivered in the presence of strangers. On the other hand, the multitude of synonyms reveals the fact that in different parts of the United States diverse substitutes are exercised. Moreover, proper nouns contain some additional information that deciphers the quality of a certain drug. *Machu Pichu* is a very strong

marijuana brought from Peru; *Maui Waui* names a type of marijuana from Hawaii islands, while *Mary Jane* or *Mary Aunt* are used as synonyms of a marijuana cigarette. Though being synonyms of the same drug, personal names have diverse spelling what confirms that slang is a regional dialect, for example:

Benny - Bennie - bennie;
Mary Warner - Mary Werner - Mary Worner;
Maui Waui - Maui Wowie - Maui wowee.

<div align="center">(Flexner, 1975)</div>

Pronunciation sometimes differs as well. Mary Jane is pronounced in northern dialect [mɛrɪ dʒeɪn], and in southern dialect - [meɪrɪ dʒeɪn] (Based on Roger W. Shuy's Dialectological Chart (Shuy, 1994: 496)).

In addition, slang names vary in form and expressiveness. Substitutes are created to alter frequently used common words such as "money", "man", "girl". Variations appear for the purpose of avoidance to use trite words in order to bring freshness into the speech. Slangy language always produces pleasure of and introduces novelty to the speech. Thus, to denominate a man serving in the army "soldier" sounds ordinary and plain, but in calling "soldier" *G.J.Joe, Bill Jim, Sammy, Eytie* (Flexner, 1975) inventiveness of a speaker is revealed. Accordingly, the use of nouns like *John Doe, Richard Roe, mister Charlie, Joe Zilsch, Joe Doakes, and Joe Blow* for indication of "any man" makes the intercourse more amusing and wittier, but on the other hand the language becomes cryptic, even ambiguous. Hence, as it has been mentioned above, only members of a particular class, where the word originated and is exercised, can decipher it. Further on, representatives of various professions, members of different organisations, races, etc. provide new-fangled synonyms of slang for indication of the same object or thing. For instance, black people call any white woman *Miss Ann*, while the soldiers in the army employ the proper noun *Judy* to denominate any female. *Barbie doll* is particularly popular among criminals, while *jane* or *Mary* became commonly accepted personal names, substituting the word "female" or "any white woman".

Configuration on meaning. It is common knowledge that each age introduces alterations in the language making it novel and fresh. Further on, during a certain period some words may retain their old meaning and at the time can develop a new one. Sometimes a word can be excluded from the language altogether. Therefore the range of connotations of any given word becomes wider and words become polysemantic. The same case is with personal names in slang. Some proper nouns possess only one implication and therefore are called monosemantic. For instance, the proper noun *Galilee* is a monosemantic slang phrase denoting "the southern states of the United States" (Flexner, 1975). The name and surname *Humpty Dumpty* codes the adjective phrase "short and thick"; *Jack Ketch* bears the meaning of "a public hangman" (Flexner, 1975). There is a great variety of other funny and picturesque monosemantic slang names in such as:

Sam Hill - "hell";
Peggy - "a nickname for a one legged man, esp. a beggar";
Mister Hawkins - "a cold wind"(hobo use);

George Eddy – "a customer who does not tip"(lunch counter use);
Cecil - "cocaine";
Blind Tom - "a baseball umpire" (baseball use);
Roger - "adv. Yes, OK" (W. W. II use), etc.
(Flexner, 1975)

However, as it has been mentioned above, numerous personal names in slang acquire more than one meaning. For example, the name of *John*, which is one of the most popular names in England and in the United States, possesses at least ten meanings:

1. A toilet, esp. a public toilet for males;
2. A man, an average man or typical man;
3. An army recruit;
4. A man who is keeping a girl, paying her rent and expenses in return for sexual favours;
5. A male lover, a girl's steady escort or date;
6. A wealthy, elderly homosexual who maintains a young homosexual in a man - mistress relationship;
7. A policeman;
8. A lieutenant;
9. A law-abiding citizen;
10. An idle young dude, a Chinese, a free spender.
(Spears, 1995).

In the following illustration the proper noun codes six notions. *Joe Blow* can be a substitute for:

1. A mealtime (circus slang);
2. Any person whose name is unknown;
3. A young male civilian (W. W. II use);
4. An enlisted man in the army (W. W. II use);
5. A musician;
6. An average man, any man at all.
(Flexner, 1975)

From the illustrations given above, it is possible to deduce that slang phrases become polysemantic when some social group transfers an old slang name to some new object, broadening the range of connotations of a certain proper name, word or phrase. Namely, *Jonah* denotes "a bringer of bad luck" in common usage, but rock and roll musicians caught the name, consequently applying the meaning of "a hipster, a rock" (Flexner, 1975). In other term of exemplification the word *Joe* is used as a substitute for "cafe" in the slang of restaurants (Flexner, 1975) but the members of underworld added the implication of "a street man", "beggar" (Flexner, 1975).

Approximately, personal names are employed in various syntactical positions. A proper noun may be exercised alone as a slang phrase like *Dracula* "anything excellent"*, Mickey* "a character from a children comics", or can be used in different word combinations with other parts of speech: nouns, adjectives, verbs. For instance, *Fancy Dan* "a stylishly dressed man"*, Elizabeth club* "a society of Negro household maids, exchanging gossip about their employees, salaries and the like", *Black Maria* "a prison van", *to raise Cain* "to make noise", (Flexner, 1975). Besides, a lot of sustained metaphors are created by additional words, for instance: *Eve with a lid on* "a piece of apple pie"; *Adam and Eve on a raft* "bacon and eggs"; (Flexner, 1975).

Consequently, when any slang name is exercised in a different combination the implication of a name becomes expanded and changed. It is interesting to observe how the same proper noun acquires another shade of connotation. The name *John* may serve as a means of illustration. When this slang name is employed alone, it denotes "café", but when some surname is included, the name alters its meaning:

Joe Blow - is a substitute for "a mealtime" or "a young male civilian";
Joe Doakes - "any male whose name is unknown";
Joe Gish - "any sailor, any midship sailor";
Joe Zilsch - "any male student college".
(Spears, 1995)

In combinations with some attributes the same name develops a new shade of meaning. Hence, *sloopy Joe* implies "a long pullover or sweater"; *holly Joe* means "any agreeable person" (Spears, 1995). Moreover, even the slightest change of grammatical category may introduce a new implication. It has been mentioned above that *sloopy Joe* is deciphered as "a long pullover or sweater", but *sloopy Joes*, the combination in which the plural number is used gets the implication of "any cheap restaurant or lunch counter serving cheap food quickly" (Spears, 1995). The same case is with the proper noun *Long John* combined with the attribute "long" is an equivalent of "a tall, thin, tanky man", while *Long Johns* becomes already a synonym of "long woollen underwear" (Flexner, 1975).

Therefore, it is possible to draw a conclusion that personal names contain variform lexical meaning. Besides, different handling of any slang name in various positions with other parts of speech creates various configurations of meaning of a proper noun, which becomes a substitute of quite a different notion or object.

"Speaking", "rhyming" and "allusive" personal names. According to S. Potter, all vocational and avocational names carry with them some information about physical or external characteristics of a man. A person could be nicknamed *Juda* for his traitory character. A vain fellow, seducing a girl can be called *Don Juan*.

It is generally known that people tend to compare men, their appearance or features. Hence, there are various slang names, which are derived from the names of well-known personalities and are applied to other people who have some features of a man, the name of which is used to nickname somebody. Therefore, such slang names are motivated as their meaning can be explained. For example, *Sammy Vick* is a synonym for "one who overeats and originated from the name of Sammy Vick who was known for his vicarious appetite. *Juda* denotes "a traitor" and derived from biblical Juda who betrayed Jesus. *Caesar* means "a type of men's hair cut" and derived from historical Julius Caesar because it resembles the hairstyle seen on a typical bust of Julius Caesar (Partridge, 1979).

Yet, there are many proper nouns with unknown connotation. It is hard to explain why *Galilee* denotes "the southern states of the United States" or *Dickens* stands for "devil" (Flexner, 1975). Especially a great multitude of unmotivated slang names is build up in the rhyming slang:

Tony Blair - "hair" (Internet);
Aristotle - "bottle" (Partridge, 1979);
Ayrton Sena - "tenner" (a ten pound note) (Internet);
Sir Walter Scott - "pot" (Partridge, 1979);
Jenny Linder - "window" (originated from the name of a famous singer) (Flener, 1975)
Captain Cook - "book" (Flexner, 1975);
Richard the third - "bird" (Partridge, 1979);
George Washington pie -"cherry pie". (Flexner, 1975)

The names given above, are connected with some historical personalities, writers, sportsmen or artists but the objects, the names' code, have no allusions to these particular people. The only one common feature of the proper noun and the notion it codes is the rhyming of the last word.

On the other hand, a lot of personal names in slang appeared from the works of literature, especially from mythology. Many slang names are allusive to particular characters. As a matter of fact, the legend of the first people Adam and Eve becomes one of the most important sources of numerous slang phrases and terms. Slangy proper nouns like *Eve* "a rib on an air plane wing assembly"; *Cain and Able* "table"; *Adam and Eve* "to believe"; *to raise Cain* "to make a noise"; or phrases *Adam and Eve on a raft* "bacon and eggs"; *Eve with a lid on* "a piece of apple pie" (Flexner, 1975) bear allusions to the myth of Eve and an apple, Eve being made from Adam's rib.

Further on, the works of literature and certain characters provide many personal names in slang though the meaning may not be connected with a character at all. For instance, *Dracula* stands for "anything excellent" and derived from B. Stoker's novel *Dracula*; *Oliver Twist* "fist" was coined from the name of the main character Oliver Twist from Dickens's *Oliver Twist*; *Faust* codes the notion of "ugly" and derived from the legends about Faust; *Robin Hood* meaning "good" is allusive to old legends and the brave archer Robin.

Conclusions

From what has been said above, the following conclusions can be drawn:
1. The meaning of proper nouns is a subject of controversy. Some linguists Ullman, Gardiner maintain the opinion that proper names devoid of meaning, others, Potter, Mencken claim that personal names are very meaningful and informative.
2. All personal names are classified into patronymic, occupational, descriptive and local groups on the basis of their meaning.
3. The rhyming slang is one of the most interesting kinds of special slang. It is formed on the basis of rhyme. Personal names become frequently used for coining rhyming slang phrases, therefore the rhyming slang grants ludicrous and picturesque connotations of proper nouns though the meaning may not be always explained. Besides, the Australian rhyming slang has characteristics peculiar only to it and differs from the English.

4. People from different groups exercise slang names, hence, a great variety of synonyms substitute common and trite words and the meaning of proper nouns become expanded.
5. Different combinations of personal names with other parts of speech result in broadening of meaning. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, the change of grammatical categories of number add new implications to the names in slang.
6. All personal names in slang are divided into monosemantic and polysemantic. The name gets a new connotation when an old slang name is applied to denote a new object.
7. There are many personal names, which originated from the names of real persons or are allusive to some works or characters from literature but the meaning of a name may not be connected with the features of a certain personality or character. Sometimes a slang phrase with a personal name can be created for the play of words.

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Asmenvardžiai: prasmingi ar beprasmiai

Santrauka

Asmenvardžiai yra viena iš prieštaringų problemų lingvistikoje dėl savo daugialypės prasmės. Kai kurie mokslininkai teigia, kad vardai neturi jokios leksinės reikšmės, o kiti bando įrodyti, kad juose koduojama svarbi informacija. Šiame straipsnyje yra bandoma įrodyti, kad asmenvardžiai turi tam tikrą semantinę reikšmę, kuri yra papildoma, vartojant asmenvardžius slengo kontekste ar kaip atskirus kalbos vienetus. Nagrinėjant vardų reikšmę anglų, amerikiečių ir australų slenge iškyla tokios asmenvardžių savybės kaip daugiareikšmiškumas, sinonimija, naujų prasmių įgijimas įvairiose žodžių junginių konstrukcijose ir sakiniuose. Taip pat nagrinėjami įvairūs vardai slenge, kildinami iš žymių politikų, rašytojų ar literatūros personažų vardų, bei jų įdomios, bet ne visada motyvuotos reikšmės.

Straipsnis atskleidžia daugiaplanę ir spalvingą asmenvardžių prasmę slengo kontekste ir įrodo, kad vardai nėra vien tik tam tikras garsų junginys. Įvairūs pavyzdžiai iš žodynų, laikraščių ir interneto net padeda įrodyti asmenvardžių prasmę ir paneigia teiginį, kad tikriniai daiktavardžiai yra beprasmiai kalbos žodžiai.

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