

# EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROPER NAME ANOMIA AND WORD RETRIEVAL: A SINGLE CASE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

We report the results of an investigation of the spoken word retrieval abilities of a patient, BG, with proper name anomia. Our investigations reveal that she is impaired in retrieving common nouns as well as proper names. Common noun retrieval was influenced by age-of-acquisition, word familiarity and name agreement. Cued retrieval of proper names was influenced by age-of-acquisition, although effects of other linguistic variables were not excluded. It is claimed that an explanation in terms of a 'continuum of word retrieval difficulty' rather than of proper names as 'pure referring expressions' can best account for the findings. However, this proposal is unlikely to be able to explain all cases of proper name anomia. Nonetheless, it is suggested that similar findings may be observed in other people with proper name anomia, and that it is necessary for future studies to investigate not only proper name but also common noun retrieval. We also provide evidence that Plausible Phonology (Brennen, 1993) and Specificity (Brédart, 1993) hypotheses of proper name anomia cannot account for BG's naming abilities.

Key words: proper name anomia, proper names, common nouns, word retrieval disorder

## INTRODUCTION

There is now considerable evidence that proper names as a linguistic category can be selectively impaired after acquired brain damage (eg. Carney and Temple, 1993; Fery et al., 1995; Harris and Kay, 1995; Hittmair-Delazer et al., 1994; Lucchelli and De Renzi, 1992; McKenna and Warrington, 1983; Miceli et al., 2000; Saetti et al., 1999; Semenza and Zettin, 1988, 1989; Shallice and Kartsounis, 1993). This disorder has been referred to as proper name anomia. Within the category of proper names, there is also evidence that people's names can be affected selectively (Carney and Temple, 1993; Fery et al., 1995; Hittmair-Delazer et al., 1994; Lucchelli and De Renzi, 1992; McKenna and Warrington, 1980; Saetti et al., 1999). In a recent review of cases of proper name anomia, however, Hanley and Kay (1998) demonstrated that the percentage of faces that a patient can name correctly is closely related to whether she or he has difficulties with other proper name categories, such as the names of countries and cities. There appears to be a continuum of severity such that the fewer faces the person can name spontaneously, the more likely there is to be an accompanying difficulty in retrieving other kinds of proper name (cf. Lucchelli and De Renzi, 1993).

Accounts of why proper names in general, and people's names in particular,

can be selectively affected can be grouped into two types of explanation. One of these focuses on what can be termed their logical properties, and the other on their statistical and distributional properties in spoken language. The majority of psychological accounts that focus on the logical properties of proper names are developments of the linguistic notion of proper names as pure referring expressions (eg. Kripke, 1980). This, put simply, refers to the observation that proper names label particular entities, but, unlike common nouns, do not convey meaningful information about them. Thus, some theorists (eg. Semenza, 1997) have noted that the semantic attributes of proper nouns are related only loosely in their probability of co-occurrence: the fact that Bill Clinton plays the saxophone, for example, is something shared by many other Americans, and has no necessary link with the fact that he was, until recently, president. Semantic attributes that describe common nouns have a higher probability of co-occurrence: sheep, for example, have four legs, stubby tails and thick woollen coats, attributes that co-occur for this breed of animal, but also for other subordinate categories of animal (such as some breeds of goat, and llamas).

Semenza and his colleagues (eg. Semenza, 1997; Semenza and Zettin, 1988, 1989; Semenza et al., 1998) have championed the view that the critical factor in the aetiology of proper name anomia is that proper names are pure referring expressions. In cognitive terms, it is claimed that links between semantic attributes and names are stronger or more elaborated for common nouns than for proper names (cf. Burke et al., 1991; Valentine et al., 1996, take an essentially similar view, but using a different cognitive framework). This hypothesis has proved difficult to test directly. Instead, it relies on the selective nature of proper name anomia and associated difficulties. Thus, word types that are affected do seem to be those that can be described as 'pure referring expressions' (geographical names, people's names), along with difficulties in learning paired-associate lists of unrelated items, which are assumed to mimic the arbitrary mapping between proper name and referent (see below).

Linked with the notion of proper names as pure referring expressions, it has been observed that proper nouns are related to singular entities, or *tokens* (eg. Bill Clinton, Eiffel Tower). Common nouns, in contrast, refer not to tokens, but to categories, or types (eg. animals, flowers, or occupations). The token-type distinction as applied to proper and common nouns has been put forward by Jackendoff (1986) and others. The account of why people's names are difficult to retrieve within the Interactive Activation and Competition (IAC) model of face processing (Burton et al., 1990) can be considered as a development of the token-type distinction. In the IAC model, access to biographical information takes place through person-identity nodes, or PINs. Each familiar person is represented by a separate token marker, or PIN, and PINs act as modality-free gateways to biographical information: the same PIN is accessed regardless of whether we see the person, see her photograph or hear her voice. Some biographical facts are common to many people and PINs: we may know many actors or have many Italian friends, for example. But people's names often represent unique biographical facts: we know only one Bill Clinton, or one Tony Blair. Unique links between PIN and name make them more vulnerable to damage than other kinds of knowledge. According to this proposal, patients with

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