The meaning of proper names
Acquisition of proper names


ZAV Study 1

- Katz, Baker, & Macnamara 1974 (see Macnamara 1982).

- Two groups of children were shown a pair of dolls differing only in hair color.
This is ZAV

• One group heard a novel word presented as a proper name for one of the dolls.

• The children then had to pick one of the two dolls when asked e.g. “Can you give me ZAV?”, “Can you show your Mum ZAV?”
This is a ZAV

• The second group of children were introduced to one of the two dolls by being told “This is a ZAV.”

• The children then had to pick up one of the dolls when asked e.g. “Can you give me a ZAV?”, “Can you show your Mum a ZAV?”
Results

• 17 months old girls and 27 months old boys showed a strong tendency to pick the doll they had been introduced to when it was introduced as “This is ZAV”.

• When the doll had been introduced as “This is a ZAV”, there was no tendency to favor that particular doll in subsequent actions.
One object per proper name

“For a time he [Kieran] seemed to assume that proper names were uniquely paired with individuals. The reason for believing so is that when he met his first “doppelgänger” he refused to accept his name. He was at the time [16 months and 13 days old] and had met a cousin of his, Lisa. He was then introduced to a girl of about the same age as Lisa also called Lisa. They played half an hour, yet, most unusual for him, he refused to say her name, no matter how often anyone said it or urged him. Shortly after he met three girls all named Aimee and he accepted the name for all three.”

(Macnamara 1982, 28)
A more recent ZAV study

- Hall 1996.
- 2 groups of 4-year olds, one tested under condition 1, the other one tested under condition 2
- Condition 1: 1 dog introduced as “This dog is ZAVY”.
- Condition 2: 2 dogs introduced as “This dog is ZAVY and this dog is ZAVY”.
Condition 1

This dog is ZAVY
Condition 2

This dog is ZAVY
and
this dog is ZAVY
Results

• Group tested under condition 1: Reluctant to extend ZAVY to any other animal or object of the same kind.

• Group tested under condition 2: Extended ZAVY to animals and objects of the same kind.
What children know about the meaning of names

• Even young children know the difference between referring expressions like proper names and predicative expressions like indefinite noun phrases and adjectives. They know that proper names pick out unique individuals.

Other things children know about names

• Children also seem to have some knowledge about the social conventions related to the practice of naming, the ‘naming game’.
What kind of things get names?

• Katz, Baker, & Macnamara 1974 (see Macnamara 1982).

• Rather than two dolls, two differently colored, but otherwise identical, blocks were used.

• Results: No preference for the named block, regardless of how it was introduced.
• Who gets to do the naming?

• Who gets to name children?

• Who gets to name stuffed animals, dolls, and pets?

• Who gets to name rivers, mountains, villages, craters of the moon, the oceans, hurricanes, schools, companies, …? 

(I am not aware of any acquisition studies)
Was the ship named?

J. L. Austin: How to do Things With Words.

“Suppose, for example, I see a vessel on the stocks, walk up and smash the bottle hung at the stem, proclaim ‘I name this ship the Mr. Stalin’, and for good measure kick away the chocks: but the trouble is, I was not the person chosen to name it.”
The Book

HOW TO DO THINGS WITH WORDS

J. L. AUSTIN

Second Edition
The Man

J. L. Austin (1911-1960) was born in Lancaster and educated at Oxford, where he became a professor of philosophy. Although greatly admired as a teacher, Austin published little of his philosophical work during his brief lifetime.

Students gathered his papers and lectures in books that were published posthumously.
How the naming game is played

• One person gets to pick a name for an individual and introduces that individual to the other players under that name.

• The other players use the name to refer to the original individual.

• The name is passed on from generation to generation, continuing to refer to the original individual.
Ideas: Personal bookkeeping

• How do people remember the names of the people and things they want to talk about?

• They seem to have something like a mental filing cabinet, pairing names with information about the assumed referents of the names.
How to play in a naming game

• I hear my friends talk about somebody called “Frida Kahlo”. I do not know who they are talking about.

• I start a mental file card for whoever that person is that is named “Frida Kahlo”.
Updating the file card

• Over the years, I hear or read more about Frida Kahlo. I update my mental file card accordingly.

• I start talking about Frida Kahlo myself, relying on my Frida Kahlo file card.
My Frida Kahlo file card

Name: Frida Kahlo

- She was a painter.
- She was Mexican.
- She married Diego Rivera, another Mexican painter.
- She broke her spine in a bus accident.
- She went to France, where she met Picasso.
- Leon Trotsky stayed in her house.
The two faces of the meaning of a name

Referent determined by social naming practice.

Mental file card with encyclopedic information about the assumed referent of the name.
The external and the internal meaning of a name

Referent.
External meaning.
  > reference

Mental file card.
Internal meaning.
  > idea
The meaning of “Frida Kahlo”

**Referent**: The real person who was named “Frida Kahlo”

**Mental file card**: Has information about assumed referent of the name “Frida Kahlo”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Frida Kahlo</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Painter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married to Diego Rivera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Uniformity and variation

• If the naming game is played correctly, the external meanings of names are the same for all members of a speech community.

• The internal meanings for particular names are likely to vary among the members of a speech community.

   Experts know more about the assumed referents of names than non-experts do, for example.
Three types of knowledge about names

- **Linguistic knowledge**: What type of denotations do proper names have? They refer to individuals.

- **Social knowledge**: What kind of things get names? How do names get their referents?

- **Conceptual knowledge**: Encyclopedic information about the assumed referents of names.
Semantic knowledge about the category ‘proper name’

- **Unique Reference**
  A proper name refers to a unique individual on each occasion of use.

- **Invariable Reference**
  A proper name refers to the same individual every time it is used.
A thought experiment

• Suppose there was a disorder that affected a child’s knowledge of the semantic properties of the category ‘proper name’. Describe the behavior of a fictional child with the fictional disorder for a fictional brochure meant to help parents and teachers identify the disorder.
Going beyond proper names

“An expedient was therefore offered, that, *since words are only names for things*, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such things as were necessary to express a particular business they are to discourse on.”

Are all words just names for things?
Are all words just names for things?

• NO!

• Some other kinds of words: *Because, not, and, or, some, all, no, .....*

• What about common nouns? *Water, food, sand, .....*