

On the Identity (and Individuation) of Proper Names

Sara L. Uckelman
Durham University
s.l.uckelman@durham.ac.uk
@SaraLUckelman

Language and Ontology workshop
Newcastle, UK
26 September 2025

When are two names
the same name?

Where the question comes from (1)

Historical linguistics

- Recent renewed interest in lexicographical projects for medieval European languages:
 - ▶ Middle English Dictionary
 - ▶ Anglo-Norman Dictionary
 - ▶ Dictionary of the Older Scots Tongue
 - ▶ Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources
 - ▶ Dictionary of Medieval Latin from Celtic Sources
 - ▶ Dictionnaire Étymologique de l'Ancien Français
 - ▶ Le Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé
- Proper names are often excluded from these dictionaries; they only turn up in, e.g., the *OED* when they stop being proper names and start being common nouns (bobby, guy, jack, jezebel, jill, john, etc.).

Where the question comes from (1)

Historical linguistics

- Recent renewed interest in lexicographical projects for medieval European languages:
 - ▶ Middle English Dictionary
 - ▶ Anglo-Norman Dictionary
 - ▶ Dictionary of the Older Scots Tongue
 - ▶ Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources
 - ▶ Dictionary of Medieval Latin from Celtic Sources
 - ▶ Dictionnaire Étymologique de l'Ancien Français
 - ▶ Le Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé
- Proper names are often excluded from these dictionaries; they only turn up in, e.g., the *OED* when they stop being proper names and start being common nouns (bobby, guy, jack, jezebel, jill, john, etc.).

Is this a problem?

Where the question comes from (2)

Lexicography

- Proper names are, first and foremost, *nouns*: In order to have a comprehensive view of a language at any given time, names must be taken into account.
- Proper names are not treated the same way as common nouns by lexicographers; they get their own (specialist) dictionaries.
- Proper names (especially given names) in medieval Europe are often some of the first/earliest documentary evidence we have for the development of vernacular languages.
- They are also our best and earliest witnesses to dialectal differences.

Where the question comes from (2)

Lexicography

- Proper names are, first and foremost, *nouns*: In order to have a comprehensive view of a language at any given time, names must be taken into account.
- Proper names are not treated the same way as common nouns by lexicographers; they get their own (specialist) dictionaries.
- Proper names (especially given names) in medieval Europe are often some of the first/earliest documentary evidence we have for the development of vernacular languages.
- They are also our best and earliest witnesses to dialectal differences.

Excluding proper names from the scope of lexicographical projects for historical languages risks overlooking an important source of linguistic information!

Scope of my interest

Generally:

- Proper names in Western Europe, before 1600.
 - ▶ Personal names (of people): given names, nicknames, surnames, bynames, epithets, etc.)
 - ▶ Names of animals
 - ▶ Place names

Scope of my interest

More specifically:

- Given names (not surnames, bynames, or epithets)
- *The Dictionary of Medieval Names From European Sources* (<https://dmnes.org/names>):

The *Dictionary* aims to contain all given (fore, Christian) names recorded in European sources written between 500 and 1600, less the names of historical/non-contemporary people and names occurring only in fictional literature or poetry. Development of the Dictionary is planned in two phases:

- ▶ First phase: Sources from Great Britain, Ireland, Iceland, Scandinavia, Iberia, Italy, France, Germany, Hungary
- ▶ Second phase: Sources from Eastern Europe (Romania, Greece, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic states, etc.)

Where lexicography meets metaphysics

Dictionaries require some sort of background ontology to decide:

- what goes into the dictionary and what doesn't: dictionaries are dictionaries *of* . . .
- given two instances of the above, do they go into the same entry or different entries?
- what things in the dictionary get entries and which get cross-references to other entries?
- what properties will be included in each entry (meaning, etymology, variant spellings, historical usage, pronunciation, related words, etc.)

Where lexicography meets metaphysics

Dictionaries require some sort of background ontology to decide:

- what goes into the dictionary and what doesn't: dictionaries are dictionaries *of*. . . languages, words, phrases, proper names, biographical entries, concepts, etc.
- given two instances of the above, do they go into the same entry or different entries?
- what things in the dictionary get entries and which get cross-references to other entries?
- what properties will be included in each entry (meaning, etymology, variant spellings, historical usage, pronunciation, related words, etc.)

When are two names the same name?

When are two names the same name?

- Are *Sara* and *Sarah* **the same name**?

When are two names the same name?

- Are *Sara* and *Sarah* **the same name**?
- Are *Sara* and *Sarah* **variants of the same name**?

When are two names the same name?

- Are *Sara* and *Sarah* **the same name**?
- Are *Sara* and *Sarah* **variants of the same name**?
- Are *John*, *Johannes*, and *Giovanni* **the same name**?

When are two names the same name?

- Are *Sara* and *Sarah* **the same name**?
- Are *Sara* and *Sarah* **variants of the same name**?
- Are *John*, *Johannes*, and *Giovanni* **the same name**?
- Are *James* and *Jimmy* **the same name**?

When are two names the same name?

- Are *Sara* and *Sarah* **the same name**?
- Are *Sara* and *Sarah* **variants of the same name**?
- Are *John*, *Johannes*, and *Giovanni* **the same name**?
- Are *James* and *Jimmy* **the same name**?

Another way to put these questions:

- Are names individuated by their spelling?
- Are names individuated by the person who bears them?
- Are names individuated by their language?
- Is there a (linguistic ?/philosophical?) difference between two names being the same or being variants of the same name?

Canonical name form vs. variant name form (1)

In terms of onomastic ontology, every individual token of a name is a variant form of *some* name (diminutives and hypocoristics are considered to be variants for the purposes of this section). These individual tokens are taken as essentially gendered, that is, *Philip* used by a man and *Philipp* used by a woman will be treated, in our ontology, as variant forms of different names. The single name which a variant is a variant of is called a *canonical name form* (CNF). Each CNF is a standardized spelling of a name chosen from amongst a group of variant spellings (see §4), and corresponds to a header entry in the Dictionary. [DMNES Handbook for Editors].

Canonical name form vs. variant name form (2)

A *variant name form* (VNF, also sometimes called a 'docform') is the spelling that a CNF takes in an individual citation. All VNFs are variants of some CNF. VNFs will often be duplicative; that is, a 1355 citation of *John* and a 1356 citation of *John* are considered different VNFs, as is an English citation of *John* and a Scots citation of *John*. Thus, each VNF is essentially tied to its language, gender, date, and source, whereas CNFs are essentially tied only to their genders [DMNES Handbook for Editors].

Moving from lexicography to philosophy

Can I give a metaphysically coherent account of CNFs/VNFs that makes sense of the claims that

John, Johannes, Henßlin, Giovannini, Jehan, Ivanus, Jessek, Hanusschius, Jesco, Johel, Jecyl, Yon, Janyn, Hawnce, Jenkin, Annik, Hanequin, Jännlin, Zoannes, Iovenello, Henneke, Joaniquo, and Evan

are (variants of) the same name, but that

Elizabeth/Isabel and Philip (M)/Philip (F)

are not (variants of) the same name?

James to the rescue!

- I'm not a metaphysician
- I don't really like metaphysics

James to the rescue!

- I'm not a metaphysician
- I don't really like metaphysics
- but the first time I heard James talk about his account of the metaphysics of words, I immediately thought "maybe that will do the trick".

Miller's Bundle Theory of Words (1)

Particular or token words are objects, which are bundles of various sorts (most notably semantic, phonetic, orthographic, and grammatical properties). Distinct words are distinct in virtue of being different bundles of properties. If those properties are taken to be tropes, two token words exactly resemble if it is the case that those words are composed of exactly resembling tropes; if properties are universals, then two words can instantiate a numerically identical property in virtue of being partly composed of the same universal [2019, p. 5737].

Miller's Bundle Theory of Words (2)

Miller developed his account:

- to provide an alternative to previous accounts of words (1) objects composed of stages or (2) abstract types or kinds, either Platonic or artifactual [p. 5731],
- to explain how words are individuated.

Miller's Bundle Theory of Words (3)

What kinds of properties are (typically?) in the bundle?

- Orthographic properties (i.e., shape)
- Semantic properties (i.e., meaning)
- Phonetic properties (i.e., sound)
- Grammatical properties (i.e., “being a noun”)
- Social/cultural/physiological/psychological properties? (i.e., speaker-intention)
- ... but not all properties (e.g., font/typographical properties)

Miller's Bundle Theory of Words (4)

What about word *types* rather than word *tokens*?

Whilst we intuitively think that two particular words can be instances of the same word, it is unclear what makes them the same. Token words of the same type can differ in their semantic, phonetic, orthographic, and/or grammatical properties and yet we still intuitively think they are the same word [p. 5740].

...

I suggest that if tokens are bundles of properties, then types are bundles (or sets or collections or pluralities) of tokens, where those types have their criterion of identity in virtue of the properties of the tokens that are members of type. That is, whether **two tokens** are **tokens** of the same **type will be** determined by the properties that compose the **tokens** [p. 5741, emphasis added].

A Bundle Theory of Names?

whether two **variant name forms** are **instances** of the same **canonical name form can be** determined by the properties that compose the **variant name forms**.

A Bundle Theory of Names?

whether two **variant name forms** are **instances** of the same **canonical name form can be** determined by the properties that compose the **variant name forms**.

Which properties are relevant?

- Orthographic properties (i.e., shape/spelling): **Not really**
- Semantic properties (i.e., meaning): **Complicated**
- Phonetic properties (i.e., sound): **Yes...?**
- Grammatical properties (i.e., “being a noun”): **Yes, but only at a high level: grammatical class but NOT grammatical case; gender**
- Social/etc. properties: **Yes!!**

Social properties of proper names

- Names occur in a linguistic context.
- Names are intentional/directed:
 - ▶ chosen for particular reasons (semantic, honorific, ecclesiastical)
 - ▶ refer to particular individuals
- Names are *used*:
 - ▶ diminutive constructions, hypocoristic suffices, etc.
 - ▶ translation
- Names have a history (how/when/why they enter the name pool)

Can this account help us answer our questions? (1)

- *Sara* and *Sarah* are **different name tokens** of the **same name type**: The orthographic difference (which has no impact on, e.g., phonetic or semantic properties) is not sufficient to distinguish the names.
- *Sara* (French) and *Sara* (English) are also **different name tokens** of the **same name type**: Though the tokens are different languages, the language is not essential to determining the type, because both names are intended to trace a route back to the same origin name (the Biblical Sara).
- *James* and *Jimmy* are **different name tokens** of the **same name type**: Because they share relevant historical-social-intentional properties (they are connected historically via particular linguistic transformations (language-specific hypocoristic/diminutive constructions) historically used interchangeably for the same person.

Can this account help us answer our questions? (2)

- *John, Johannes, Henßlin, Giovannini, Jehan, Ivanus, Jessek, Hanusschius, Jesco, Johel, Jecyl, Yon, Janyyn, Hawnce, Jenkin, Annik, Hanequin, Jännlin, Zoannes, Iovenello, Henneke, Joaniquo, and Evan* are also all **different name tokens** of the **same name type**.
- *Philip* (M) and *Philip* (F) are **different name tokens** of **different name types**: Because while language distinguishes tokens but not types, gender distinguishes both token *and* type.
- *Elizabeth* and *Isabel* are . . .

Can this account help us answer our questions? (2)

- *John, Johannes, Henßlin, Giovannini, Jehan, Ivanus, Jessek, Hanusschius, Jesco, Johel, Jecyl, Yon, Jany, Hawnce, Jenkin, Annik, Hanequin, Jännlin, Zoannes, Iovenello, Henneke, Joaniquo, and Evan* are also all **different name tokens** of the **same name type**.
- *Philip* (M) and *Philip* (F) are **different name tokens** of **different name types**: Because while language distinguishes tokens but not types, gender distinguishes both token *and* type.
- *Elizabeth* and *Isabel* are . . . **complicated**.

Some final thoughts

- Miller's Bundle Theory of Words seems apt for explaining things about proper names (after all, they are words).
- However, it needs some sharpening/precisification in order to be practically applied for my purposes.
- Significant work is being done by the “social” properties:
 - ▶ Are these properties well defined?
 - ▶ Are they easily identifiable?
 - ▶ Are they appropriate?

More reading

The Dictionary of Medieval Names from European Sources

website: <https://dmnes.org/names>

blog: <https://dmnes.wordpress.com/>

- “Why is Jack a nickname of John?”
<https://dmnes.wordpress.com/2017/01/28/why-is-jack-a-nickname-of-john/>
- “How do you get Peggy from Margaret?”
<https://dmnes.wordpress.com/2017/01/25/how-do-you-get-peggy-from-margaret/>