

Personal names vs. common nouns: Cross-linguistic findings from morphology and syntax

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Proper names and common nouns show a number of differences in their grammatical behavior. Though individual languages vary greatly with respect to how visible these differences are – ranging from distinct forms of the article in a number of Austronesian languages (Lynch et. al. 2013: 37) to a preference for the pre-nominal position as possessors in German – the evidence for a special grammatical status of names has become too numerous for linguistics to further treat them as just “some type of noun”. Personal names, as the prototypical name type, are the class of names that deviates the most from common nouns (Anderson 2003: 365, 373; Van Langendonck & Van de Velde 2016: 33). Thus, this paper concentrates on personal names, yet pointing out interesting contrast with other types.

Presumably, every area of grammar exhibits some distinct behavior between personal names and common nouns in some language. This paper will illustrate this for the domain of inflectional categories as well as noun phrase syntax. With respect to the overt encoding of nominal categories, distinct paradigms exist in a number of languages that may even distinguish different numbers of feature values (e.g. distinct case forms) or be subject to different conditions of assigning one feature value or another. This has been demonstrated for case and definiteness (Handschuh 2017), but similar patterns are also found with other categories. In their syntactical behavior, names in a number of languages show a tendency to exhibit restrictions on their ability to co-occur with modifiers. Another pattern, very prominent at least in Austronesian languages, is that names seldom occur as NP-heads but are rather used in apposition to common nouns serving as the head of the phrase instead.

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