The Semantic Vacuum

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What are proper names (PNs)? Which grammatical categories can accompany them? What is the meaning contribution of such accompanying elements? And how does this meaning combine with that of PNs? These are the questions we want to address in this paper. We will start with a simple, well-known, and well-ignored, phenomenon concerning PNs and use it as a trigger for a simple yet fruitful answer to our first question. Answers to subsequent questions will follow naturally.

1. What are proper names?

Ziff (1960) argues that "it is not possible to state a simple strong generalization about proper names" [1960:93][1]. Yet, even Ziff (1960) admits one systematic regularity, a strong generalization, for PNs in natural languages: they always appear in bare singular constructions. What Ziff (1960), and with him most of the tradition, failed to note is that *only* PNs appear in singular constructions such as (1) to (3).

(1) _____ is on the mat.
(2) _____ was by the mat.
(3) _____ was by a mat.

Interestingly these constructions admit any expression be it a noun, an adjective or a verb, but transform it into a PN.

(4) Sausage is on the mat.
(5) Red was by the mat.
(6) Tequila was at the house.
(7) Rotten is playing with his friends.
(8) Big is not doing his homework.
(9) Ask is coming home.

Typically, (4) to (9) will be interpreted as describing the whereabouts of an individual – a cat, a dog, or even a human being. This pattern is well observed across languages.

(10) Chorizo duerme en su cama
Chorizo sleeps in. his bed.
(11) Frage ist so langsam.
Question is so slow.
(12) Marrazo azokara joan zen.
Shark to-the-market go was.

For this to be the case, the '_____ is F' construction must be a semantic vacuum (SV), sucking out all semantic content from whatever expression is placed in argument position, turning it into a PN. Vacuumed expressions behave as ordinary nominals as in (14)-(18).

(13) ¿Quién se comió la pizza? Chorizo.
Who self ate the pizza? Chorizo.
(14) Wer ist dieser langsame Läufer? Frage.
Who is this slow runner? Question.
(15) ¿Dónde está Tequila? En la cama.
Where is Tequila? In the bed.

[1] Ziff. P. 1960. *Semantic Analysis*. Cornell University Press.

(16) Wo ist Frage? Hinter.
Where is Question? Behind..

(17) Non dago Handi? Bere ohean lotan.
Where there-is Big? His in-bed sleeping.

(18) Nor da korrikalari geldo hori? Gorri.
Who is runner slow that? Red.

If this is a universal fact about human languages, then it seems to be an essential feature of PNs. (SV) is a universal PN generator. If we take this to be definitory, as all other features lack such universality, then substantial consequences follow. First, PNs are all and only those expressions that repeatedly occur in SV constructions. There will naturally exist a list of expressions that are regularly so used. Yet, new ones may always be generated. Second, PN semantics is emptied out and is, thus, null or void in semantic composition. PNs are interpreted by purely contextual, pragmatic means. Even if you take PNs to be a subset of common nouns (CNs), SV will generate new PNs out of the rest that cannot keep such semantics. Further results follow.

2. Which categories may accompany PNs?

Suppose we add a determiner to the SV, thus getting (20) out of (21).

(19) Sausage is on the mat.

(20) The Sausage is on the mat.

If the determiner is not an expletive, it will have precluded the SV from doing its work, letting the CN 'sausage' do its ordinary semantic work. Thus, 'sausage' in (20) will not be a PN and hence 'the' may not be said to be accompanying a PN. If, on the other hand, the determiner is an expletive, as in Romance languages and, the result (21) is still an SV then the determiner accompanies a PN.

(21) El Chorizo, el mejor corredor de todos, se ganó la medalla.
The Chorizo, the best runner of all, self won the medal.

Throughout South American Spanish two different patterns emerge for expletive Det+PN constructions. In Chilean Spanish the personal article is fully innocuous, with no expressive difference between Det+PN and PN. Argentinian and Uruguayan Spanish allow for Det+PN, yet the use carries a familiarity expressive content (see Oggiani and Aguilar Guevara, 2024[2]). Apparently this same array of alternatives exists among dialects of German.

So determiners may accompany PNs as expletives, for otherwise the construction is not an SV, and the expression used is no longer a PN as in (20) (see Longobardi 1994 and 2005)[3]. This argument generalizes to all other accompanying categories, such as honorifics and adjectives.

(22) Don Chorizo vino de visita.
$\text{Don}_{\text{HON}.sing}$ Chorizo came to visit.

(23) #Dones Chorizos vinieron de visita.
$\text{Don}_{\text{HON}.plu}$ Chorizo_{plu} came to visit.

[2] Oggiani, C. and Aguilar-Guevara, A. 2024. "Determined proper nouns in Rioplatense Spanish express interpersonal proximity". *Borealis. An International Journal of Hispanic Linguistics*.

[3] Longobardi, G. 2005. "Toward a unified grammar of reference". *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft*. 24, 5-44.

As observed by Bernstein, et.al. (2019) [4] (see also Saab, 2021)[5], honorifics in Spanish do not allow for pluralization. Precluding SV in (22) from becoming a non-SV construction in (23). As with adjectives, notice (24) and (25) which parallels the difference between (19) and (20).

(24) Red Sausage is lying on the mat.

(25) The Red Sausage is lying on the mat.

3. The case against predicativism

The claim that, if present, the definite article in an SV construction – whereby a CN is transformed into a PN – must be expletive is not a mere assumption against Matushansky's (2006 and 2008) view that names are always accompanied by a full-blown article followed by descriptive content. Rather, it is an argument against this view. For suppose Matushansky's view is correct and all argument uses of PNs are (must) be accompanied by a full-blown article, and consider the case of 'shark', which is transformed from a CN in (26) to a PN in (27), and back into a CN in (28).

(26) The fish that swam past the surfers was a shark.

(27) Shark is in the kitchen.

(28) A shark is in the kitchen.

If Matushansky is correct, in (27) 'shark' is accompanied by an unpronounced yet full-blown definite article. Yet, if such were the case, (27) would be semantically equivalent to (29) where 'shark' is accompanied by a full-blown *and* pronounced definite article.

(29) The shark is in the kitchen.

Yet, clearly, 'shark' cannot be interpreted as a PN in (29). Instead, it is interpreted as in (28), a non-transformed use of the CN 'shark' denoting a particular squaliform fish. Whenever accompanied by a semantically full-blown determiner a CN in argument position will always be interpreted as a CN and cannot be transformed into a PN. Thus, if Matushansky is correct (2006 and 2008), CNs can never be transformed into PNs by merely placing them in argument position of a singular predicate construction. This, of course, is the wrong prediction.

Transformed PNs must not be accompanied by a full-blown definite article. Matushansky (2006) does consider the fact that many languages prohibit the use of definite articles preceding PNs. She argues that the DefArt+PN construction is the product of M-merger and that PNs without preceding articles constitute a class of PNs that, due to some morphological or root feature, block M-merger. It could be that transformed CNs, precisely due to the change involved in their transformation, block the M-merger and preclude the full-blown article from appearing, thus allowing for the CN to transform into a PN.

This explanation, however, has unwelcome results. First, it implies that CNs constitute a separate class of terms from that of PNs, since the latter are meant to allow for M-Merger while the former do not. If so, then the very idea that PNs are but a subset of CNs themselves constituting predicates is weakened. On this view, PNs and CNs just seem to be different kinds of expressions. Second, if the M-merger blocking account is to apply to the transformation of CNs into PNs – as in (26) and (27) above – then it better be that the blocking does not only preclude a pronounced definite article but also a phonologically null yet semantically full-blown one. For otherwise we would be back at square one, with (27) – where 'shark' is a transformed PN – having the semantics of (29) – where

[4] Bernstein, J. Ordóñez, F., and Roca, F.. 2019. "On the emergence of personal articles in the history of Catalan". In, *Cycles in language Change*, edited by M. Bouzouita, et. al. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 88–108.

[5] Saab, A. 2021. "A short note on honorifics and personal articles in Spanish and Catalan. Consequences for the theory of proper names." *Isogloss. Open Journal of Romance Linguistics*, 7, 6, 1-14.

'shark' is an ordinary CN. Thus, to account for PN transformation of CNs, predicativism must give up on the idea that PNs are always accompanied by full-blown definite articles (pronounced or not).

4. What is the meaning contribution of such accompanying elements?

Since PNs are products of SV, accompanying constructions may not make semantic contributions other than merely marking a denotational type due to their syntactic role in the SV construction. They may, of course, make expressive, and otherwise pragmatic contributions, that may vary in their details from case to case but which are always derived from the context of use.

5. How does this meaning combine with that of a PN?

If PNs are products of SV, they seem to make no semantic contribution based on their lexical semantics. It is an open question whether they may have other kinds of semantically encoded meanings, e.g., via conventional implicatures. Conventions, together with pragmatic reasoning, may account for such behavior. This includes all predicative uses, but also referential and identifying ones. We've claimed that PNs merely carry a denotational type associated to their syntactic role, lacking any further semantic information. Yet, if 'N' is to play any syntactic role, it must have a syntactic root $\sqrt{N}$. Thus, for every 'N' we have a $\sqrt{N}$ and a denotational type that will adapt to the particular syntactic configuration in which $\sqrt{N}$ is inserted (see Saab and Lo Guercio, 2020)[6]. If combined with a determiner phrase it may get into argument position, thus demanding an *e*-type denotation. If combined with a null noun it may take predicate position, demanding an $< e, t >$-type denotation. To this we must add the information systematically associated with PNs due to their conventional use in contexts. For example, in argument position uses of 'N' will conventionally contribute that there is one object for 'N'; that α is the most salient object in context *c* where 'N' is used; and that $\alpha$is named 'N' in *c*.

Thus, we have a root, a syntactic combination, a denotational type and a set of conventionally associated information for every type of use of a PN. Together, this set of information give place to a paradigm for 'N'. The paradigm for argument use of 'N', for example, is given in (30).

(30) Argument 'N'

(a) $\sqrt{N}$

(b) $[_{\text{DP}}\ D[_{\text{nPe}} n + \sqrt{N}]]$

(c) $[[N]]$: *e*-type

(d) there is one object for 'N' in *c*; α is salient in *c*; α is named 'N' in *c*; etc.

The predicate paradigm for 'N' can be easily derived from (30) by updating the syntactic combination, given by the predicate use, and the adapting elements (b) and (c) accordingly. Thus, (31) offers the paradigm for predicate use of 'N', still with an empty (vacuumed) semantics.

(31) Predicate 'N'

(a) $\sqrt{N}$

(b) $[_{\text{DP}}\ D[_{\text{numP}}\ [_{n\text{P}<e,t>}\ Num + [_{\text{nP}^{\text{n}}} + \sqrt{N}]]]]$

(c) $[[N]]$: $< e, t >$-type

(d) there is a property associated to 'N' in *c*; being named 'N' is salient in *c*; etc.

The paradigm in (31) delivers a straightforward account of plural uses of PNs as in (32) to (34).

(32) The Smiths are coming.

(33) There are three Lauras in the room.

(34) The department made an offer to a Martha.

[6] Saab, Andrés & Lo Guercio, Nicolás. 2020. "No name: The allosemy view". *Studia Linguistica* 74(1), 60–97.