

Metonymy and Multiple Naming in North American Indian Societies

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In the Western tradition, names are everywhere iconic indicators of the autonomy of the *persona*, of the Self as a locus of emotional and existential resistance to the community. This has given rise to endless speculation about the manner in which proper names have signification even though most are deprived of lexical meanings (Wilson 1998:xi). Individual names therefore subvert the standard (largely Jakobsonian) theory of semantic codification (Marconi 2000) in which the relation of sign to signified is transmitted through the semantic content of the sign. To identify properly the subject of a simple sentence such as "John is at home" in order to gauge the truth of the assertion, a listener must know from the unspecified context to which "John" the speaker is referring, transforming "John" into a metonym of the category of proper names. Furthermore, for the sentence to be meaningful to the listener (which is not the same thing as its truth value, as Noam Chomsky has pointed out), the listener must invoke a second unspecified context, attaching to the name "John" visual and personality clues coded to that specific listener, i.e., the listener's memories of John. These clues in the listener's memory do not correspond to agreed-upon semantic conventions that constitute the referential pool that is determinative of the socially-'objective' knowledge beloved by Karl Popper's analytic approach and criticised (but in the end legitimated) by Wittgenstein. Since the speaker assumes the listener to have some memories of John but does not know which specific codes the listener will invoke, "John" exists as a metonym in the dialogical space linking the speaker and the listener but does not exist in either the speaker's or the listener's shared semantic (and therefore metaphoric) frame of reference. The individual proper name is therefore doubly metonymic without having any of the metaphorical qualities of the sign. In other words, unlike common names ("table", "dog"), proper names are not easily metaphorised.¹ Similarly, the decodification of a metaphor depends on shared knowledge which is a) immediately accessible to the listener (or the speaker would not have invoked it) and b) widely shared across class, ethnic, religious and other boundaries in a given society. In contrast, the decodification of a double metonym (the proper name) can only operate by the listener invoking specific knowledge to which the speaker has at best incomplete access, thus defining an intersubjective space defined, for the speaker, by lacunae to which he implicitly orients the listener by his invocation of a proper name he

¹ One exception, obviously, is for physical objects that have some iconic properties in a given culture; during the Second World War and up to the 1960s, North Americans might say that a person "was built like a *Sherman* tank" (and not "like a tank"), after the aggressive American Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman. The American tank to which his name was attached was inferior to its German counterparts, which in fact did nothing to halt (and may have contributed to, given U.S. Army attempts to propagandise what was an inferior product) the later metaphorisation of the name. Another exception is those very few names that are metaphorised because they are extremely common, like "John" in English, such that the class of "Johns" becomes a sign of anonymity.

thinks is known to the listener.² Names, therefore, are paradoxically denotative of a double boundary condition ("John" is a particular person and no other; "John" is the pure signifier of the link between speaker and listener, who do not share the signified of the sign but share the knowledge that what is not accessible to one is accessible to the other) and of ambiguity. Under certain conditions, therefore, proper names therefore create and define ritual communicative spaces composed of pure metonyms.³

Mythologically-oriented societies construct and especially link categories to one another by means of metonymic analogies, thus creating multiple truth-statements about the universe and especially, as Lévi-Strauss has shown in the *Savage Mind*, about individuals vis-à-vis the social universe. Beyond the truth statements established by mytho-logic, these constructions appear to be psychologically irrational, prompting some researchers (for example, van Gennep) to establish a "logic of irrationality" to describe systems of categorisation among these peoples. However, the contemporary rejection of evolutionary classifications of systems of categorisation into 'rational' and 'irrational' (even calling into question the heuristic aspect of 'culture' as a means of describing a single society), has sometimes led to a resurgence of neo-liberal and functionalist explanations for practices such as changing individual names over time; in particular, this is sometimes erroneously considered a sign of the weakness of the Self subject to the tyranny of an ontologically dominant, small-scale, relatively homogeneous and overly-integrated collectivity. In this view, the mechanical Durkheimian solidarity typical of the primitive community creates a Self (or Selves) that is (are) dominated by the exigencies of the Us: for example, when fearless warriors are needed for the survival of the group, names invoking aggressive qualities are given to individuals already possessing qualities of bravery (or are given to infants in the hopes that the young boy will acquire these characteristics as he grows up).⁴ When such qualities are no longer needed, the name changes, the individual Self is re-aligned with the functional needs of the community.

However, this view ignores that the problem of defining the nature of the metonymic links invoked by the class of proper names (and almost all languages have such a category in contrast to common names) is inseparable from the issue of culturally-specific beliefs regarding individual agency, since the class of proper names refers to a category composed of autonomous Selves. However, many traditional Native North American societies in the past had a practise of changing individual names during the course of a person's lifetime, as well as of simultaneously using several different systems of naming individuals that were not necessarily congruent with one another: kinship

² Does the speaker know, for example, that John is Mary's lover when speaking to Mary that "John is at home"? Does he know that Mary has another lover and is thinking of leaving John? Probably not, but one can be certain that Mary cannot escape this private knowledge when listening to the sentence.

³ "Under certain conditions" refers to cases in which the speaker knows for certain that the proper name is unknown to the listener and subsequently furnishes other information; for example, a lecture in a classroom. However, this supports my assertion of the 'pure' metonymic nature of proper names since the speaker since the speaker knows that his listeners are incapable of deciphering the meaning of the name and furnishes information.

⁴ The metonymic logic underlying this latter point is the same as the alimentary and other taboos underlying ritual prohibitions: for example, a nursing mother must not drink too much water or she will dilute her milk; an infant must not be too exposed to the sun or he will 'dry up' and not grow, etc.

terms, teknonyms, and nicknames.⁵ Names changes were especially frequent during an individual's youth and early adulthood. These changes could be recognised formally by an initiation ritual or informally by general consensus as significant events marked a person's life. Because these practices call into question Western beliefs of Self and agency, they are often marginalised by the Western intellectual and attributed to a particular social category, a Band society. Exoticising the Other ("orientalising", in Edward Said's famous conceptualisation) because of this practice requires that Western societies are as "occidentalised" as the exotic Other is orientalised (to choose one example of this view):⁶

The Western individual is a self-contained, rational subject, locked within the privacy of a body, standing against the rest of society consisting of an aggregate of other such individuals, and competing with them in the public arena

By contrast,

Selves [in Band societies] ... are "grown within a field of nurture... they expand to incorporate the very relationships that nourish them.

And,

In [Western societies] , relationships are strictly confined to external contacts in the public domain, and do not violate the integrity of the private, subjective self. [In Band societies] selves expand to fill the entire field of relationships that constitute them. (Ingold 1999:407).

In other words, in order to account for 'primitive' Selves that are simultaneously 'weak' (hardly distinguished from others even to the point of disassociating personal names from the ontological Self) and 'strong' (failing to distinguish themselves clearly from others, Selves "incorporate the very relationships that nourish them"), some writers have created an unbridgeable gap between Us and Them that hearkens back more to Henry Sumner Maine's 19th century evolutionary classification (*Ancient Law*, 1861) of human societies than to contemporary visions of the complicated workings of personal agency and subjectivity in non-Western societies. This latter view sees multiple names as sites of ambiguity and aporia in moral and social orders (cf. Battaglia 1999), as individuals are subject to multiple centering or de-centering effects caused by unequal exchanges across frontiers delimiting different bases of power.⁷

I propose an alternative hypothesis for the phenomenon of multiple names among North American Indians, based on my interpretation of mythological thinking among the Sekani (Lanoue and Desgent 2001), an Athapaskan-speaking peoples of northern British Columbia (Canada), who construct the collectivity through metonymically linking the various and unique qualities acquired by individuals as a result of circumstances bringing hunters into contact with the transcendental nature of animals. The transcendental dimension is a leftover (in their view) of the time of Transformation at the beginning of

⁵ Although by now everywhere in North America Native People use a Western-style system of personal name and family or surname (sometimes with a "real" and "Indian" name attached between parantheses).

⁶ Typical of hunters and gatherers, although not all hunters and gatherers live in bands.

⁷ Even in analyses of Western notions of individual agency that do not explicitly acknowledge multiple naming as a Western phenomena, notions of agency is constructed through a series of carefully orchestrated rituals as when a schoolchild learns to express itself in writing, being thus redirected from an ephemeral communicative mode and limited audience (speech) to a (semi-) permanent record of the Self aimed at an audience not limited by class, locality, time or even language (Kress and Hodge 1988:256).

time in which animals possessed qualities superior to humans (which they still possess, according to the Sekani: unlike people, animals need no weapons, social organisation or language to survive in the same environment as humans). By transforming himself into symbolic prey (isolated and with no food), hunters invite animals to demonstrate their transcendental dimension through unusual, non-instinctual behaviour. The hunter then becomes metaphorically identified with the animal and metonymically linked to the transcendental (a-temporal) dimension in which normal boundaries between categories disappear; he is then able to take on the special qualities of the animal.

The rule of silence observed by the hunter when he returns to the community creates a limited ritual space in which the metaphors linking one individual to 'his' animal acquire new signifieds from which the collectivity is imagined from the emergent metonyms.⁸ Multiple names (either by changing names or by using nicknames, tekonyms and kinship terms) parallels this process by transforming the Self into a recursive metonym of the imagined and ephemeral collective; by splitting agency from the Self (the hunter is no longer completely human but part animal; the hunter is no longer one person but several as he takes on multiple names), the ephemeral nature and transcendental origin of the collectivity is given concrete form and is transformed into a polity.

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⁸ I cannot in this space broaden my argument concerning silence as a ritual space but only allude to the process of ritualisation by which banal and accepted signifieds are detached from their signs by a) adherence to a behavioural formula, or b) enforced repetition of words or gestures. Both empty the space of other signs, at first denaturing the signifiers remaining in the space and then enriching them when these acquire new signifieds within the space. Enforced silence operates in both dimensions of ritualisation: adherence to a (negative) formula composed of a limited number of signs (not all animals give access to the transcendental; not all men manage to gain access to the transcendental). However, everyone knows the transcendental qualities of other hunters; it is the silence that surrounds them that allows metonymic shifts from one metaphoric field to another, resulting in the imagined collectivity.