

# Proper Names and Their Role in Social Ontology

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**Abstract:** The article deals with an applicability of John Searle's theory of social ontology to linguistic category of proper names. We suggest that in the context of Searle's theory we can consider proper names to be a kind of social institution. By several examples from anthropolinguistic research and from the field of theoretical onomastics we try to show that proper names meet conditions specified by John Searle, in particular that – through different communities all over the world – they are “holders” of various types of deontic power. At the end of our article we shortly weigh the possibility that proper names can be regard as status indicators (in terms of Searle's theory) too.

**Keywords:** baptism, deontic power, onomastics, proper names, social ontology.

*Blake, John? Nothing here.  
Alright, try my legal name.  
You should use your full name.  
I like that name, Robin.  
Dark Knight Rises*

To speak about problems of proper names in the context of philosophical views of John Searle makes sense for various reasons. Primarily, professor Searle has dealt with the category of proper names repeatedly: In fact, he started his career with the text *Proper Names* (see Searle 1958) and the conception presented here brought him directly in “textbooks” of this important philosophical debate; proper names as rather strange and interesting individuals are aptly shown also in Searle's *Speech Acts* (see Searle 1969; the evidence of strangeness could be the mentioned and everlasting discussion on their reference behavior,

sense, meaning, denotation, connotation and differently called chains ...). And so it may not be uninteresting to stop and think about the position these special entities (he dealt with repeatedly) could take in the concept of social ontology. It has been developed by professor Searle in the last decades. He speaks about determining position of natural language in the broader context of human acting and human society.

I will keep to a few short comments. They will refer to social-ontological dimension of proper names. I hope the connection will not be only accidental.

## 1 Social ontology concept

First, several words about the idea of social ontology. Professor Searle presented it in detail in the book *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995), he summed up its basic sources again e.g. in the article *Social Ontology: Some basic principles* (2006; it is our starting point in particular) and he developed it again in the book *Making the Social World* (2010). However, basic elements of the concept of social ontology and institutional facts, which professor Searle works out in the above mentioned works, are included in the earlier "language" oriented works (compare e.g. Searle 1965 and in it mentioned differentiation of regulative and constitutive rules or the Chapter 2.7 in *Speech Acts* devoted to differentiation of pure and institutional facts).

The central proposition of the concept reads: There is something that could be called social reality. And it exists only because we think it exists. At the same time professor Searle develops a very interesting conviction that it is the human language that is the necessary condition of existence of something like institutional facts constituting this social reality. The existence of these facts is set up by means of phenomenon of collective intentionality which enables attaching functions (status functions) connected with the key term of deontic power. The whole construction is summed up by professor Searle in the formula having the character of constitutive rules (his older concept), which is (by the way) an example representative of semiotic thinking: X constitutes Y in context Z. Professor Searle says convincingly that what we call society is an extremely complex net of those "status functions" constituting our social reality, namely on deontic basis of "positive and negative power". Professor Searle simultaneously stresses that it is the question of cases where deontic power is in play, i.e. the fact constituted as a re-

sult of collective intentionality attached to status Y in context Z (physical existence of X, as he shows in the example of limited company, is not always necessary) connected with the set of rights and obligations. From the point of view of philosophy of language, it is essential that the condition of existence of such (humanely specific) system is existence of language as a medium of representation. Professor Searle claims (but does not develop in detail) we need for it a sufficiently rich symbolic system (which language represents for him), it is even necessary because key status functions are formed by speech acts – declaratives. Making such speech acts, one of the components of social ontology – institutional fact is constituted. What professor Searle is interested in (besides the very fascinating development of the idea of “logical” bases of human society) are the types of institutional facts. We will keep to them.

Key terms of the conception of professor Searle are *status function*, *collective intentionality*, *deontic powers* a *desire-independent reasons*, which form special characteristics of human socialization. And in professor Searle’s opinion, language, of course, which is a medium of representation. It is worth mentioning one important comment – in the concept of social ontology we speak about language in a broad sense. So the condition is not full-blown natural language, but simply a symbolic system which is an exclusive bearer of deontic power. The last comment is notable because it can cause doubts – Does it make sense in this context to deal with specific linguistic categories such as proper names? (When professor Searle doubts in his article if it depends whether language has this or that category and speaks about language “in a broad sense”). I think yes. In my opinion, proper names are a very specific and important social institution.

## 2 Professor Searle on proper names

As for proper names, professor Searle speaks about them both in *Proper Names* and in *Speech Acts* and he pays attention to them wholly in discourse of debates about their meaning and reference qualities. Proper names are for him a remarkable category. It is shown in his formulations such as “Yes, in a loose sort of way” (Searle 1969, 170; if proper names make sense), or “seldom we consider proper names as part of one language as opposed to another at all” (Searle 1969, 169; in margo of Frege’s example with dr. Lauben and the declaration that those who

connect with certain names different descriptions speak different languages). Such statements indicate the status of proper names is rather ambivalent. Professor Searle used in both his texts a funny metaphor of proper names as something like hangers (professor Searle calls them “pegs”) for description. People sometimes have to hang something on them so that hangers can be useful (and agree somehow what is hanging on them), but on the other hand, they must not forget that clothes on hangers are something else than clothes in a heap (we know it well from our households). How I think these hangers exist will follow in a minute.

### 3 Proper names as an institution *sui generis*

As for proper names, fortunately, we have a special linguistic discipline called onomastics at our disposal. The field of onomastics is complex: beside the care of semantics and reference of proper names – it shares this with logic and philosophy of language – it also includes other linguistic matter (e.g. parts of speech, syntactic and word-formative characteristics of proper names) and for quite a long time it also studies sociological aspects of proper names (in narrow interconnection with ethnology, for example; remember Frazer’s *Golden Bough*). No wonder there is a lot to say about proper names from sociolinguistic point (from socially semantic fields of proper names to the phenomenon of family relationship expressed by surnames) – proper names rank among so-called language universals (cf. Trost 1995a). **It seems there is an agreement** that every language community has in its repertoire expressions which could be classified as proper names (to be honest, sometimes it is a tricky stuff because some proper names look much more like descriptions, but so do Morning Star and Evening Star anyway). In the same way it goes that comparing various societies and their handling proper names reveals a great spectrum of special characteristics of sociolinguistic nature. One of the basic warnings definitely remains (says Paul Ziff to Saul Kripke in Ziff 1977), to come with some generally valid theory of proper names is unusually daring (undoubtedly in what I am going to speak about there will be difference between the names of persons and hills, namely in different communities, not speaking about such proper names as FC Liverpool; I will only speak about personal proper names, so-called anthroponyms). “Any ‘picture’ of proper names that ignores such data that ignores the evolutionary diachronic

character of names and the languages in which names are used is not worth hanging" (Ziff 1977, 332).

In spite of my own warning, I would like to make some more general comments on proper name as a social institution. I will have to mention such things as baptism, identity, index and state of health. I am afraid even in this case the nature of proper names will appear slightly mysterious.

Let us remind again what are, by professor Searle, key moments of forming institutional facts by means of attaching status function: they are language (symbolic system of representation) as an instrument of forming a fact (declarative), collective intentionality (collective acceptance) and deontic power/character of fact (its connection with the set of positive/negative rights/obligations).

Let us start *ab ovo*, with what Saul Kripke calls "baptism". How does it happen? Undoubtedly, a part of it is some speech act. Professor Searle mentions in his texts in connection with institutional facts forms of declarative as a key speech act. Declarative, as he says, leads from words to the world and vice versa at the same time (in contrast with directive = words → state of world or constative = words ← state of world). Such declarative is naming someone a king or founding a limited company (I trust professor Searle that at least by California law it is like this). The very speech act of declarative establishes an institutional fact (e.g. real formation of legal person). Then could we consider baptism a speech act characterized as declarative? I suppose so. And I find support in one of older texts of professor Searle (see his 1976). Baptism goes as follows: under the given conditions enabling the community subsequent acceptance and use of proper name, semiotic relation between the subject as individual and the name of this individual is established. In Wittgenstein's opinion, the case of name is not the question of move in a language game (that is what I agree with – the name was not used but mentioned), but the very baptism has the character of speech act in relation to the subject and the community and it is a move in a language game, in my opinion.

I say baptism, but naturally I mean any moment when proper name is given in the procedure which various communities and cultures consider appropriate. Of course, I can name anything in any way (and as an atheist, thank God). But language is – as de Saussure or Central European interwar structuralists taught us – a fundamentally social phenomenon where nothing much happens without censorship/

acceptance by language community. And there are numerous proofs showing that for cultures of the world this act is an extremely serious moment tied up with socially obligatory rules so that it could be accepted by community. Probably most communities have regulated conditions for introducing names. And it does not matter if they are Wishram with their ritual specialist who is the only one authorized to choose a child proper name, or Czech parents at City Office in Hradec Králové who choose it themselves, but they have to do it and confirm it with their signature (i.e. with their proper name in the individualized format; they have right to do it if they introduce their proper name and produce evidence with the document containing the name!). In tribe Ga when an infant is given a name, members of all four branches of his kindred must be present. Delaware child's name is first spoken to the Creator and then repeated reverently so that the Creator will remember the child by name. And so on. No wonder, across communities of the whole world, hardly any act of behavior is so strictly determined with the net of social rules as the act of attaching proper name to its bearer – it is an important creative event (very ceremonial – Catholic christening, or technically mechanical – visit in a social department of a local office), even if with various implications. What is common to these events is that by the act of baptism, by introducing name its new bearer is socially individualized inside the given community, i.e. he enters it as a RIGHTful individual. “In our society there are no nameless, everyone has not only right to have a two-part name but it is his duty to have it. Conditions are regulated e.g. by Register Law. It does not apply only to our country: “In American society a personal name is attached to its bearer by law such that a name change must be legally notarized, and one's signature is used to make agreements legally binding” (Bean 1980, 311).

The act of giving proper name offers an individual the right to be regarded a member of the community. In a loose “Quinean” metaphor it is a dummy variable which is evaluated by baptism and in this way socially ontological obligation of existence is met. In baptism community gives rights to an individual and simultaneously it accepts culturally various sets of obligations. The importance of community acceptance and its indisputability is naturally basic and obvious. In some cultures in the act of baptism all the community members have to repeat the given name which confirms the acceptance of the name and the individual.

Pavel Trost in (1995a) characterizes this process of awarding and “owning” a name as the foundation of theoretical identity of the subject, which further of socially constitutes the given individual. “Further, while both proper names and definite descriptions identify individuals, the indexical character of proper names, that is their connection to their bearers, makes proper names not simply descriptive of the individuality of their bearers, but constitutive of it as well. A proper name is part of the individual identity of its bearer whether the latter be a person, a mountain, a river. (It may be because of this pragmatic linguistic fact that in so many societies personal names are considered to be part of the self or soul and naming constitutive of social persona)” (Bean 1980, 308). This identity, with only minor exceptions, does not change while other features of the subject change. Name may be the only one which survives. (Again even here we can find social difference and systematics – e.g. there are tribes in which the change of name is connected with social recognition of personality transformation and with the change of social status). Many mythologies of the world confirm this tight connection of proper name with bearer’s identity and its constitutive role (in tribe Bantu the given name determines the character of its bearer – it binds him to a certain type of social behavior). One of the manifests EZLN (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional) says: “Now we are named, we cannot die.” I consider this an apt intuition. As if the nameless could not ask for their social rights, as if they did not even exist. Article 10 of Basic Document of Rights and Liberties says everyone has the right to have his name protected. In tens of law regulations we can find formulations concerning the fact if someone acts or does not act in his proper name.<sup>1</sup> It is interesting that the right to personal proper name used to be – and somewhere still may be – limited. One needs only to remember the practice of treating proper names in Ancient Greece and Rome. “Personal name is a social moral value; anonymity is a shame” (Trost 1995c, 313).

Proper name is something like an identity anchor not only from society point of view – it protects identity against changes of descriptions of subject – but even from point of view of its bearer. It is not by chance – as an Marek Tomeček’s speech *The Name in the work On Certainty*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See References.

<sup>2</sup> Speech held during seminary “Wittgenstein” which took place in Plzeň in 2009.



reminded me – proper names serve as a diagnosis tool with patients after recovering from unconsciousness. If a patient can't remember his name, something very bad happened. In cinemas we can enjoy the fourth part of agent Bourne's story. The story about a man who had dozens of passports with tens of names in them and out of blue he can't remember which one is the real one. He can't remember his name and that's one of the symptoms of his identity loss. And not only inner one (amnesia, impossibility to reconstruct his personality through a name as an identity anchor), but even outer – he is torn out from the web of social, legal but even communication-pragmatic relationships. Who will he be when he cannot confirm his identity, sign a contract, fill in forms? In which sense is he still a member of our society? Proper name connects us socially to our actions, to our past. This is the very socially-existential reason why we can talk about institution of proper names fulfilling deontic power condition. It founds obligations and rights. It itself is right and obligation.

I know, it may look weird or even like manifestation of primitive thinking (which is ironized by Frazer who himself is reproached by Wittgenstein for the same thing for a change): all that magic and belief which say that a name is a part of soul, that a name is something more than useful means of reference, that to know somebody's (true) name is to have control of him. Taboo of a real proper name. All this sounds suspicious. Newspaper readers in Czech were prepared for a dull season recently by cause of a dumb foundling. He had no name by the way (more precisely he did not say it to the police). Can we say that the nameless boy lost his right to legitimate trial, medical care etc.? Absolutely not – evidently he is a human being and he would use all of this even if he wasn't ever baptized and lived his life somewhere in the jungle like Mowgli.<sup>3</sup> But frankly – could he, later, buy a house, run business, ask for child benefits being still nameless? Probably not. The fact that he has a name opens all these possibilities on the other side (precisely it is a necessary condition not a sufficient one – we are talking about net of connected status functions here).

In this context professor Searle mentions several ways of creating institutional facts. Is baptism *creatio ex nihilo* (precisely from a net of status functions)? I think this is not the case. There is a physical entity

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<sup>3</sup> In fact Mowgli evidently has his name. But he was baptized by his adoptive wolf mother in the language of animals which people cannot understand.



which, as many of us believe, is an individual (it has a unique mind and DNA), having a name or not (but maybe someone doesn't think this way, see unity of name and soul in Inuite mythology). It is the case "X counts as Y in C and We accept (S has power (S does A))" (see Searle 2006, 65) more likely than the case "We make it case by Declaration that an entity Y exists that has status function(s) F in C" (cf. Searle, 2010, 100).

In context of professor Searle's theory I worry about another thing but I cannot deal with it now. Long story short. I took a stand that we can treat proper name itself as some kind of social institution. By means of specific speech act they create social objects – theoretical identity of subject, they are linguistic representations of status function which is created by its very existence. But there is some but in professor Searle's concept: he also mentions institution of something called "status indicator" (Searle 2006, 63). Things (!) that indicate (confirm, refer to) the fact that the given person is authorized or certified to some "status function". Some communities – discourses more likely – just insist on it. We are talking about passports, college diplomas etc. In connection with professor Searle's belief that proper names do not belong to "one language" and that we do not learn them in the way we learn other expressions (their meaning) suggests this interpretation to me: proper names stand somewhere at the edge of language, metaphorically speaking: as if they lean out of the language into the world of things, which proper names stand for in semiosis. What I'd like to say. This jazzy speculation about proper names as symptoms is maybe supported by Ch. S. Peirce's works. He labels proper name as an index or more precisely he classifies it as a subindex. The relation to what it stands for differs from the one represented by symbols, typical linguistic expressions. While symbols represent on the basis of general law and tradition, indexes "represent a comparison, a real connection, a clash, that we can associate with what happens in acts of volition or, more generally, of existence. Index has a force but neither sense nor character" (Peirce 1931-1935, 3.434). It looks as if proper names were names (language expressions) and symptoms of things at the same time. The name we have distinguishes us from others, it works as a distinctive feature (you can literally owe your name in some communities). Speech act of introducing is not a description but an action, performative. Czech linguist Pavel Trost in several papers says: proper name is literally a part of an object, it's not only a sign (signum), but even a thing (res). "Boy František differs from

the other boys in various psychophysical attributes, but also in the fact his name is František. This name doesn't signify his essential qualities, but it itself is an essential quality" (Trost 1995d, 258).

Maybe we can regard proper names as these status indicators in question (in cases, when we think of them as confirmation of status seen as a complex of rights and duties). "If this is your name, you must be a noble man." "Identify yourself - what is your name?" "My name is Fox Mulder. OK, you can enter then!" They would be an ID card, symptom of status role assigned to the subject.

#### 4 Openendedness

This article doesn't supply argumentation in detail, it only suggests the ways we can try to think the problem through. They lead to the recognition of proper names as a specific part of social ontology. We suggest treating the very institute of proper name as a type of social institution. "To have a name" is a social concept and particular proper names are institutional facts. The very fact of using language as a sign is a socially significant performance and it supports the idea that natural language is a cornerstone of socialization.

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