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estudio de la lengua vasca

Differential D-marking on
proper names? A cross-lin-
guistic study

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Differential D-marking on proper names? A cross-linguistic study

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ABSTRACT

According to recent studies, proper names and common nouns differ cross-linguistically with respect to their morphosyntactic behavior, i.e. their marking for case, definiteness, number and gender, among other grammatical categories. Consequently, it has been argued that proper names possess a special onymic grammar. This study is meant to contribute to the discussion by comparing the marking of definiteness and specificity (D-marking) on proper names and common nouns in a sample of fifty areally, genetically, and typologically unrelated languages. The results show that there is only weak evidence for a differential D-marking of names.

Keywords: proper name; common noun; morphosyntax; D-marking; typology.

1. Introduction: literature, aims and scope of the study

Onomastic research has traditionally focused on explaining the etymologies of names and their implications for language history and reconstruction (Tovar, 1954; Evans, 1967). In comparison, there are few cross-linguistic studies which deal with the synchronic grammatical features of proper names (henceforth, PNs). Recently, however, this field seems to have received more interest (Anderson, 2004, 2007, 2015; Van Langendonck, 2007; Schlücker & Ackermann, 2017; Handschuh, 2017; Helmbrecht, Denk, Thanner & Tonetti, 2018). Most of these studies draw, in any case, on analyses of a few well-known Indo-European languages (Anderson, 2004, p. 435; Van Langendonck & Van de Velde, 2016, p. 18). A notable exception to this limitation is Handschuh (2017), whose study nevertheless disregards all non-anthroponymic name types and who draws data exclusively from written sources.

In view of this state of affairs, this study aims to provide an answer to the following question: what cross-linguistic tendencies can be observed concerning the marking of definiteness and specificity on PNs? Attempting to answer this question presents a major methodological issue: language grammars, which often constitute the main basis of typological research, rarely provide information about onomastic systems (Croft, 1990, p. 268). An effort has been made to avoid this problem by drawing part of the data from native speakers: see Section 2.2 for more details on data sources. The rest of this study is structured as follows: Section 2.1 discusses the most relevant comparative concepts used in this paper, followed in Section 2.2 by a layout of the methodology and sampling procedures. Section 3 provides an overview of the generalizations that can be made on the basis of the data. Finally, Section 4 presents the conclusions of the study as well as possible avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Basic comparative concepts: proper name, definiteness, specificity

A basic concept this study draws on concerns proper names: according to widespread agreement in the literature, PNs are nominal elements that directly denote a single extra-sentential or extra-linguistic referent (Anderson, 2004, p. 456, 2007, p. 127; Van Langendonck, 2007, p. 6; Van Langendonck & Van de Velde, 2016, p. 18; Schlücker &

Ackermann, 2017, pp. 310–311). PNs differ with respect to other nominal elements such as pronouns and common nouns (henceforth, CNS) in the sense that they cannot denote classes of referents¹ and have little or no lexical meaning, i.e. the meaning of a name (if any) does not determine its denotation² (Van Langendonck, 2007, p. 6; Handschuh, 2017, p. 486; Schlücker & Ackermann, 2017, p. 310). Consequently, all nominal elements which are characterized by these two properties have been considered PNs.

These are, however, not the only properties by which PNs differ from CNS: the former have been argued to behave in a distinct manner at the syntactic and morphosyntactic levels as well (Sasse, 1993, p. 195; Anderson, 2007, p. 258). These differences include differential case marking, gender marking and the coding of definiteness and spatial relations (Nübling, Fahlbusch & Heuser, 2015, pp. 80–86; Handschuh, 2017, p. 500; Stolz, Levkovich & Urdze, 2017, p. 124). Indeed, PNs have been claimed to differ so much from CNS that the former have been considered to have a «special onymic grammar» (Anderson, 2007, p. 127, 2015, p. 599; Nübling *et al.*, 2015, p. 64; Stolz *et al.*, 2017, p. 123). In this line of thought, some authors have proposed that PNs either form a distinct lexical class (Sasse, 1993, p. 195; Plank, 2011, p. 269) or align with determiners and pronouns (Anderson, 2003, p. 348, 2004, p. 435, 2007, p. 26). As opposed to this, the traditional view classifies PNs as a subclass of nouns (Coates, 2006, p. 357). However this may be, the discussion around the syntactic category of PNs is still open, which motivates a cross-linguistic comparison of the properties of PNs and CNS (Schlücker & Ackermann, 2017, pp. 35–36).

A basic distinction which concerns names is that between PNs and proper nouns (PNos). According to the literature (Coates, 2006, p. 373; Schlücker & Ackermann, 2017, pp. 311–312), PNs are nominal elements at the phrase level, whereas PNos are nominal elements at the word level. This implies, on the one hand, that PNs, unlike PNos (*Nicole, Berlin*), can contain verbs (*John Dies at the End*), adjectives (*New Queensland*), genitive attributes (*the Earl of Sandwich*), definite articles (*the Seine*), and other nominal modifiers (*Lower Saranac Lake*). On the other hand, PNs can be headed by PNos (*the Peruvian Andes*) or by CNS (*the White House*). Distinguishing between PNs and PNos is important in typological terms, as not all languages build names on the basis of PNos: in Slave, for example, indigenous names are usually constructed by means of CNS and inflected verb forms (Rice, 1989, p. 191). Accordingly, the abbreviation *PN(s)* is used here to encompass both PNs and PNos, and a distinction between the two has been made when strictly necessary. Another matter that relates to name types concerns the contrast between native/traditional and foreign/modern names: this distinction should be borne in mind when analyzing the morphosyntactic

¹ An exception to this property can result from deonymization, i.e. from common noun uses of PNs such as *a Beretta* and *a Zeppelin* (Schlücker & Ackermann, 2017, p. 311).

² PNs typically originate in verbs, adjectives and CNS, where meaning does determine denotation (Anderson, 2003, p. 366; Plank, 2011, p. 271). Therefore, the absence of this feature should be considered to apply only after onymization has taken place, i.e. after the source element has lost its original meaning for the purpose of reference (Coates, 2006, p. 368).

properties of onymic classes, since native/traditional names have been argued to display more inflectional marking than foreign/modern ones in languages such as Dutch and Yiddish (Hoekstra, 2010, p. 760).

A second basic comparative concept used throughout this study is definiteness. According to Himmelmann (2001, p. 831), at least theoretically the distinction between *definite* and *indefinite* is universal and can thus be analyzed in all languages. Definiteness is, moreover, a category traditionally distinguished for nominal elements, together with case, number, gender and possession (Handschrift, 2017, p. 488). Since, as argued above, PNs seem to be nominal elements, definiteness should thus be a relevant category when analyzing the typological properties of PNs. Lyons (1999, p. 282) claims that definiteness is a morphosyntactic category which is marked³ on noun phrases and which encodes a pragmatic category of identifiability for both the speaker and the hearer. Marking for definiteness can ensue via various formal means, including bound morphemes, free elements and stem changes (Bickel & Nichols, 2007, pp. 172-180).

A difficulty at the time of identifying definiteness is that it frequently overlaps with other grammatical categories. Definiteness can, for example, be encoded by the same individual marker as animacy: this is the case of languages with differential object marking, where case often distinguishes a subset of direct objects that are characterized by definiteness and/or animacy (Lyons, 1999, p. 202). Moreover, elements which mark definiteness in some languages can mark other categories in other languages: for example, articles encode definiteness in some Afro-Asiatic and Indo-European languages in addition to Basque, Hungarian and Northwest Caucasian, whereas they encode specificity in Atlantic-Congo and Austronesian languages (Hawkins, 1978, pp. 106-148; Himmelmann, 1997, pp. 195-198; Becker, 2018, p. 4). This state of affairs implies the need to define a third major comparative concept used in this study: specificity. According to Hawkins (1978, p. 204), Lyons (1999, p. 165) and Becker (2018, pp. 82-83), specificity indicates that a discourse referent is identifiable to the speaker, i.e. that the speaker is referring to an arbitrary member of the class described by the discourse referent. Therefore, definiteness differs from specificity in that the former indicates identifiability for both the speaker and the hearer, whereas the latter expresses identifiability only for the speaker:

Table 1. The opposition between definiteness and specificity (Von Heusinger, 2002, p. 249)

Identifiable by	Definite, specific	Indefinite, specific	Indefinite, non-spec.
Speaker	+	+	-
Hearer	+	-	-

³ A morphosyntactic category is considered here to be marked in any particular language if in that language overt marking distinguishes different feature values for the category in question (Croft, 1988, p. 161).

According to Becker (2018, p. 110), two hypotheses may explain the occurrence *vs* absence of articles with PNs: on the one hand, PNs have unique referents, thus they are inherently definite and do not need to be marked for definiteness and specificity. On the other hand, PNs have referents which are unambiguously identifiable; therefore, their co-occurrence with articles is to be expected. In view of these contradictory hypotheses and of the fact that elements which mark definiteness in some languages express specificity in others, it seems unpractical to analyze the marking of definiteness and specificity separately: Himmelmann (1997, pp. 6-7) uses the term *D-element* as a cover-term for markers of definiteness, specificity and referentiality. In line with Handschuh (2017, p. 491), the expression *D-marking* will henceforth be used to refer to the overt marking of any of these categories.

2.2. Methodology: sampling, elicitation and data sources

This study is based on data from fifty languages: Aguaruna*, Apinayé*, Bambassi*, Basque#, Bini#, Burushaski*, Chavacano (Zamboanga variety)#, Chemehuevi*, Chukchi*, Finnish*, Fijian (Boumaa variety)*, German (Swiss variety)#, Gooniyandi*, Guarani (Paraguayan variety)#, Hungarian#, Iatmul*, Jamsay Dogon*, Japanese*, Kabardian#, K'ekchi'*, Ket*, Khalkha Mongolian*, Kunama*, Kurdish (Behdini variety)#, Mambai*, Maori#, Mapudungun#, Mauritian Creole*, Michif*, Mundari*, Nama*, Nivkh*, Ok-sapmin*, Ottawa*, Pa'o Karen#, Pipil#, Pumé*, Russian#, Slave*, Swahili*, Tamazight#, Thai#, Tibetan (Modern literary variety)*, Turkish#, Telugu*, Vietnamese#, Warlpiri*, Warrongo*, West Greenlandic* and Wolof#. The geographic distribution of these languages is shown in Figure 1.

This sample of languages was created following Rijkhoff, Bakker, Hengeveld and Kahrel (1993, pp. 171-178) and Rijkhoff and Bakker (1998, pp. 264-266). The method laid out by these authors aims to maximize the diversity of reduced language samples, so that the generalizations made on the basis of these samples can have the widest possible cross-linguistic validity. Stated differently, the choice of languages is meant to be representative of the variety found in the world's languages. Variety samples are suitable for exploratory research, i.e. in order to investigate linguistic phenomena about which little is known (Rijkhoff & Bakker, 1998, p. 265). In line with Handschuh (2017, p. 486), in this study the most animate onymic subclasses (anthroponyms and zoonyms) have been compared to the CNs «woman», «man» and «child» because these are both highly animate and not likely to be inalienably possessed. As opposed to this, the least animate onymic subclasses (toponyms, ergonyms, praxonyms and phenonyms) have been compared to the CN «place», since all of these are usually inanimate and likely to be used in a lative or locative sense (Stolz, Lestrade & Stolz, 2014, pp. 287-291)⁴.

⁴ The data this study is based on are exclusively synchronic. A diachronic analysis of D-marking on PNs in some of the languages of the sample, such as Basque (Manterola, 2015) and German (Plank, 2011) would certainly contribute to a better understanding of the topic at hand. Such an analysis is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this study.



Figure 1. Distribution of the languages under study.

Concerning the data sources, these were primarily collected from descriptive grammars in 32/50 (64.0%) of the languages in the above list, i.e. those marked with an asterisk. Secondly, information was retrieved directly from native speakers in 18/50 (36.0%) of the aforementioned languages, that is to say, those marked with a hashtag in the list. The secondary data were collected by means of questionnaires in which the speakers were requested to provide sentences in isolation similar to the ones given in the questionnaire. The questions were specifically designed to encourage the use of all onymic subclasses identified by Nübling *et al.* (2015, pp. 99–104). The data sources used for this study present, however, two limitations: on the one hand, for most of the languages in the sample only written sources of information have been used. On the other hand, translations tend to encourage calquing of the structures found in the source language. This means that the primary and secondary sources are bibliographically and translationally biased, respectively (Rijkhoff & Bakker, 1998, p. 266). These limitations should be borne in mind at the time of evaluating the validity of the results, which will be presented in the following section.

3. Discussion: cross-linguistic tendencies in the D-marking of PNs and CNs

Four possibilities exist concerning the D-marking of CNS and PNS: (α) both CNS and PNS are overtly D-marked; (β) neither CNS nor PNS are overtly D-marked; (γ) CNS are overtly D-marked, whereas PNS are zero-marked or less D-marked than CNS; (δ) PNS are overtly D-marked, whereas CNS are zero-marked or less D-marked than PNS. Out of these four possibilities type (α) is the most frequent one (24/50, 48.0%) among the languages in the sample. Moreover, for type (α) four distinct subtypes are logically possible: (α1) different D-markers are used for PNS and CNS under the same grammatical conditions; (α2) different D-markers are used for PNS and CNS under different conditions; (α3) the same D-marker is used for PNS and CNS, but under different conditions; (α4) the same marker is used for PNS and CNS under the same conditions. Of these four, subtypes (α1) (2/50, 4.0%), (α3) (7/50, 14.0%) and (α4) (15/50, 30.0%) are illustrated by the languages in the corpus. Handschuh (2017, p. 493, f. 8) also reports on the absence of languages representing type (α2).

The first (α1) of the three attested subtypes is illustrated by a number of Austronesian languages, such as Boumaa Fijian and Maori, which have different D-markers for PNS and CNS. Therefore, in Boumaa Fijian the D-marker (*n*)*a* is used for CNS such as *gone* ‘children’, whereas a different D-marker, *o*, D-marks PNS such as *Viti* (Dixon, 1988, pp. 33, 41). In Maori the D-marker *te* is added to CNS such as *marama* ‘moon’, whereas a distinct D-marker, *a*, attaches to PNS such as *Hata* (Bauer, 1993, pp. 13, 319). Subtype (α3) is represented by Pipil and Swahili. In the first of these languages the D-marker *ne* can accompany CNS such as *lamah* ‘old woman’ (Campbell, 1985, p. 106). Even though descriptive grammars rarely address this issue, the answers to the questionnaire revealed that the same marker can accompany PNS as well. How-

ever, this usually only occurs with female first names such as *Estela* and *Moncha*, whereas male first names such as *Alan* and *Carlos* tend not to be D-marked (Ramírez, 2004, p. 8)⁵.

In the case of Swahili, when CNS like *mtoto* ‘child’ and PNs like *Zanzibar* are direct objects both kinds of nominal elements can be D-marked on the verb by means of object markers such as (*k*)*i*- and *m(u)*-/*m(w)*-, which indicate specificity (Mpiranya, 2015, pp. 202, 212). However, whereas all kinds of object CNS can be D-marked in this way, not all PNs are always marked for specificity, even when they are specific: this is the case, for example, of names of mountains like *Kilimanjaro* (McGrath & Marten, 2003, p. 248). K'ekchi' and Pumé, among other languages, represent subtype (α4). In the first of these the D-marker *li* can attach both to CNS like *winq* ‘man’ and to PNs like *Rosa* under the same conditions (Eachus & Carlson, 1980, p. 356; Stewart, 2016, p. 74). The same thing applies to Pumé, where the D-marker *judi*, *jūñ*, *jí* is attached to CNS such as *pūmēbo* ‘child’ and PNs such as *Pedro* and *Luis* (Guerreiro, 2015, p. 116).

So far languages have been discussed in which both CNS and PNs are overtly marked (subtypes α1-4). However, type (β), i.e. languages with no overt D-marking in either CNS or PNs, is also quite frequently (14/50, 28.0%) found in the corpus. This type is illustrated by Warrongo, where neither CNS like *warrngo* ‘woman’ nor PNs like *Jangala* are D-marked (Tsunoda, 2011, pp. 118, 669), and by Vietnamese, which D-marks neither CNS like *con* ‘child(ren)’ nor PNs like *Viet Nam Airline* (Brunelle, 2014, p. 946). The third major language type (γ) involves overt D-marking of CNS vs zero-marking (or more restricted D-marking) of PNs (12/50, 24.0%). This type is illustrated by Hungarian, where different verb forms are used depending on whether the object of the verb is definite or indefinite (Törkenczy, 2002, p. 69). In addition to this D-marking coded by the verb, Hungarian also has an opposition between the definite article *a(z)* and the indefinite *egy* (Törkenczy, 2002, p. 69).

Unlike the coding of definiteness by the verb, which is obligatory regardless of whether the object of the verb is a CN or a PN, the definite article *a(z)* can, however, only attach to CNS such as *gyerek* ‘child’, whereas it cannot be added to PNs such as *Rocky* (Rounds, 2009, p. 68). Therefore, in Hungarian PNs can be claimed to be less D-marked than CNS. Likewise, in Modern Literary Tibetan demonstrative articles such as *di* ‘this’ and *dée* ‘that’ can be attached as D-markers to CNS such as *gyiimen* ‘woman’, but not to PNs like *Chayday* (Goldstein, 1991, pp. 33, 48, 90). Table 2 summarizes the proportions, in absolute numbers as well as in percentages, of the distribution of types (α-δ) in the languages of the sample:

⁵ According to Lyle Campbell (personal communication), this state of affairs of D-marking in Pipil is very likely due to contact with Spanish: in many Spanish varieties D-marking of female first names vs zero-marking of male first names is common (de Mello, 1992, p. 223).

Table 2. Distribution of D-marking types across the corpus of languages

Language type	Proportion
Both CNS and PNs are overtly D-marked (α)	24/50 (48.0%)
(Different D-markers under same conditions ($\alpha 1$))	(2/50 (4.0%))
(Different D-markers under different conditions ($\alpha 2$))	(0/50 (0.0%))
(Same D-markers under different conditions ($\alpha 3$))	(7/50 (14.0%))
(Same D-markers under same conditions ($\alpha 4$))	(15/50 (30.0%))
Neither CNS nor PNs are overtly D-marked (β)	14/50 (28.0%)
CNS overtly D-marked, PNs zero-marked/less D-marked (γ)	12/50 (24.0%)
PNs overtly D-marked, CNS zero-marked/less D-marked (δ)	0/50 (0.0%)
Total	50/50 (100%)

The distribution of language types shows that there are no languages in the sample which overtly D-mark PNs and zero-mark CNS (type δ). This is, in principle, to be expected, since any D-marker which occurs only with PNs—or which, in other words, is a dedicated onymic D-marker—may in descriptive literature be labeled not a D-marker, but rather an onymic marker (Schlücker & Ackermann, 2017, p. 314). The issue should therefore be addressed in future research whether onymic markers can in fact be D-elements as well. Furthermore, in the majority of languages in the corpus (types $\alpha 4 + \beta = 29/50$, 58.0%) there is no difference between the D-marking of CNS and PNs, which speaks against the «special onymic grammar» frequently mentioned in the literature (Anderson, 2007, p. 127, 2015, p. 599; Nübling *et al.*, 2015, p. 64; Stolz *et al.*, 2017, p. 123). The distribution of the various D-marking types shown in Table 2 above is illustrated in the following figure (where black dot (●) = type $\alpha 1$; black square (■) = type $\alpha 3$; black diamond (◆) = type $\alpha 4$; white dot (○) = type β ; gray dot (◐) = type γ).

As can be seen by Figure 2, the D-marking types seem to be areally distributed to a considerable extent: languages which overtly D-mark CNS and PNs by means of the same markers under the same conditions (type $\alpha 4$), for instance, seem to be widespread in North America (Michif, Ottawa, West Greenlandic), as well as in South Asia (Burushaski, Mundari, Telugu) and the Middle East (Behdini Kurdish, Turkish). Languages with no overt marking for either CNS or PNs (type β), on the other hand, are common in Australia (Gooniyandi, Warrongo), Southeast Asia (Pa'o Karen, Thai, Vietnamese) and northern Eurasia (Chukchi, Finnish, Kabardian, Ket, Russian). Finally, languages in which CNS are overtly D-marked and PNs are zero-marked or less marked occur in Europe (Basque, Hungarian), Southern Africa (Mauritian Creole, Nama) and West Africa (Bini, Jamsay Dogon, Mambai).



Figure 2. Distribution of D-marking types across the languages of the corpus.

4. Conclusions and future research

An overview of D-marking on CNS and PNs in a representative corpus of fifty languages has revealed that a majority of languages (29/50, 58.0%) do not display any difference in the forms and conditions which apply to the D-marking of these two kinds of elements. This finding does not provide support for the «special onymic grammar» frequently adduced in the literature (Anderson, 2007, p. 127, 2015, p. 599; Nübling *et al.*, 2015, p. 64; Stolz *et al.*, 2017, p. 123). Nevertheless, it should also be borne in mind that there is a considerable number of languages (21/50, 42.0%) in which CNS and PNs are indeed D-marked differently. In fact, the data suggest that variety is the rule, since six out of the eight possible language types are quite evenly attested among the languages in the corpus. The absence of languages in which only PNs are overtly marked (type δ) has been related to the fact that dedicated onymic D-markers might not have been identified as such in the descriptive literature. Future research should thus address the question whether onymic markers can encode definiteness and specificity as well.

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En homenaje de la efemérides, este libro pretende dar cuenta del estado actual de la investigación en lingüística y literatura vascas. Investigadores de gran trayectoria y nuevas generaciones se unan en esta publicación para tratar, entre otros temas, sobre dialectología, didáctica de la lengua, filología, gramática teórica, tipología lingüística, lingüística histórica, traducción, literatura, onomástica y sociolinguística.

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