



About Some Overlooked Function of Proper Names on the Example of the Functioning of the Name *Byelarus'* in Different Countries

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the functioning of proper names from a sociolinguistic and political perspective, focusing on the name of the Republic of Belarus across languages. The aim of the study is to explain why the form *Belarus* (Byelarus') is promoted by Belarusian authorities and communities, and why traditional exonyms continue to be used in other languages. The study also demonstrates that proper names perform functions that extend beyond mere identification and reference, and that these functions may acquire particular significance in politically sensitive contexts.

The analysis is based on a qualitative, onomastic and sociolinguistic approach, drawing on comparative examples from various languages and historical contexts, as well as selected theoretical accounts of proper-name functions. Particular attention is paid to the distinction between endonyms and exonyms and to the socio-political conditioning of naming

practices, including their historical development and contemporary transformations.

The findings indicate that, alongside their primary referential function, proper names may assume a secondary, symbolic function, interpretable as an expression of territoriality. In this capacity, names operate as markers of collective identity and symbolic boundaries, reflecting broader processes of negotiation between linguistic tradition and political agency. The preference for *Belarus* thus reflects not only linguistic choice but also an ongoing process of identity construction and political self-determination.

It is concluded that disputes over country names are not purely linguistic but are embedded in broader cultural and political dynamics. Proper names can function as symbolic instruments of territorial demarcation in both physical and mental geographies, thus contributing to the construction and consolidation of national identity.

KEYWORDS: proper names, endonyms and exonyms, territoriality, national identity, Belarus, sociolinguistics.

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1. Introduction

On 19 January 2021, the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) in Moscow hosted an international scientific conference *Имя страны: Белоруссия и её название в языках народов мира* [*The name of a country: Belarus and its naming in the world's languages*]¹. It was attended by scholars from several countries. Issues related to the naming of Belarus in German until 1990 were presented by Igor I. Barinov (Institute of Slavic Studies, RAS), and from 1990 to 2020 by Thomas Bohn (Justus Liebig University in Gießen, Germany). The naming of Belarus in French sources was handled by Dar'ya A. Korotkova (Institute of Slavic Studies, RAS), in Lithuanian by Alyaksandr Hornyy (Grodno State University, Belarus) and Marina Hornaya (Junior high school No. 9 in Grodno, Belarus), Ksenya A. Klimova (Moscow State University, Russia) in Greek. Additionally, papers were presented in the context of the use of the name Belarus by: Yuriy A. Labyntsev (Institute of Slavic Studies, RAS) – *Православный "епископ Белорусский" святитель Георгий Конисский* [*Orthodox „Bishop of Belarus” St. George of Konissky*], Larisa L. Shchavinskaya (Institute of Slavic Studies, RAS) – *Римско-католический "епископ Белорусский" Станислав Богуш-Сестрентцевич* [*Roman Catholic “Bishop of Belarus” Stanislav Bogush-Sestrentsevich*] and Mikhail Yuryevich Dronov (Institute of Slavic Studies, RAS) – *К вопросу об этнической идентичности белорусов-литвинов бывших северных уездов Черниговской губернии* [*To the question of the ethnic identity of the Belarusians-Litvins of the former northern districts of the Chernihiv province*]. The discussion of the papers raised various issues related to the functioning of the name Belarus in different languages, although it can be argued that the most fundamental problem remained unresolved – whether the traditional forms, established in different languages, should take precedence, or the forms preferred by the Belarusian authorities and Belarusians themselves, which is now important primarily in connection with the Russian name *Belorussiya* [Белоруссия] against the Belarusian name *Byelarus'* [Беларусь].

The political map of the world is constantly evolving, with many of the changes being substantive and involving the dissolution or creation of states. New political entities disappear from the world map (e.g., *Yugoslavia*, *USSR*) or appear on it (e.g., *Republic of Kosovo*). Sometimes, however, the changes are merely nomenclatural, for example, in recent years, English texts do not use the name *Burma*, but *Myanmar* (in Polish, to this day, “the pronunciation of the name ‘Myanmar’ has not been established”²). In Europe, on the other hand,

1 Conference homepage: <https://tinyurl.com/3m8apmya> [accessed on: 26.10.2022].

2 See <https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mjanma> [accessed on: 17 January 2021].

there have been several years of political wrangling over what to call *Macedonia* (North Macedonia as of January 11, 2019), which borders on Bulgaria, Greece, Albania and Serbia. Without going into the details of such disputes, we will note that these changes and naming disputes provoke a rethinking of the problem of defining proper names and their functions. In this paper, I intend to look at the functions of proper names from the perspective of how the name *Byelarus'* [Беларусь] functions.

Onomastic studies have long distinguished between proper names given to and used by their bearers, known as *endonyms*, and the equivalents used by members of other communicative communities, known as *exonyms* (for the difference between exonyms and endonyms, see, for example, Włoskowicz 2015). Both types of naming units may sometimes be disputed. Many times, efforts are made to impose the “correct” form of an exonym. These actions are often politically motivated, and the discussion is not scientific but rather part of political discourse and political struggle.

After independence was declared in 1991, the official name *Byelarus'* (*Belarus* in English, *Biélorussie* in French) was established. The new country's authorities at the time urged other countries to use this particular name. In Poland, we eventually stayed with the name *Białoruś* (with the vowel *a*), although doubts about the name remained, but they concern a different issue. Normative publications allow the combination *Republika Białorusi* (*Republika* + genitive), while official documents adopted *Republika Białoruś* (*Republika* + nominative).

The case of *Byelarus'* also illustrates the long-standing tension between endonyms – the names used by the inhabitants of a country – and exonyms, or foreign-language names created through contact and tradition. The evolution of Belarusian names – *Белая Русь*, *Беларусь*, *Белоруссия* [*Byelaya Rus'*, *Byelarus'*, *Byelorussiya*] – mirrors the country's changing political history and cultural self-definition.

Similar processes can be observed in the transformation of other state names, such as the *Netherlands* vs. *Holland* or *Macedonia* vs. *North Macedonia*. In each case, the linguistic change reflects shifts in political sovereignty and identity negotiation.

From an onomasiological perspective, these variations highlight how proper names may acquire connotative meanings that go beyond their referential function – becoming symbols of legitimacy, independence, or resistance.

The attitude of the Belarusian authorities to the country's name used outside its borders has been changing. At the beginning of Alexander Lukashenko's presidency, the issue of the country's name was not raised, but back in 2009 Belarus' Foreign Ministry raised the issue again. This included the German name

Weissrussland, which literally means ‘White Russia’. The same is true for the name of Belarus in Swedish – *Vitryssland*, literally ‘White Russia’ [Pisalnik 2013].

Proper names, like common words, can be borrowed either directly or through other languages. Many names from the territories of pre-revolutionary Russia or the USSR have entered international circulation through the Russian language, hence Belarusian diplomats raise the issue of their country's name sometimes in areas of the world far from their country, such as in 2018 when Kirill Rudi, Belarus' ambassador to China, wrote on Twitter:

Беларусь – не Белая Россия.” В Китае началась кампания по изменению наименования белорусского государства на китайском языке с “Белая Россия” или “Белоруссия” на “Беларусь (16.03.2018, Пекин)”³.

Of course, the most difficult problem is the Russian name *Byelarussiya* [Белоруссия]. As we know, this issue has already been addressed by diplomats and top-level politicians alike (e.g., in 2009, the then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Russian Justice Minister Alexander Kononov), as well as by linguists. From a purely linguistic, or rather from a structural point of view, the Russians are right in asserting that language norms are shaped by their users. This is because what is the norm in a language is decided by its users. I have also taken this position myself in popular articles on the Polish name *Wilno* (*Vilnius*) and the Lithuanian name *Wilnius* [Duda 1993], or the name *Moldawia* (*Moldova*) [Duda 1996]. We have the right to say *Wilno* and *Moldawia* in Polish, because this is Polish tradition, but – at the same time – we do not have the right to decide what Lithuanians or Moldovans call the same places in their language. While this position seems reasonable, today I would pay more attention to the social context of language functioning. We have no right to impose on anyone what language they use or what forms they prefer. The sender must reckon with the fact that the receiver is not obliged to accept his/her linguistic choices, i.e. – let us try to apply this position to the problem of naming the *Republic of Belarus* – Russians, Germans, Chinese, etc. have the right to persist with the traditionally established names of Belarus in their languages. However, they must realize that this leads to confrontation, as Belarusians are under no obligation to accept their choice. How to reach a compromise on this issue? I have no idea. It seems to me that this is the purpose of the Moscow conference.

³ See <https://tinyurl.com/bdhhbapf8>. This was reported by Belsat TV: <https://tinyurl.com/3kejmar6> [accessed on: 16 January 2021].

2. About the functions of proper names

Many researchers have written about the functions of proper names, including Czesław Kosyl [1983], Mariusz Rutkowski [2010], Aleksandra Superanskaya [1973], and more recently Bogusław Dunaj [Dunaj 2017]. Summing up his article on the functions of proper names, Dunaj said that

the basic universal function of proper names was to identify a particular object. For many names it happens to be the only function. Depending on the type of objects being labeled, there may also be other functions: expressive, used to express a variety of emotions, and impressive, which is specific to some chretonyms. [Dunaj 2017: 87]

Given this “basic universal function of proper names” the problem of *Byelarus’ v. Byelorussiya (Weissrussland etc.)* does not exist. Each of these names unambiguously identifies a specific political entity whose boundaries and status are regulated by international law. Moreover, the names of the same country listed here in different languages appear in a complementary distribution, i.e., each is used only in texts in one language (*Byearus* in Belarusian, *Byelarussija* in Russian, etc.). So why are both the Belarusian opposition and the country’s authorities struggling to get – in their view – the name right? I believe that the issue is related to a specific and often overlooked aspect of the identity function of proper names, which I propose to call the territorial function.

This function manifests itself when a name is used not only to identify a place, but also to symbolically mark and protect a community’s perceived territory. In this sense, proper names of countries, cities or regions become linguistic markers of belonging – a semiotic extension of human territorial behavior.

Thus, proper names of places (countries, cities, rivers, etc.) can be seen as symbolic signs of *territorialism* inherent in human societies, reflecting both physical and imagined boundaries of identity.

Territorialism is an instinctive form of behavior in animals involving the defense of a territory (area) recognized as their own. The manifestations of territorialism take various forms of aggression against representatives of their own or other species. Indirect (symbolic) forms of territorialism are also observed, such as acoustic signals (singing, howling, roaring) and also leaving scent marks. The description of the territorial behavior of various animal species is the subject of a great number of scientific works in biology and sociobiology⁴. This type of

⁴ There is a very rich body of literature on animal territorialism [see, e.g., Kaleta 1996; Bujalska 1992 etc.].

behavior is also observed in humans. The usual reference to people is territoriality, which is defined as “the strategy used by individuals, groups and organizations to exercise power over a particular space and its contents” [Agnew 2000: 823–824, quoted in Kowalski 2013: 13], and its manifestations include the digging in of boundary stones, fencing and the erection of boundary walls. In the case of humans, too, marking one’s territory can be done indirectly, with the help of signs. As, for example, Edward H. Hagen and Peter Hammerstein have argued, music can be traced back to the territorial behavior of human ancestors [Hagen, Hammerstein 2009]. Symbols of territory rights for people are signs such as the flag, coat of arms, anthem and proper name. In the original function, the name, as we know, is a sign that identifies the object. In this function, its shape is not important. The most important thing is that it should indicate a certain territory. In a secondary function, the name becomes a symbolic sign by which a community marks its territory, marks its boundaries. It is because of this feature that both the authorities of the Republic of Belarus and the people of the country, as well as Belarusians outside Belarus, insist on calling their country *Byelarus’*. They treat other forms of the name, even if they are, from a structural point of view, from the perspective of language evolution (the Polish name *Białoruś* is historically the regular equivalent of the Belarusian name) and from the perspective of linguistic and cultural contacts (the Russian *Byelarussiya* was created at a specific historical moment), as a symbolic violation of their territory. Changing the form of a name is, in my opinion, a violation of the symbolic order of the boundary of the territory designated by the name, and in exceptional cases, which I do not want to consider here, a manifestation of symbolic violence⁵.

In 1925, dr. Antonio Menotti Corvi, then Italy’s representative in Poland, demanded that Poles of the city of *Włochy* [Italy] should speak and write *Italia*, *italski*. Witold Doroszewski writes:

Well, the erasure of old Polish names and the introduction of new ones in their place is countered by fundamental consideration that what a nation is called by its neighbors or other nations in general is decided not by this nation, but by the others. The Germans call themselves *Deutsche*, we call them *Niemcy*, the French call them *Allemands*, the English call them *Germans*, the Italians call

5 What I consider manifestations of symbolic violence are, for example, deliberate distortions of politicians’ names: e.g., *wielki Mocz* (Leszek Moczulski), *Kaczor* (about one of the Kaczynski brothers), *Olszewik* (Jan Olszewski). Examples from Irena Kamińska-Szmaj’s work, *Słowa na wolności: język polityki po 1989 roku: wypowiedzi, dowcip polityczny, słownik inwektyw* [Words at Large: the language of politics after 1989: statements, political wit, and a dictionary of invectives] [Kamińska-Szmaj 2001: 99–100].

them *Tedeschi*, the Lithuanians call them *Vokiečiai*. The Latvians call Russia *Krievija*, Estonia is *Igaunija*, the Hungarians call Poland *Lengyország* and the Lithuanians call it *Lenkija*, we call the Hungarian state *Węgry*, not *Magyarország* as the Hungarians themselves call their country. Neither the Poles, nor the Germans, nor the Russians, nor the Hungarians make claims to any other nation about what that nation should call them. In the same way, it is inappropriate to impose new names on us from the outside, in place of those whose use has been established with us by several centuries of tradition. This is not a matter suitable for what is so beautifully called diplomatic “negotiation”, because it is about a certain linguistic custom beyond politics. [Doroszewski 1937: 104–105]

Agreeing with Witold Doroszewski, however, we will note that he writes about relations between nations and states that are either not adjacent to each other or that there is no current and lively political dispute between them. In the case of Belarus and Russia, on the other hand, it is about relations that are still forming, about discharging some historical ballast. What for Doroszewski is merely “a linguistic custom beyond politics”, for contemporary Belarusians is an important political issue. What for Russians is merely a matter of linguistic tradition, for Belarusians is the essence of their identity. By rejecting the Russian name and the names of their country in other languages created as an imitation of the Russian name, they are not only cutting themselves off from their shared Soviet past, but also building their future.

The border is marked by the territory in physical, political space. The territory thus delineated is identified by the proper name in the primary function, while the proper name used in the secondary function as a determinant of territoriality marks these borders in the mental, imaginary geography, which – although this issue is already beyond the topic of this article – has serious consequences. Let us try to look at this issue now.

3. Mental geography

Mental geography is the geography in our minds, the imaginary geography. In Russia, the study of imaginary geography is dealt with by humanitarian geography, which is defined as “междисциплинарное научное направление, изучающее различные способы представления и интерпретации земных пространств в человеческой деятельности, включая мысленную (ментальную) деятельность”⁶. Mental geography determines our perception of

6 *Gumanitarnaya geografiya*, in: *Wikipedia: Svobodnaya encikloppiedija*, <https://tinyurl.com/y33dry8h>. Accessed on: 19 December 2019.

the world. The point of reference is always some kind of center (the navel of the universe, the Greek *omphalos* or the Roman *umbilicus mundi*). As research shows, the world in mental geography looks a little different than the world on physical and political maps.

From the point of view of mental geography, proper names in the function of territory markers of an ethnic and communicative community do not name the same territories as the same naming units used in the primary, identification function. This is perfectly illustrated, for example, by the name *Syberia* in Polish. In its original identifying function, *Syberia* is “a geographic land in northern Asia, part of Russia, located between the Urals in the west, the Arctic Ocean in the north, the divide of the catchment areas of the Arctic and Pacific Oceans in the east, and the steppes of Kazakhstan and Mongolia in the south”⁷. However, it is a “polysemous” name in the Polish language, as we still have *Syberia*, synonymous with *Sybir*, less commonly *Sibir*. The latter land can be defined as “a place of exile for Poles, a place of their suffering”. The two lands overlap only partially. In the memoirs of Poles exiled during the Stalin era to the Solovetsky Islands or Kazakhstan, *Syberia* is mentioned often. Is Kazakhstan a Siberia? When staying in Arkhangelsk, Tadeusz Zgółka noted:

[...] in the Polish language, as it seems to me, two etymologically identical words are used, but semantically they are quite distinctly different. One is *Syberia*, the geographic land east of the Urals, and the other is *Sybir*, a place of exile deep into Russia, Kazakhstan, etc., a place not necessarily in *Syberia*. Having made this distinction, it can be concluded that Arkhangelsk is not in *Syberia*, as it is located at the point where the Dvina flows into the White Sea, but is an element of *Sybir*, i.e., one of the places where Poles were deported. [Zgółka 2001: 296–299]

This imaginary land was born in Polish mental geography during the Romantic period and, despite its later confrontation with the real land, lives in our collective imagination to this day. Alicja Pihan-Kijasowa [2005: 165–174], among others, has written engagingly about its birth and functioning based on the linguistic data in the diaries of Siberian exiles.

The name *Syberia* functions similarly in Russian, as noted by Ewa Thompson:

7 *Syberia*, in: *Wikipedia, wolna encyklopedia*, <https://tinyurl.com/y4rg6c7x>. Accessed on: 19 December 2020.

The continuous expansion of Russia precipitated the unending brutalities to which both the conquered and the conquerors were exposed. These brutalities became enshrined in the empire's social and political memory, and in its geographical taxonomy. Suffice it to mention that for centuries the word "Siberia" was associated with forced labor camps. [Thompson 2000:29]

Examples of such lands existing in the imaginary geography of Poles, Belarusians, Russians are, I believe, numerous. One prominent example of such a land is Belarus.

Although there is one Belarus on the political map, there are various imaginary lands in our heads. Political Belarus is inhabited by Belarusian citizens of the Republic of Belarus. Who inhabits the imagined Belarus? In Poland and Russia, as research shows, the stereotype is still alive, which tells us to see Belarusian-Catholics as Poles and Belarusian-Orthodox as Russians [Kliabanau 2010: 24]. Doesn't the imagined Belarus appear to Poles as a backward country in terms of social development, "the Cuba of Europe", etc.⁸? As Tadeusz Lewaszkiewicz, who comes from a family of displaced persons from near Novogrudok, wrote to me in a personal letter – "in our language (the children's, i.e., mine, my brother's and sister's) Belarus was a synonym for the backwardness of grandmother and parents. The adjective *białoruski* [Belorussian] meant something inferior, such as *białoruskie gadanie* [Belorussian talk] (grandmother's reminiscences and archaic views), *białoruskie jedzenie* [Belorussian food], i.e., simple food, such as borscht with potatoes, *krupnik* [barley soup], sour milk and larded potatoes with dill, potato pancakes. *Niebiałoruskie jedzenie* [Non-Belorussian food] was refined food, such as pork chops with potatoes and *mizeria* [cucumbers in sour cream] and other delicacies" (letter dated 17 January 2020)⁹. Without going further with this topic, we will only say that Belarus in the mental geography of different peoples is not the same country, although called in the same or very similar way.

4. Conclusions

The discussion about the appropriate name for the Republic of Belarus in foreign languages seems to be a substitute problem. Its real source lies in the process

8 In a google.co.uk search, the phrase *Kuba Europy* [the Cuba of Europe] appears nearly 500 times, although not all uses refer to Belarus. Status as on 16 January 2021.

9 Tadeusz Lewaszkiewicz is a prominent Poznań Slavist, primarily a Sorabist (an expert in Lusatian languages). He recently published an important monograph, *Język powojennych przesiedleńców z Nowogródka i okolicy* [The Language of Post-War Displaced Persons from Novogrudok and its Vicinity] [Lewaszkiewicz 2017].

of identity formation of a still young state seeking its position in Europe and the world.

The territorial function of the name operates here as a symbolic act of self-determination: by insisting on *Belarus*, the speakers mark not only their linguistic preference but also the boundaries of their collective imagination. In this way, the name participates in shaping the country's mental geography – the internal map through which communities perceive themselves and others. The name of the country has become a symbolic border for Belarusians at home and abroad, and for the country's authorities¹⁰ – a symbolic border post and an axis for building Belarusian identity. As Belarusian identity solidifies and the position of the Republic of Belarus stabilizes, the name *Byelarus'* will lose its secondary function as a sign of territoriality. It will remain the name in its original identifying function, the form of the name will become a secondary matter.

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10 I do not discuss the intentions of the actions of the authorities of the Republic of Belarus. According to some publicists, “by fighting for the country's name, the [Belarusian] authorities are taking away the opposition's monopoly on the role of the sole defender of Belarusian national traditions” [Pisalnik 2013].

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