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A Glass of Cognac in Cognac: On the Relationship Between Similar-sounding Proper Names and Common Nouns

Abstract

The nature of properhood is one of the fundamental questions in onomastics. Nouns are traditionally categorised as either proper names or common nouns, but a word can change from one category to another. In recent times, properhood has been explained in terms of pragmatics so that a lexeme can function as a proper name in one context and a common noun in another. Related to this, the relationship between proprial reference and appellative meaning has been problematised in various ways over time. Traditionally, onomasticians have tended to consider proper names to be without meaning as such, so that a similar-sounding proper name and common noun are seen as homonyms. Some textbooks go even further and claim that each instance of a proper name – such as *Mary* referring to different individuals – is a different name. Relaxing the categorical divide between pragmatics and semantics makes it possible not only to define properhood in terms of the pragmatic use of the lexeme but also to study the various changes between the appellative sense and onymic reference, or between etymologically connected onymic references, with theoretical tools already used for more mainstream semantic change.

Keywords
properhood, polysemy, pragmatics, semantic change

1. Introduction

The nature of properhood is one of the classic issues in onomastics. The view that proper names are a distinct category of nouns is old, as evidenced by the etymology of the term *name* and its cognates – indeed, the resemblance between Proto-Indo-European **nōmn̥* and Proto-Uralic **nime* has sometimes been proposed as evidence of a common ancestor for these language families (SSA, s.v. *nimi*). During this long history, the way the distinct nature of names is interpreted has changed as the corpus of knowledge has grown, especially in philosophy and linguistics. In general, though, the defining property of a name is still considered to be the way it is in itself a definite reference to an individual entity.

In the present millennium, Coates (2006) gives a comprehensive review of how properhood has been viewed throughout Western history. He ends up discarding the view that proper names are strictly a separate sub-category of nouns, instead viewing properhood as a matter of pragmatics: there is clearly a distinction between semantic and onymic modes of referring but it is a matter of **referring** and not of grammatical **categorisation**. Depending on the context, a word may be interpreted either as a proper name or as a common noun.

The complexity of the overlapping relationships between proper names and common nouns has, of course, been long known. For instance, Nyström (1998) considers lexicon and onomasticon as separate – and, in the diagrams he draws, orthogonal – collections of words, with links between those elements that appear in both. In the case of each use, a word is either a proper name or a common noun, but at the level of language, or language community, the properhood of an expression can be more gradual and nuanced, so that both ends of the connecting link may be apparent to a lesser or greater degree.

The dual nature of proper names is also evident in naming (Leino, 2006), especially in cases where a new name is somehow related to an existing one. On the one hand, a place name is "just a name", that is, a reference to the named place. On the other hand, however, it is also seen as a noun phrase with a meaning, and the creation of a new name often involves blending the semantic contrast between the existing name and the new one with the referential contrast between them.

My view of language is heavily based on Construction Grammar, especially its Radical flavour (Croft, 2001). Building on this base, and adding such considerations arising from a functional view of language and a pragmatics-based view of properhood (Coates, 2006, 2012), I'll propose three theses that may seem somewhat more radical than I believe them to actually be:

(1) Proper names are not a completely distinct category of nouns.
It is clear that proper names are used in a manner different to common nouns. However, the line between proper and common is not sharp – there is a lot of overlap.

(2) Names are not monoreferential by nature.
There are well-known categories of names that have multiple referents. While names are typically used to refer to a specific individual entity, this monoreferentiality is not a fundamental property of the names themselves but rather of their use. Thus, similar-sounding names that refer to different entities are usually better considered in terms of polysemy than homonymy.

(3) Etymologically related common and proper nouns can be studied as semantic change.
This is a direct consequence of (1) and (2), above: as proper names and common nouns are overlapping nominal sub-categories whose difference is essentially in function and pragmatics, and as multiple-referent names can be seen as a phenomenon similar to appellative polysemy, the obvious next step would be to extend the tools for analysing the relationships between connected polysemic meanings of a common noun to cases where the connections are between appellative sense and proprial reference.

2. Properhood and sense

Perhaps the clearest case of the blurred line between proper names and common nouns are semantically transparent names. In these cases, an expression is used unambiguously as a name but at the same time, the connection to non-proprial sense is readily available. Transparent names and the way an onomastic theory should deal with them was briefly discussed in the 1980's in "Names" between Scandinavian onomasticians.

Initially, Dalberg (1985, p. 129) took the view that the onymic reference inherent in a proper name is not related to the appellative meaning that a similar-sounding expression might have, beyond the act of name-giving: "The acquisition by a word of the function of a proper name means that it has been given the linguistic task of referring to one, in principle uniquely occurring, object, and conventionally that it can only be used to refer to this one object." In her view, a proper name and a similar-sounding common noun are inherently separate at the level of *langue* and thus their relationship must be considered homonymic.

On the other hand, Pamp (1985) saw the situation in a different light. His starting point was that it was reasonably common for an appellative description to only gradually become a proper name. As a consequence, a well-formed onomastic theory should be able to deal with this. Responding to both Pamp and Dalberg, Peterson (1989) points out that there is a clear distinction between reference and sense, so that two expressions can easily refer to the same entity without being synonymous. Reading her article thirty years later, she appears to emphasise that onymic reference is a pragmatic matter while appellative sense is a matter of the language system.

In the discussion about the sense of proper names, or lack thereof, some arguments have seemed a little on the strict side, to the point that Sjöblom (2006, p. 64) notes how "[t]he inclination of onomasticians to deny the existence of meaning in proper nouns is confusing". This confusion is especially easy to share when one considers how often it has been suggested that proper names originate from descriptive expressions (e.g., Leibniz, 1710; Koß, 1995). It is, perhaps, reasonable to ask whether the question "do proper names have a meaning" is useful at all, or whether it would be better to ask how meanings are construed and function (Van Langendonck, 2007, p. 38).

Personally, I'd rather be diplomatic and consider all of these positions valid. They are based on widely different points of view but given each of these viewpoints the conclusions do appear sound. Nevertheless, the question of the nature of proprial semantics remains. Proper names have been described as fundamentally definite, or monoreferential, but what does this mean?

One way to look at the difference between proprial and appellative reference is through the concept of the triangular semiotic sign (Ogden & Richards, 1960, p. 11), shown in Figure 1a. What I'm presenting here is admittedly a slightly loose interpretation of how the semiotic triangle was originally developed, but it is nevertheless a useful extension of de Saussure's (1959) linguistic sign: while the Saussurean sign consists of form and meaning, the triangular semiotic one extends to include the referent as well.

When a proper name is described as being definite by nature, this translates to a claim that the bottom right corner of the triangle is not empty. Similarly, describing proper names as monoreferential claims that this corner contains a single entity. Both of these depend on context, but neither is sufficient to catch the nature of a proper name – the first one is too broad, the second too narrow.

Instead of looking just at the corners of the triangle, or the different aspects of the sign, it is instructive to look at the vertices that join them, or the connections between the constituent parts of the sign. Figure 1b (Leino, 2007, pp. 53–54) shows two different ways to proceed from form to referent. Route (a) links the word form directly to the individual referent, showing the way a proper name in its use context is a direct reference to the named object. Route (b), in turn, leads from the word form to a semantic meaning, and proceeds from there with the aid of contextual cues to the referent. This is the way common nouns function.

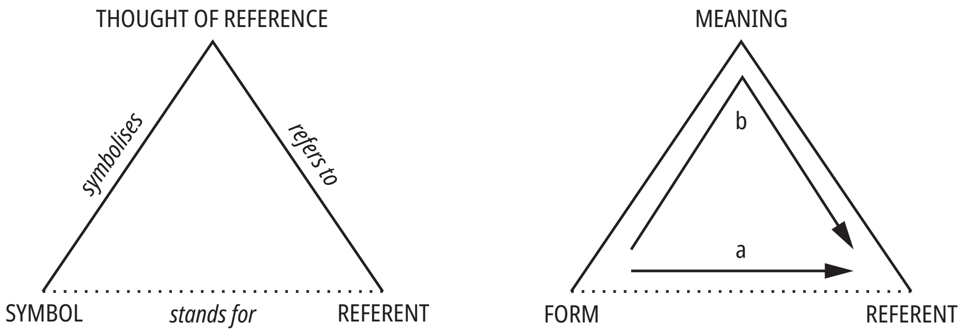

Figure 1. a) left: the semiotic sign; b) right: onymic and semantic reference

Source: Ogden & Richards, 1960, p. 11; Leino, 2007, p. 54.

If properhood is now seen as a matter of pragmatics, like Coates (2006) does, this means that the reference of link (a) is the **salient interpretation** of the sign, in the sense that Giora (1999) talks about salience: it is not necessarily the dictionary meaning of the word, but rather the interpretation that would be primarily available in context. On the other hand, while properhood itself is context-dependent, a word may have the potential of being used as a name to a greater or lesser extent. This potential translates to the **existence** of link (a): a word can meaningfully be used as a name only if there is an entity whose name it is.[1]

This duality might help solve the problem pointed out by Van Langendonck (2007, p. 69): according to Coates, properhood is senseless denoting while the traditional Saussurean view is that all linguistic signs are combinations of both form and meaning. Here, form and meaning are both present – the difference between common nouns and proper names is whether the route is from form to meaning to referent, or from form to referent and only secondarily to meaning. Van Langendonck (2007) would appear to have similar views, even if he describes it slightly differently.

Usage-based theories tend to see schematic symbols as generalisations of more specific ones. In the case of complex grammatical constructions, this means that specific lexical elements are replaced by more schematic ones – and, in some theories, grammatical categories in turn are generalisations of these elements across different constructions (Croft, 2001, pp. 53–57; Langacker, 2005, p. 108). From this, it is not an altogether great leap to consider the meaning of a word as a similar generalisation made at the level of *langue*, from specific referents at the level of *parole*.

A proper name clearly has an extension, or a set of possible referents. However, a typical proper name does not have an intension in the traditional sense: there is no clearly defined set of properties that define the set of possible referents. Because of this, the normal route from form through meaning to referent is not generally available. On the other hand, it is possible to see a proper name as having an incomplete form of intension derived from the extension, that is, a set of properties that a referent of the name has either in reality or in the mind of someone using the name. Unlike common nouns, where the intension defines the extension, with proper names the extension defines the intension (Peterson, 1989; Van Langendonck, 2007, p. 56).

[1] Note, though, that the entity need not be real. Also, it is possible for a word to be used in a way that would lead a listener to interpret it as the name of an unknown entity, even if it does not in fact have such a referent.

The intension of a proper name, as derived from its extension, has often been called categorical meaning (Van Langendonck, 2007, pp. 71–78). In cognitive linguistics (e.g., Langacker, 2005), grammatical categories are usually given as examples of atomic language elements that are schematic. It seems, however, reasonable to see the categorical meaning of names as schematic as well. Trousdale (2012, p. 549) notes that an increase in the schematicity of a linguistic sign has two apparently opposite effects. On the one hand, a more specific sign has more semantic detail than a more schematic one; but on the other hand, an increase in schematicity means also an increase in abstraction, which in turn means that a schematic construction is capable of sanctioning new, more specific ones. Trousdale talks about complex constructions, such as sentence types and partially productive idioms, but it seems that a similar effect can be seen in proper names. The categorical meaning of a name gives some information about the named entity, and at the same time sets limits on new entities that could share the name.

Schematicity in the meaning of proper names is a broader concept than what has traditionally been called categorical meaning. The other main source of (non-affective) meaning in names is semantic transparency. While categorical meaning emerges from the use of the name and can in this sense be considered native to the name, transparent meaning comes from elements that already exist in the lexicon. However, this transparency does not always survive the naming process intact but instead the name often ends up being partially transparent, with semantic content that does not fully describe the named entity or correspond to all the elements of the name.

Similarly, cases where a word has fully-fledged interpretations both as a proper name and as a common noun can come about in two main ways. First, a descriptive phrase can be onymised to form a proper name. This is how Leibniz (1710) saw the origin of proper names, and while it is by no means the only way to come up with names, it certainly is one of the ways. Second, a proper name can eventually develop non-onymic uses, so that it can be used for instance to describe properties associated with the named entity. In both cases, but especially the first one, the line between a proper name and a common noun is not always clear. Salience might be usable as an indicator of properhood, and as Giora (2012, p. 239) points out, a similar approach works reasonably well in cases where a word has different interpretations that are all possible to a greater or lesser degree.

3. Polysemy, homonymy and names

The relationship between similar-sounding names referring to different entities has sometimes been described (as by Dalberg, 1985) as homonymic rather than polysemic. In addition to the issues of properhood discussed above, this also has the problem that the difference between polysemy and homonymy is not as clear as how it is often presented. Nerlich (2003) gives an account of the history, and as it turns out, as late as in the 19th century the two terms were used roughly interchangeably.

In 20th century linguistics, polysemy has been used to describe cases where a single word has developed multiple related meanings, so that for instance *mouse* is used for both the rodent and the computer accessory. This is in opposition to homonymy where two different words happen to sound the same (for instance, in the sentence *Can you open that can?*). Especially in morphologically complex languages, homonymy is often present only in some forms of the words in question.

As noted by Croft and Cruse (2004, p. 111), the distinction between homonymy and polysemy is nicely unambiguous in a diachronic setting, at least as long as the etymology of the word can be reliably determined. However, from a synchronic viewpoint the situation is more ambiguous, and the difference between polysemy and homonymy is more a continuum than a sharp categorical divide. Also, as Blank (2003) writes, not all cases that are seen as polysemy from a synchronic viewpoint have developed through semantic change while some cases of apparent homonymy have. For instance, he considers Modern German *Schloss* 'lock' and *Schloss* 'castle' as completely unrelated in meaning and therefore homonyms even if the latter meaning derives from a Middle High German metaphor; on the other hand, he notes that the Modern English *corn* 'callus' is easy to interpret as a metaphorical extension of *corn* 'grain' and thus a case of polysemy, even though they are etymologically unrelated.

Looking at the issue from a synchronic angle, one possible approach is to consider polysemous those cases where there is only one lemma and homonymous the cases with several. While such a formulation is attractive on many levels it's not quite as clear as one would hope. Croft and Cruse (2004) are correct in considering the distinction a continuum, and one person's polysemic meanings are another's homonyms. Defining polysemy this way is also dangerously close to circular reasoning, as one prominent way of defining a lemma is through the same interconnectedness of the meanings that is at the core of polysemy. The connection between the concept of lemma and that of polysemy is, however, real.

Polysemy appears to be rather fundamental to the way word meanings are processed (Fauconnier & Turner, 2003), so that all appellative meaning is to some extent polysemic. Somewhat related to this, the process of naming an entity often involves interpreting the name simultaneously as an onymic reference to the entity and as an appellative description. Figure 2 shows an example of this happening in contrastive naming, so that a prior *Mustalampi* 'Black pond' is used as a model for naming a nearby *Valkealampi* 'White pond', projecting both the contrast between the two lakes and the contrast between the two colours to the conceptual space of place names.

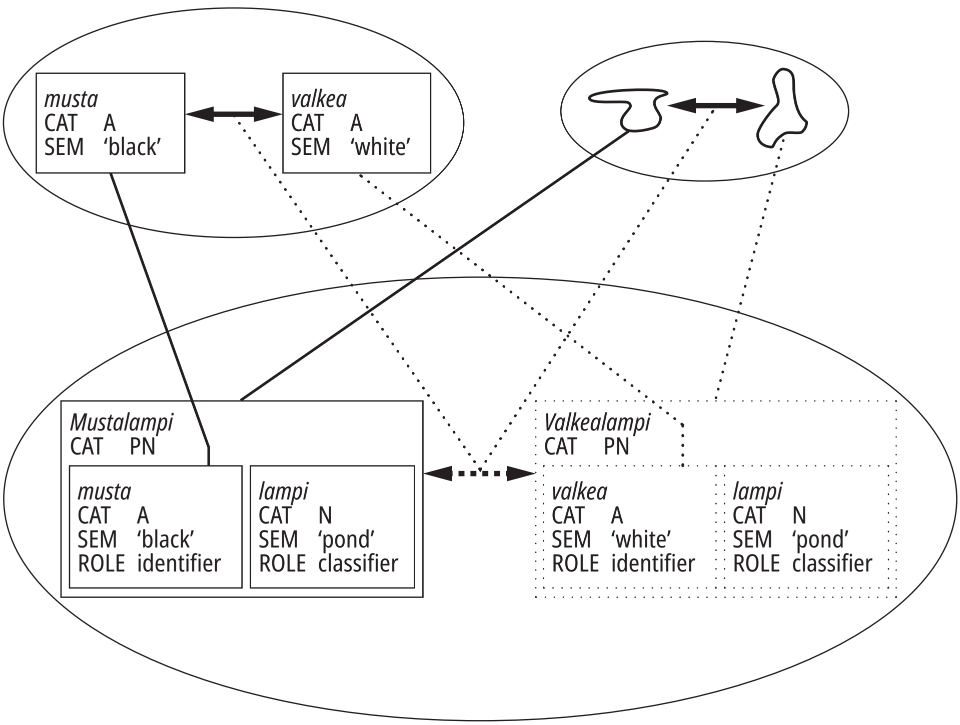

Figure 2. Contrastive naming using both the onymic reference and appellative meaning apparent in the existing name

Source: Leino, 2007, p. 46.

Here, polysemy (and, by extension, homonymy) are seen as covering both the common appellative route from form to meaning to referent (Figure 1b, link b) and the onymic one directly from form to referent (Figure 1b, link a). This is not altogether uncontroversial but rather a strong commitment to a usage-based approach to language and linguistic meaning. It also means seeing the difference between semantics and pragmatics as a continuum instead of a sharp line (cf. Langacker, 2008, pp. 39–43).

4. Semantic change

When polysemy is considered to cover both sense and reference, the continuum between appellative descriptions and proper names becomes easier. In the context of semantically transparent names, Pamp (1985) was worried about the transition from appellative descriptions to proper names, and if one perceives onymic reference as strictly separate from semantic sense this transition is highly problematic. On the other hand, if one takes the kind of strongly usage-based position where sense is not completely distinct from reference in terms of how an expression is understood, the process of onymisation can be seen as an extreme case of semantic narrowing where the focus is on one definite instance.

It is also possible to consider same-sounding proper names in terms of polysemy: it is rarely useful to postulate several proprial lemmas but instead view such names as having several possible referents, much like a common noun can have several different but connected senses. This is obvious in the case of personal names – it does not seem plausible to suggest the number of distinct lexical entries that one would need to consider each *Maria* independent from each other. Other types of names do not fare all that much better, though. For instance, there are a dozen or so small lakes in Finland named *Peipposenmeri* 'Chaffinch's Sea'; these appear in such a compact geographic area that it's unlikely the name-givers hit independently on the metaphor of the same small bird having a small lake as its sea.

It should be noted, though, that there are other ways to solve the problem than to extend polysemy by blurring the line between semantics and pragmatics, and thus sense and referent. For instance, the linguistic entities I'm calling names could be seen as archinomemes that cover several monoreferential nomemes (Brendler, 2008, pp. 112–125). In a more traditional theoretical setting, Ainiala et al. (2012, pp. 33–34) propose that polysemy covers the relationship within the set of a primary name and the secondary names derived from it, while similar-sounding primary names are homonyms. However, they admit that personal names do not fit this model very well; in addition to this, in cases like *Peipposenmeri* it is not always easy to determine whether a name is primary or secondary.

Focussing on the similarities between appellative sense and proprial reference is attractive with regard to the principle of parsimony: it means that semantic changes that are already known and widely used are not limited to just the sense of common nouns. Similar processes are also apparent in some cases where a common noun becomes onymised, or when a proper name acquires sense as an appellative expression, or in the formation of secondary names.

The meaning of an expression is often generalised, so that for instance *holiday* has come to mean not only holy days but also more generally those days that are free of work. The generalisation of meaning can also be a part of a lengthy process: for instance, Proto-Germanic **hlaibaz* 'bread' gave rise to a derivative noun **gahlaibō* 'member of a group (such as a squad of soldiers) who shared their meals'. This, in turn, was translated as a calque to Latin *companio* which in turn was borrowed as the English *companion*.

Similar generalisation is also seen in proper names. It is relatively common for patronyms, like Gaelic *MacEachainn* or Swedish *Johansson* to develop into surnames. The reference in a proper name can also develop into appellative sense, as has happened when *Caesar* changed from a cognomen first to a dynastic title and from that further to a true title of office. Changes like this can also transcend the borders between word classes, so that the proper name *Google* has developed not to a common noun but a verb.

Metaphor is a common enough phenomenon that many modern cognitive theories, especially since Lakoff and Johnson (1980), see it as a central mechanism for human cognition. Its use can range from completely unremarkable (*chair leg*) to stylistically marked (*couch potato*), and the origins can be completely forgotten even when the metaphorical status is apparent (*understand*). Not all metaphors are linguistic, either, so that we are used to seeing a computer screen metaphorically as a tabletop.

Proper names can get appellative sense through metaphorical use. For instance, *Nazi* is in common parlance often used metaphorically, not to mean ‘a member of the NSDAP’ but rather some variety of ‘strict authoritarian’, especially in semi-idiomatic expressions like *grammar Nazi*. On the other hand, metaphor is a common way to form transparent proper names: there are six lakes in Finland named *Housujärvi* ‘Trouser Lake’, each with a shape that resembles two legs. Metaphor can also have a proper name as both its starting and end point, so that the quarter of *Amuri* in Tampere, Finland – once considered as being far away from the town centre – is named after the oblast in Siberia. *New York* too can be seen as having a metaphorical relation to the old *York*.

Metonymy is likewise a common phenomenon, found in unremarkable (*dish* ‘the food served on a dish’) as well as obvious (*the suits* ‘the class of people wearing suits’) contexts. It can be used to form names, so that a swamp can be named *Pihlaja* ‘Rowan’, for instance after a notable tree. Transferred names are often based on metonymy, so that *Ilvesmäki* ‘Lynx Hill’ may originate as the name of a hill, be given to a farm built on the foot of that hill, and later adopted as the surname of the family living on the farm.

A proper name may turn into a common noun through metonymy. The first Duke of *Wellington* wore a particular type of leather boots which came to be called *Wellingtons* and, a century or so of semantic drift later, *wellingtons* settled to the current meaning of ‘rubber boots’. An even longer history has resulted in the Finnish word for moonshine, *pontikka*: it traces back to Jean de *Pontac* who in 1525 married Jeanne de Bellon, heiress to the Seigneury of Haut-Brion, and started the estate that currently produces one of the four Premier Cru wines in the Bordeaux region.

5. Conclusions

At the start of this article, I presented three theses regarding the relationship between proper names and common nouns, with particular focus on those cases where there is a pair that sounds the same. As seen above, these names, both ones that are transparent and ones that have been de-onymised, offer insight on properhood. At this stage, it is time to take another look at the theses.

(1) Proper names are not a completely distinct category of nouns.
In a somewhat similar vein to Coates (2006), I have here argued that properhood is primarily a matter of pragmatics. In any particular context, a word functions as a proper name if its salient meaning is a direct reference to a named entity; likewise, it functions as a common noun if its salient meaning is a semantic sense, even if that sense will also in context lead to a specific referent. Related to this, a word has the potential of being used as a proper name if its meanings include such a link.
Even if properhood is tied to a reference that bypasses sense, a word can have semantic content. This semantic content is, on the one hand, sense; and on the other hand, it is also a property of the name itself and not just the name's appellative homonym. Considering a name a single lexical unit that has form, referent, and – often not fully defined – meaning can explain not only transparent names but also the de-onymisation of a proper name and several types of secondary names.

(2) Names are not by nature monoreferential.
The claim that proper names are by nature monoreferential stems primarily for a need to define properhood. However, as seen above, it is possible to propose a consistent definition that does not require monoreferentiality. In the absence of such a need, defining name as a proprial lemma that may be attached to several referents would appear to fit most common perceptions of name similarity. Under such a view, proper names that sound the same but refer to different entities are best seen as a case of polysemy rather than homonymy. This does not require that the names have a fully formed sense, although it does require a view of language where the difference between semantics and pragmatics is flexible enough to allow polysemy to cover both sense and reference.

(3) Etymologically related common and proper nouns can be studied as semantic change.
Once one relaxes the line between semantics and pragmatics to allow properhood and polysemy to coexist, it is also apparent that some of the semantic processes that lead to changes in the sense of a word, and thus to polysemy, also apply to proper names and the polysemy they develop.

The onymic reference and appellative sense can coexist, and transitions between the two can be seen as semantic change. It is, however, not always easy to tell whether such change results in a proper name or a common noun. *Stilton* is originally the name of an English village, and metonymically of a type of cheese; similarly, *Cognac* is a town in France and the variety of brandy made in the region. Whether the term for the cheese and the brandy are names, though, is not obvious: to determine this, one would need to have a lengthy discussion – perhaps over cheese and brandy – on the question of what kinds of entities are distinct enough that they can be named.

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