



Onomastics as a Window into Social Hierarchies and Power Structures

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Abstract:

This article examines the study of onomastics with a focus on how names function as indicators of social hierarchy, political authority, and institutional power. It explores the socio-political dimensions of naming, including honorifics, naming taboos, state-controlled naming practices, and the symbolic power of renaming. Through cross-cultural examples and historical contexts, the paper demonstrates how naming is deeply entwined with status, legitimacy, and control. The study emphasizes that names are not neutral; they often serve as tools of inclusion, exclusion, and social stratification. By investigating the politics of naming, this article reveals the potential of onomastic analysis for understanding structures of dominance and identity formation.

Keywords: onomastics, power, social hierarchy, renaming, identity politics, linguistic authority, honorifics

The field of onomastics, traditionally concerned with the etymology and usage of names, has increasingly come to be recognized as a critical domain for understanding social structures and mechanisms of power. Names are not merely arbitrary labels but are often strategically used to assert dominance, mark status, and enforce or resist ideological narratives. In many societies, the structure and function of personal names are shaped by rules that reflect underlying hierarchies. The use of honorifics, titles, and rank-based name forms—such as the Japanese “-san,” “-sama,” or “sensei,” or the aristocratic titles of Europe like “duke” or “baroness”—demonstrates how language encodes respect and authority through onomastic forms. These naming conventions serve to reinforce social order and establish boundaries between individuals of differing ranks.

State and institutional powers often play a central role in regulating naming practices. In some historical and contemporary regimes, names must be approved by government authorities, as seen in certain European countries with official name registries. In Iceland, for example, names must comply with phonological and grammatical rules of the Icelandic language and culture, and approval must be sought from the Icelandic Naming Committee. Such policies are justified as efforts



to preserve linguistic heritage but may also reflect broader anxieties about cultural integrity and national identity. Similarly, colonial administrations often imposed new names on individuals and places, erasing indigenous naming systems and replacing them with colonial ones—effectively overwriting local histories and asserting symbolic control. Renaming becomes an act of domination: by controlling what things are called, one controls how they are perceived.

Naming taboos and prohibitions also reveal the social significance of names. In some African and Asian cultures, it is considered inappropriate to name a child after a living elder, particularly within the same family, as this could disrupt the perceived natural order and hierarchy. In royal or religious contexts, the names of sacred figures may be forbidden for ordinary use, reserved exclusively for divine or noble attribution. Such taboos reinforce reverence and institutional sanctity, positioning certain names above common access.

Renaming events can serve as potent symbolic acts, whether they reflect political revolutions, regime changes, or social reconfigurations. After independence, post-colonial nations frequently rename streets, cities, and public institutions to reclaim historical narratives. The transformation from “Rhodesia” to “Zimbabwe” or from “Bombay” to “Mumbai” illustrates the power of naming to reject colonial legacies and affirm indigenous sovereignty. Conversely, the imposition of names by oppressive regimes can signify conquest and control, as in the Nazification of toponyms in occupied territories during World War II. These acts highlight that naming is not simply descriptive but performative—it enacts power in language.

Religious traditions also use naming as a form of initiation, transformation, or consecration. The Christian practice of taking a saint’s name during baptism or confirmation, the Islamic tradition of adopting new names upon conversion, or Buddhist monastic renaming all reflect the symbolic redefinition of identity through names. These moments mark transitions into new moral or spiritual identities and are often accompanied by societal recognition. In these contexts, names are not inherited but earned or granted, symbolizing moral rebirth or alignment with communal values.

In diasporic contexts, name adaptation is often a response to discrimination or assimilation pressures. Immigrants may modify or shorten their names to fit the dominant language or to avoid social stigma. This phenomenon, common among Eastern European immigrants to North America in the 20th century, illustrates how names become sites of negotiation between heritage and social acceptance. The loss



or alteration of names under such conditions often leads to cultural erasure or fragmentation of identity. Conversely, some groups consciously revive traditional names as a form of cultural resistance and self-assertion, such as African-Americans adopting African-origin names during the civil rights and Black Power movements.

Even in modern bureaucracies and digital systems, names continue to carry institutional weight. Identification documents, databases, and algorithmic systems rely on standardized names to sort, track, and authenticate individuals. Errors or inconsistencies in naming—such as diacritics being removed or multiple surnames being misinterpreted—can result in the misrepresentation of individuals and barriers to access. This technological dimension of naming reflects deeper questions about linguistic equity and the privileging of certain name structures over others.

Ultimately, the study of names provides a unique vantage point from which to interrogate the workings of power, authority, and social order. Onomastics reveals that the act of naming is never entirely neutral—it is an exercise of agency, an imposition of meaning, and often a reflection of wider socio-political forces. Whether through state-sanctioned regulations, religious rites, or literary invention, names are tools with which societies define, control, and remember. As such, onomastic research remains an indispensable key to decoding the hidden structures that shape our perception of identity, legitimacy, and belonging.

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