

# **A Semantic Analysis of Personal Names in English and Arabic**

Dr. Mehdi F. al-Ghazalli (Lecturer) Faculty of Arts, AlMustansiriyah University

## **Abstract**

The present study is concerned with introducing a meaning-based analysis of personal names (PNs) in Standard English (SE) and Standard Arabic<sup>1</sup>(SA). It is based on the hypothesis that in both languages surnames are roughly derived from the same sources. Thus, the study is limited to the investigation of personal names including surnames. The paper is divided into two parts: the first sheds light upon the meaning of proper names in English and their relationship with definiteness, origin of surnames and ambiguity of proper names. The second part deals with PNs in Arabic, the way they are coined their categorizations into different classes and on what bases surnames are derived. The results of the study have validated the hypothesis of the work.

**Keywords:** Personal names, ambiguity, analysis, definiteness, surnames.

## **1. Personal Names in English**

### **1.1 Meaning and Personal Names**

“Names play such an important role in human relations that they are often endowed with magic potencies and surrounded by elaborate superstitions and taboos” (Ullmann, 1962:71)

Various traditional and current theories concerning PNs have been proposed by philosophers and semanticists to account for the status of such nouns in language. The theories in question aim to highlight the characteristics of PNs from a philosophical and semantico-syntactic perspective. The advocates of the theories hold much controversy over whether PNs have meaning or not. For space necessity, it is not Possible to introduce them here (for more details, see Pollock, 1982:41-54).

Philosophers and semanticists have suggested many definitions for PNs; for instance, Ullmann (1962:73) asserts that “a proper name merely serves to identify a person or object by singling it out from among similar items”. The name is closely associated with its owner that it stands for his reputation; good or bad .Langendonck (2008) maintains that “a proper name denotes a unique entity at the level of langue to make it psychologically salient within a given basic category”

In fact, there is a traditional philosophical problem that arises in connection with PNs, which does not arise in connection with other referring expressions(see 1.2 below).The problem is that plausible arguments can be introduced to show that PNs have meaning, and others to show that PNs do not have meaning. The very simple reason behind holding the view that PNs have meaning is that how is it possible for words having no meaning to serve systematic functions in language? The argument of saying that PNs have no meaning, on the other hand, is that we do not talk of them as having meaning as one says “John is a philanthropist”, it is possible to ask what “*a philanthropist*” means, but not what “*John*” means .The idea of meaning is a slippery one where it can be easily applied to common nouns but it cannot always be applied to PNs (Cooper, 1973:86f, see also Jaszczolt, 2002:126f).

It is concluded from the forgoing discussion that one is not forced in dealing with PNs to choose between two opposing terms "meaningful" and "meaningless" since the latter has a pejorative sense; but it is plausible to say that the majority of PNs have meaning and the minority have reference only(see 1.2 below).

## 1.2 Proper Names and Reference

As mentioned in (1.1 above), PNs are used to refer to their bearers. Brown and Yule, 1983:210f) hold the same thesis in that the use of PNs (e.g. Mr. Bennet, Elizabeth, Edward, Plato etc) as referring expressions is generally a less controversial issue if they are compared to common nouns. It is suggested that PNs are used to show unique identification for individuals. We should be careful in dealing with this view in that PNs can be so only in specific contexts. *Elizabeth* is not necessarily referring to the Queen, as there is a large number of *Elizabeths* in the world. The same holds true of *Plato* which can be used to refer to one's son's cleverness, and not necessarily to the famous Greek philosopher.

1. Plato is on the second shelf of your library.

In example (1), *Plato* refers to one of the books written by the philosopher. Since PNs can be used with this extended referential function, it is unwise to maintain that they have a uniquely identifying function.

On the other hand, Kempson(1977:14) introduces a totally distinct view in stating that "in proper names there is a one-to-one correspondence between word and object". According to her, "object" means "referent or bearer of the name", she is wrong in sticking to this perspective because such correspondence between PNs and referents is not always true as noticed above.

Logically, PNs are the only genuine names because their bearers cannot be identified by description, but by "deixis in a context of direct acquaintance"(Harrison, 1979:144). As in (ibid) Mill in his book *System of Logic* maintains that a PN such as *John* although borne by many persons "it is conferred upon them to indicate any qualities, or any thing

which belongs to them in common". Therefore, PNs do not express properties since we cannot infer what properties a person has from the mere fact that he has a certain name (Cooper, 1973:87).

### **1.3 The Rise of Surnames**

Depending on records found after 1066(the advent of the Norman Conquest), surnames came gradually into use in England between 1400-1066.During the period preceding 1066, a person usually used to have one name only- a Christian name belonging to himself and not necessarily to his father or his grandfather. The growth of surnames is a sequence of two reasons: the increase of population and the expansion of government. The simplicity of life of a small population does not make individuals bother themselves to have more than one name; and the confusion caused by two people having the same name and living in the same village does not arise too frequently. However, life after 1400 got more complicated due to the growth of population and the expansion of towns resulting from travelling and the contact between strange trade men. In addition, under William and his successors' reign, records became more elaborate and voluminous. The old system "one man- one name" turned to be unworkable and its replacement took three centuries to complete where the present system of naming has become established since then. In a word, surnames arose to avoid confusion between people (John&Levitt, 1975:47).

On his part, Langendonck(2008) holds that surnames are often derived from the towns, villages, or other places people lived in, particularly when they settled elsewhere but were known to have originated in a place whose name they were given. The oldest use of surnames is unclear, but owing to the insufficiency of using single names to identify individuals in

heavily large populated cities, surnames have come into use. He adds, in many cultures, the practice of using additional descriptive terms in identifying individuals has arisen. These identifying terms or descriptors may indicate personal attributes, location of origin, occupation, parentage, patronage, adoption or clan affiliation.

#### **1.4 Personal Names and Language Universals**

No one can deny that it is impossible to find a human language devoid of proper names (personal and non-personal). Surnames are no exception in this regard. Langendonck (2008) made a nice survey to prove the universality of sources of surnames. Accordingly, they are derived roughly from the same sources across linguistically and culturally unrelated languages. For instance, in the English speaking countries, most surnames of British origin fall into several types: occupations (eg Smith, Baker), personal characteristics (eg Short, Brown), geographical features (eg Hill, Lee) place names (eg Flint, Hamilton) patronymics<sup>ii</sup>(eg Richardson, Johnson) matronymics (eg Marriott from Mary) and paternal, from patronage (eg Hickman meaning Hick's man). In French, people are named, following the same traditions: Legrand( the tall), le Carpentier (carpenter), le Parisien(from Paris). The same sources of surnames are true of the Spanish-speaking countries: Delgado (thin), Molinero(miller), Aleman from (Germany). In Russian, one finds the same: Tolstoy(fat or stout), Portnov (tailor), Moskova (from Moscow). Romanians follow the same procedures in deriving their surnames: Barbu(bushy bearded), Fieraru(Smith), Munteanu(from the mountains) Moldoveanu(from Moldova). In Netherlands, the Dutch adopt the same path in forming theirs : De Groot(the great), Van Weert( of the city Weert) (ibid).

## 1.5 Common Nouns vs Proper Names

Scholars often discuss common nouns and PNs concomitantly due to the fact that the latter usually in grammar or semantics are subsumed under the former. However, a criterion-based distinction is drawn between the two.

In surveying the traditional theories of PNs, Pollock(1982:49) maintains that PNs have a denotation but not connotation; the sense of a PN, as used on a particular occasion, is uniquely determined by its denotation(i.e, its referent cf 1.2 above)(see also Jaszczolt:127).Ullmann(1962:73f) states that the criterion of identification helps to draw a dividing line between common nouns and PNs in that many philosophers and linguists are in agreement in regarding PNs as identification marks. Unlike common nouns whose function is to subsume particular specimens under a generic concept(eg say various houses, irrespective of material, size, colour or style under the class concept 'house'), a PN merely serves to identify a person or object by singling it out from among similar items. Ullmann(p.76) adds that the great majority of PNs have no plural. As a general tendency, this is no doubt true and even inevitable since the identifying function of PNs does not go easily with the idea of plurality. The essential difference between common nouns and PNs lies in their function: the former are meaningful units while the latter are identification marks. He (p.77ff) clarifies that although it seems fairly easy to distinguish the two categories, the border-line between them is totally clear cut. For instance, many PNs are derived from common nouns (eg place names like *Newcastle*; surnames like *carpenter* Christian names like Pearl).When a common name is made into a PN, the change may be accompanied by a restriction in range, but it is not necessarily the case. This is true of common nouns becoming place-names: there are many

*black forests* or *new markets*, but as a PN *The Black Forest* and *New Market* will denote only one place or possibly a small number of homonymous places.

### **1.6 Definiteness and Ambiguity of Personal Names**

Superficially, there is a close relationship between definite descriptions and PNs in that both usually refer to specific entities (eg David or the house). Scholars, on their part, do not unanimously approve this view. Let us consider sentence (2) and (3):

2. Isaac Newton was awarded Nobel Prize for physics.

3. The person who discovered gravity was awarded Nobel Prize for physics.

Suppose that it was Robert Hooke who discovered gravity. Then, if Robert Hooke was awarded Nobel Prize for physics, then (3) is true and (2) is false. In (2) there is a PN while in (3) we have a definite description. The PN refers directly and uniquely to one person, while the definite description can refer to different people, depending on the state of affairs. The semantic properties of PNs and definite descriptions are different. PNs are rigid designators; their meaning depends on the object they name. Normally, the meaning of definite descriptions can remain unchanged while the person or object they refer to differs within circumstances (Waismann and Harre, 1965:128f). Jaszczolt(2002:9) states that definite NPs refer but do not need to mean that the speaker refers to an entity by using them. In (4) the definite noun phrase 'the architect of this church' used as a definite description has a referent, a particular person, but the speaker may have just said that whoever the architect was, he or she was insane.

4. The architect of this church was mad.

So the property of madness is attributed to whoever satisfies the description.

In addition to what has been mentioned so far, Cooper (1973:88) confirms that PNs involve some sort of ambiguity in at least two ways. First, a PN will mean something different each time it applies to a different individual (see 1.2 above). Second, if a PN means the same as some descriptive description which applies to the individual, then since there might be some descriptive expressions which uniquely apply to that individual.

PNs resemble definite noun phrases in that their intended referent may be ambiguous. *The man* may refer to more than one male individual previously mentioned in the discourse or present in the non-linguistic context. *J. Smith* may similarly refer to more than one individual named *Joseph Smith*, *John Smith*, *Jane Smith* etc (Nina, 2008)

## **2. Personal Names in Arabic**

The researcher has found out that SA and colloquial Arabic varieties roughly adopt the same strategies in the choice of PNs. Therefore, they will be compared to English.

### **2.1 Introduction<sup>iii</sup>**

During the pre-Islamic period and onward, Arabs used to follow certain traditions in choosing their personal names. Roughly, the same traditions have been followed in modern Arabic dialects. In classical Arabic<sup>iv</sup>, some names were chosen by tribes for various reasons: (1) to threaten their enemies (eg Muqâtil: fighter, Ghâlib: winner, Asad: lion) (2) to express their optimism of their sons (eg Sa'ûd: happy, Malik: owner, Najy:

rescued) (3) to involve the sense of roughness of land or trees (eg *ṭalḥa* : thorny tree, *ḥajar*: stone) or (4) the newly born child is named depending on what his father comes across while the child's mother is being in labour. For instance, if the father meets a *fox*, the child will be named accordingly: *Ṭhaḡlaba*. The same holds true of *dog*: *kalib*, *crow*: *Ghurab*(Ibin Duraid,d.321H,nd:5f) (seealsoAlṭhaḡaliby,d.430H,2007:406f)

Ibin Qutaybah(d.276 H,1999:67) adds that some people's names are taken from names of plants(eg *ḡalqamah*: colocynth) others from people's characteristics or attributes(eg *al-kareem*: generous, *al-shuḡaḡ*: brave). In the Arabian Peninsula, females were named as males. This is attributed to the fact that the tribal societies at that time need be seen greater in number by others so that they would think a lot before invading each other.

After the rise of Islam, the tradition of naming persons by the use of plants' or animals' names went on; and other factors for naming had become involved. For instance, beautiful names were chosen (*al-Rabiiḡ*: Spring) and got widely spread due to the Prophet's position against the choice of ugly names. He (P.B.W.H) recommended that parents should select beautiful names that bring happiness and satisfaction to newly born children. In surveying the traditions that Arabs followed in naming persons during the pre- and post-Islamic period, one finds that the same traditions have been roughly adopted by modern Arabic native speakers (Murâd, 1984:36, 46). Al-Samaray (1961:4) adheres to a rather distinct view in that classical Arabic is no longer the variety spoken all over the Arab homeland i.e. different Arabic colloquial dialects are in use. This has had its impact on the way the PNs are used or chosen in every Arabic speaking country (see 2.2.1 below).However, Al-Samaray (p.5) does not state that the traditional ways of naming became totally absent(see 2.2.2

below). Ulaiq (2001:12ff) further indicates that PNs in SA and modern Arabic dialects are attributed to:

1. Natural phenomena (eg Qamar; the moon, kawkab: planet, Hilal; Crescent)
2. The sequential order of the newborn child which has sometimes a part to play in naming him or her(eg Faryd; the unique, Wahyd; the alone, Rabi6a; the fourth).
3. Well-known or outstanding figures such as poets, heroes, wise men, presidents, artists or leaders (eg Siina; Avicenna; Saladdiin, AbdulNasir).
4. Grandfathers' or grandmothers' names to glorify them specially the eldest son.
5. Harmony of the names so as to be of the same musical tone of the family members (eg Ranny, Rajjy, Wally, Haddy).
6. Particular occasions or events(eg Ramadhan: the fasting month, Najjah; success, Zilzâl: earthquake)
7. The fear of envy in that ugly names are attributed to infants (as some people believe) to keep them away from being envied. Nevertheless, this tradition has become of a very minor role to play due to the spread of education and knowledge in the Arab homeland.

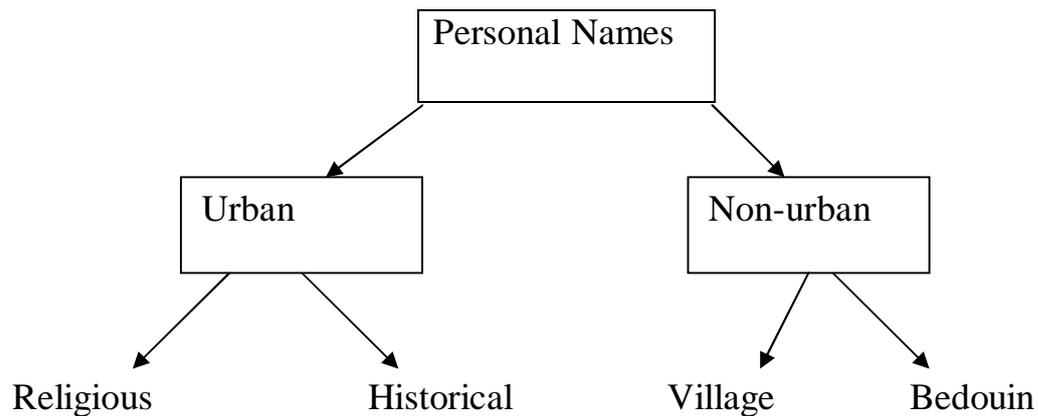
In modern Iraqi Arabic, for instance, some names are chosen because they are either associated with primitive beliefs (eg envy) or superstitions. For instance, uneducated families tend to name their newborn infants in such a way that shows triviality. These families believe that the more

names signal bad attributes, the more their bearers get welfare (eg Shanan: one who brings two persons in conflict, Irhayf: the weak person) (Murâd, 1984:128f).

## **2.2 Categorization of Personal Names**

As referred to in (2.1 above), a number of factors or strategies are involved in designating PNs to people. It is possible to for more than one factor to be at work in choosing such names. Scholars introduce many classifications of PNs used in Arabic.

In this regard, Al-Samaray ( 1961:3-18,1963:53-66 and 1964:59-74) presents a three-fold categorization of PNs in SA, and dialects used in north Africa Arabic-speaking countries(eg Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt) and Middle East Arab countries (eg Syria, Iraq, and Arab Gulf states). He (p.5-16) states that PNs in Arabic can be classed into urban and non-urban. Under the heading of the former falls PNs that both SA and Arabic varieties have in common since they are religion-based (eg *Muhammad, Abdullah: the slave of Allah*) or history-based (eg *Omar, Othman, Ali, Al-Hassan and Al-Hussein*).Unlike in SA, in colloquial Arabic varieties spoken in the eastern part of the Arab world, the last two names are used without the definite article. Non-urban names are used in villages and in Bedouin. Following is a diagram to show the categorization under discussion.



**Diagram: Categories of Personal Names found in Classical Arabic and Some Arabic Colloquial Varieties**

Al-Samaray (p.11f) proceeds to show that two types of PNs could be subsumed under the subclass of history-based urban names: novel and old-new. The former refer to those PNs that have been coined and used for males and females alike (eg *Ibtisam: smile, Najjat: rescue, Rajaa: hope*). The rationale behind the choice of such names is that people became fed up with the names that have been very common for a long period of time. So, they wanted something novel to attract others' attention. The old-new names, on the other hand, used to be very common and were deserted, but they have got currency once more. The rise of such names is attributed to the revival of Arab nationalism (*Khalid: immortal, Tark: the morning star, Umaima: Smith's hammer*).

As to non-urban proper names(p.14), they encompass place names used to identify people(eg *Waddy: valley, Shaṭy: coast*), plant names(eg *Wardah: flower, Rumanah: pomegranate*) animal names(eg *Ghazal:*

*deer, Bazoon: cat, ħamamah: dove*) tool names(eg *Saif: sword, Minjal: sickle* ).

### **2.2.1 Names signalling Personal Attributes**

Al-Samaray(1964:60f) discusses PNs which reflect the features of their bearers (eg Mubarrak; blessed, Jabbar; great).Some of these names involve the evil sense intended to frighten enemies(eg ʿaddwan; aggressive) or some refer to a colour or a physical feature(eg Aswad; black, Akhadher; green,Khshaym; of a small nose).He(1963:57) adds that the same holds true of the north Africa Arab countries(eg Budirballah; a shabby person, Busnadir: of separate long teeth).

### **2.2.2 Names referring to Place or Time**

It is doubtless that inhabitants of cities and of Bedouin use names that are associated with certain places or days or months. So, women whose infants are given birth on the days of the week will be named accordingly (eg *Sabti; Saturday, Jumiʿah; Friday*).Or sometimes the months of the year (according to Hijri calendar) play a part in the choice of the child's name (eg *Rajjab, Shaʿban* etc).Places' names, on the other hand, are often taken as PNs; this is found in Arabian Peninsula (eg *Waddy: valley, Nahr; river*) and north Africa Arab countries(eg *Bunḫailah; one who is born in an area full of palm trees*)( Al-Samaray,1964:63f; Al-Samaray,1963:57)

### 2.3 Surnames in Arabic

Surnames are used in SA and colloquial Arabic dialects where they are derived approximately from the same origins. Some surnames are based on persons' fathers' occupations such as *Şayad*, *hunter*; *haddad*; *Smith*; *haṭṭab*, *woodcutter*. Other surnames are attributed to the tribe that a person belongs to like *Tamimy*, *Jiboory*, *Zwaiyi*, *Sinawsy*. In addition, people's birthplaces often become the reason behind their surnames: for instance, one comes across surnames: *Basrawi* (from a city in Iraq), *Karaki* (from a city in Jordan), *Ghadamisi* (from a city in Libya) etc (Murâd, 1984:132f,136).

Al-Samaray (1963:59) emphasizes that the same sources to derive surnames are followed across the whole Arab homeland. Therefore, it is quite possible to find surnames such as: *Najjar*, *carpenter*; *Fahaam*, *coalman* or those arising from physical defects where they are preceded by the definite article (al-) like *Alaḅwar*, *the one-eyed man*; *Alaqraḅ*, *the bald man*; *Alaḥddab*, *the hunchback man*.

### 3. Conclusions

On the basis of what has been introduced so far, the following findings have been drawn:

1. In accordance with the discussion held among English linguists and semanticists concerning PNs, the majority of such names have meaning whereas the minority has reference only.
2. It is not always true that there is one-to-one correspondence between PNs and their referents in both languages.
3. In Arabic and English, among other languages (eg Spanish, Russian, French, Romanian etc), surnames are roughly derived

from the same origins. Therefore, this has verified the hypothesis of the present study. Moreover, it is safe to say that surnames are language universals.

4. PNs in Arabic are coined depending on more reasons than those found in English.
5. Unlike in SE, in SA and modern Arabic dialects, primitive beliefs and superstitions still play a role in the choice of PNs.
6. SA and modern Arabic dialects have more frequently religion-based names than English does.
7. English linguists and semanticists hold a lot of controversy over whether PNs are meaningful or meaningless. Arab linguists, on the other hand, unanimously agree that PNs do have meaning.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Whenever Arabic is mentioned, reference is made to SA and Arabic dialects used across the Arab world since SA and the varieties spoken employ the same strategies in the choice of PNs.

<sup>ii</sup> Names which distinguish a person by his father are known as patronymics. Those which refer to a person's mother are called matronymics.

<sup>iii</sup> Key of Transliteration Symbols of Arabic Letters (AlKhudary, 2004:13)

a :أ b:ب t:ت th:ث j:ج ħ:ح kh:خ d:د z:ذ r:ر z:ز s:س sh:ش ص:ص dh:ض ط:ط đ:ظ  
6:ع gh:غ f:ف q:ق k:ك l:ل m:م n:ن h:ه w:و y:ي ؟

<sup>iv</sup> Classical Arabic and Standard Arabic are two terms alternatively used in the present paper