

NAMING AND POWER – A PERSPECTIVE ON THE ACT OF NAMING

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Abstract

Through its engendering and categorizing nature, the act of naming encompasses a multitude of functions and meanings, which trigger numerous subliminal (pragmatic) effects. This paper aims to present an overview of the act of naming from the perspective of the aforementioned implications. The research focuses on the power relations established between the agents of the act of naming – the name giver and name bearer (the recipient of a name). The approach is theoretical, and it refers to the pragmatic, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of name-giving. The first part of the study outlines the main theoretical principles of the nature and typology of name-giving. The second part of the paper provides a detailed analysis of two specific aspects: on the one hand, naming as the intersection of identity and alterity and, on the other, the examination of the power relations established between the two entities. The methodology employed pertains to linguistics, pragmatics, and philosophy of language. The investigation also relies on sociocultural, symbolic, and religious studies. The research hypotheses are illustrated by referring to different social practices or scenes from the Bible with universal symbolic function.

Keywords: *naming, name, power, identity, alterity*

Résumé

L'acte de *nommer*, par sa nature créatrice et ordonnatrice, rassemble une multitude de valences et de significations, ainsi que leurs conséquences au niveau subliminal (d'ordre pragmatique). Cette étude vise à esquisser une perspective sur l'acte de *nomination* à la lumière de ces implications. L'épicentre de la recherche réside dans les dynamiques de pouvoir qui se déploient entre les parties prenantes de l'acte de nomination – entre *le nominateur* (celui qui attribue le nom) et *le nommé* (celui qui reçoit le nom). La recherche abordera théoriquement le thème proposé en

considérant les aspects pragmatolinguistiques, culturels et symboliques du processus dénominatif. Notre approche débutera par la mise en évidence des principaux fondements théorétiques concernant *la nature* et *la typologie* de l'acte de nommer, puis procédera à une analyse détaillée de deux aspects spécifiques : le processus de dénomination en tant que point de rencontre entre *l'identité* et *l'altérité*, et l'exploration des *dynamiques de pouvoir* qui se créent entre ces deux instances. La méthodologie adoptée extraira les outils d'analyse du domaine de la linguistique, de la pragmatique, de la philosophie du langage, ainsi que de la sphère socioculturelle, symbolique et religieuse. Les hypothèses formulées seront illustrées à travers différentes pratiques sociales ou des récits bibliques revêtant une signification symbolique universelle.

Mots clés: *nomination, nom, pouvoir, identité, altérité*

1. Premises

The act of naming something is specific to human individuals. It is a display of the presence of consciousness. Name-giving has a primordial role, facilitating the acknowledgement and understanding of the physical world, of the metaphysical world, and of the self. Naming is loaded with profound meanings, and with cultural and spiritual value.

This study aims at the analysis of the act of personal naming, in other words, the analysis of the act of attributing a proper name to a person by a name-giving instance. The paper addresses topic from a linguistic, pragmatic, sociocultural, historical, symbolic, and religious point of view. The main point of the present research consists of the identification and analysis of the power dynamic found at a subliminal level during the process of name-giving.

The main cosmogonic myths of humanity have as their central theme the presence of the Creating Word (*Logos*). The most famous myth is the biblical scene of the Genesis of the Universe. Within it, the existence of the world is conditioned by the reception of a signifier, a verbal sign of identification, through which, at the same time, the materialization of the world is achieved: "And God said: 'Let there be light!' And there was light". (*Genesis* 1, 3). In addition to its creative function, naming has got an ordering function, enabling the differentiation between opposites, between contrasting elements or aspects, thus ensuring a certain hierarchy and order in the created Universe: "And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night" (*Genesis* 1, 5). Therefore, the Creating Word (*Logos*), as a primordial sign, is the original element of the Universe, through which everything that exists was created and simultaneously named: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1, 1). In this sense, every act of naming, in general, has a creative and ordering function, as the article will show.

The naming act is defined as a “linguistic baptism” (Felecan 2018: 133, our translation), an assignment of “a verbal sign or a suite of verbal signs with designative function” (Felecan 2014: 13, our translation), carried out by an actant. In a broad sense, naming has two valences. On the one hand, naming common objects involves assigning a verbal sign to a category of things that share certain characteristics. The assignment of a proper name, on the other hand, results in differentiating a certain individual from the rest of the elements from the same class, investing it with a unique, identifiable “personality” (see Felecan 2014: 14). The second type of naming can refer to a wide spectrum of “baptized” elements: persons, deities, places, waters, mountains, landforms, animals, literary characters, avatars, games, monuments, events, etc.

Naming is a declarative speech act (see Felecan 2014: 57), since its achievement involves the combination, the interaction between the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary components (see Austin 2005: 99-100). The act of naming qualifies as a language act (see Felecan 2014: 57). The speech act is “a communicative action performed by a speaker by making an utterance in a particular context” (DPAD 2023: 15, our translation). Thus, the act of naming, as a speech act, has a pragmatic character, causing changes in the surrounding world (see *Ibidem*: 15).

In a narrow sense, the act of personal naming refers to the assignment of anthroponyms, that is, to the process of distributing a naming element, performed by a subject in relation to another instance or to itself (self-naming). In other words, the act of naming is “a complex operation of building a concept (*name*) through the mediation of a linguistic form, simultaneously using other forms of the same kind and involving two subsidiary actions” (Felecan 2014: 15, our translation): *the act of assigning a name* and *the act of using a pre-assigned name*. This implies the existence of two instances, *the agent* (the one who assigns the name) and *the patient* (the one to whom the name is assigned) (see Felecan 2018: 134).

As the result of a *declarative speech act* (see Felecan 2014: 57), naming implies the presence of a declarative verb. This process is carried out through the two aforementioned successive acts: on the one hand, the act of naming and, on the other, the act of using a pre-assigned name (see Golopenția-Eretescu (1972 I/II), *apud* Felecan 2014: 33).

2. Conventional naming vs unconventional naming

Over time, names and naming have been the subject of extensive debates, especially regarding the existence or non-existence of their meaning and the nature of their possible connotations. Thus, in the field of psycholinguistics and the philosophy of language there are numerous polemics about names and the act of naming, stretched over several centuries and addressed by various theorists. Among

the most well-known approaches we mention Mill's theory (1988), countered by Frege (1971) and Russell (1956) and later reiterated, in a reinterpreted manner, by Kripke (2001). Recently, modern viewpoints have emerged, asserted by voices such as Searle (1969).

Daiana Felecan (2014: 17, 57) distinguishes between two types of naming: *official naming* and *unofficial naming*, or *primary* and *secondary* naming (*Idem* 2018: 134). These types of naming imply the assignment of *conventional* anthroponyms (in the case of official names) and *non-conventional* anthroponyms (unofficial names), respectively.

Conventional anthroponyms are “constitutive proper names” (Felecan 2014: 17, our translation), i.e. first and family names established in an official, institutionalized manner, usually within the initial baptism, and are registered in an official database. They are given by a figure invested with a certain authority (parent, godfather, etc.) and are chosen according to certain criteria, based on cultural (community) and/or religious practices (for example, assigning names of saints, as a sign of entering under their protection). Official anthroponyms have an arbitrary, conventional character, and are not endowed with intrinsic meaning (see *Ibidem*: 18). Their semantic loading is achieved only through an intervention by the name giver, who assigns to the name “interpretative potentialities depending on the nominal genealogical component, on one's own aesthetic values, on cultural tastes, etc.” (*Ibidem*: 19, our translation). In this context, it is necessary to mention the *causal chain theory* advanced by Searle (1983) regarding the intentionality of naming. In the case of official naming, intentionality is achieved exclusively at the level of a chain of communication, of a successive series of naming acts. Searle (1983: 240) identifies intentionality through the successive reiterations of the same name, the meaning of which is built as repeated uses occur.

As for unconventional anthroponyms, the official, conventional framework is omitted, as they are given in informal contexts. They are “*circumstantial proper names*, derived either from *other proper names* (*deanthroponyms*, *detoponyms*) or from *common and individual group names* (*deappellatives*)” (Felecan 2014: 17, our translation). In the class of unconventional anthroponyms, Daiana Felecan distinguishes the following categories: nicknames, pseudonyms, hypocoristics, individual and group names undergoing anthroponymization (see *Ibidem*: 19). In the case of unconventional anthroponyms, the affective involvement of the name giver is obvious, as these names arise from the name giver's desire to endow the name bearer with a phonetic unit that captures certain characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, belongings, etc. Therefore, unconventional names function as *iconic signs* and are, at the same time, “‘derivative’ nominals, resulting from the name giver's desire to

assign a specifying/characterizing verbal label to an individual" (*Ibidem*: 20, our translation).

3. The proper name – a point of confluence between identity and alterity

As we have previously stated, the act of naming involves two figures: the name giver and the name recipient (name giver vs name bearer). Within the dynamics between these two figures, the giving of a name results in contamination of the passive figure with a series of identity markers of the naming agent.

During the naming process, the name giver's identity expands beyond its own borders, invading the space of alterity. Through the act of assigning a name, the naming entity "gives birth" to the linguistic existence of a pre-existing element (referent). Through the received name, a thing "is passed into language, it begins to exist as such, autonomously, but it does not describe itself" (Felecan 2018: 138). Therefore, the name does not describe *itself* or *through itself*, its meaning is not intrinsic, but historically determined. The autonomy of the named entity is also limited by an external action: receiving the name implies automatically taking over other defining characteristics for the one who gives names. Along with the "linguistic birth", the name giver attributes to "the baptized" individual a series of identity markers linked to their own personality (attitudes, ways of thinking, preferences, etc.). These are included in the assigned name through the presence of certain semes historically introduced in the name, and by means of external, contextual attributes that occurred within the naming act.

Thus, "an identity transplant" is produced, "an extirpation of the self and its moving into the territory ruled by otherness" (Felecan 2018: 135, our translation). Assigning a name places the identity under the sign of the alterity, through "a temporary or definitive relocation of the Self in You" (*Ibidem*: 138, our translation). The individual is found in the passive role of internalizing the attitudes imposed by the one who names them and places themselves in a relationship of subordination to the naming agent.

4. Naming and power

In the previous section, we argued and demonstrated that the act of naming implies the assessment of a psychological, social, and cultural mark of the name giver on the named entity. Thus, we find it necessary to study the power relations that derive from this operation.

We consider it obvious that, in the case of the relation between the naming agent and the named entity, the possession of the power and the force of imposition belong to the former. Daiana Felecan suggests this aspect in the study devoted to *Identity and alterity in the act of naming*: "Metaphorically speaking, the assignment

of names reiterates offensive actions on a battlefield” (2018: 137, our translation). The one who receives the name is subordinated to the name giver, whose nominal paternity the name bearer must acknowledge.

Since ancient times and in various communities, names have been given to an heir by the parent (usually this has been the father’s task) or by the person responsible for the child or, in some traditions, by the child’s godparents, corresponding to their role as spiritual parents. The act of naming is a marker of the transposition of identity onto a named entity, an indication of belonging to a community/nation and, at the same time, a sign of subordination to a higher authority from the point of view of holding power: the name giver. The name giver acts as a responsible figure, as the agent who attributes part of their identity to the named entity and, implicitly, imposes oneself as the voice that holds the authority in other aspects: behavioral, educational, social, religious, etc. The named entity (most often a child) is thus placed under the protection of the one who names them. In most cultures, the act of naming is seen as an act of exercising power, an act of taking possession or imposing one’s mastery. The one who assigns a name is considered a master or protector.

For example, in certain societies, such as the Russian one, female individuals receive names that underline their paternal descent, thus placing them under the father’s protection. The name *Alexandra Feodorovna* suggests that the person named *Alexandra* is Feodor’s daughter, so she is under the father’s protection and, most of the time, is subjected to his right to decide. The same principle applies in the case of male descendants (for example, *Ivan Feodorovich*). The specific difference is that, according to traditional practices, once married, women will receive, instead of the father’s name, the feminine version of the husband’s name, as a mark of the change of the person responsible for her protection and for exercising his decision-making authority over her. For example, if *Alexandra Feodorovna*’s husband is named *Vladimir*, her name will become *Alexandra Vladimirovna* once the marriage is officially recorded. These practices are also found in other Slavic societies and, in other forms, in other communities.

Name-giving can be seen as a demiurgic act reduced to mundane dimensions, which is why it is generally construed as an interaction between two entities that are not on the same hierarchical level. Of these two agents, the one that imposes itself as a demiurge by means of naming acts is a master, having various superior attributions. Thus, just as the divine entity “created the world in the beginning” through the Word by means of naming the world and became, at the same time, the master of the created universe, the name giver, in a general sense, symbolically re-creates this action at the moment of assigning the name. An example is the act of naming animals performed by Adam before the original sin. As a being created “in the image of God” (*Genesis*, 1, 26), the human being is gifted with divine attributes

and is placed on a higher level compared to other beings. The most conclusive evidence in this regard is the human individual's endowment with the ability of verbal communication, which is clearly superior to the communication methods of other beings, thereby attesting the existence of *consciousness*. Immediately after creation, Adam receives the task of naming the living creatures, as a symbol of taking possession of them: "And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought *them* unto Adam, to see what he will call them; and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that *was* the name thereof" (*Genesis* 2, 19). Therefore, naming is a mark of being situated in a higher plane of existence, as well as a sign of having power.

Taking into consideration the aforementioned construal, the intention to change a name arises, most of the time, as an act of "rebellion" against the instance that imposed the initial name, as a denial of its power by the name bearer and a refusal to accept the legacy (linguistic and, implicitly, of any other nature) "decreed" by it. The name bearer denies the parts inherited from the other and performs an action of purification/elimination of the other's elements from one's identity. This onymic denial undermines the nominal parent's power and implies the name bearer's assertion of autonomy, of gaining a certain degree of independence in relation to the name giver.

Conclusions

The conclusions of this study converge to the idea that the act of naming is a performative act placed at the basis of human knowledge, which delimits and creates reality, making it possible to perceive and understand it. The act of personal naming is a complex process, which can be carried out on several levels, each of them contributing to the formation of a broad image of the world and of metaphysics, enriching them with new meanings by creating new concepts. Name-giving is marked by implicit confluences and power relations, establishing clear relationships between the entities involved. They take on different roles in the initiated dynamic, i.e. active vs passive roles, corresponding to the established power relationship. Thus, the hierarchy that indicates the power relations places the naming entity on the higher level, as this is the protective agent which contributes to the name bearer's identity, holds responsibility, and takes on the decision-making role. At the opposite pole lies the name bearer, the entity hierarchically occurring in a lower position, a submissive and passive agent who receives identity markers and does not have a decision-making role.

The identification and analysis of these relations contribute to the complex, holistic understanding of the dynamics of the act of naming and, at the same time, to the reinterpretation of the implications derived from them.

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