

Onomastics : A Study of Names – Origins and Meaning

Linguistics is the scientific study of language, its origin, development, history and meaning for us as human beings in the context of our place in the world as mindful and aware members. It spans a large arc of investigation and topics – one of them the study of proper names termed “Onomastics.”

Onomastics itself has various strands of topics, they include research into the history and origin of names, the environment of the development of proper names, the proliferation of names, the migration of names from one area to another, creation of new variants – whether new versions or just spelling differences, as well as the extinction of names or their consolidation. Language as such is not static; it is a living and ever-changing part of human experience and history.

We focus today on the proper names of one specific group of German speakers. Germans from Russia are groups of emigrants who left Russia in the late 19th century to settle in the United States, Canada and South America. They had been recruited to the Russian Empire in the 18th century from the Palatine area, some were Hessians and others came from the Lower Rhine and the Lowlands. All spoke their respective “Mundart” or dialect. Looking at their proper names we will have to pay attention to this diversity, but to start we look at the common history of Germanic language speaking peoples and that will encompass a huge area of Europe including northern - the Scandinavian Germanic, the western – English, German and Dutch, and the eastern – extant mostly in literary form such as Gothic. Our focus will be the core area of Germany today.

Early history describes various Germanic tribes living and migrating throughout this core area. They came from the north and east, some settled and farmed, others were often nomadic. Whenever they were able to settle, and the conditions for raising crops and domesticated animals were good, these tribal settlements flourished and increased in population from just a few families of maybe 100 individuals to several hundred still within one tribal unit, and even larger groups of several thousand. In the course of political and social changes from the times of the Roman expansion into German territories to the establishment of the German Empire (Franken) under Charlemagne, around 800 CE, not only villages flourished but also towns and cities. The number of individuals known by one first name increased exponentially and required differentiation for clarity – thus the proper name, or last name. Structural societal change such as the development of different social classes furthered this process. We had aristocrats, craftsmen, merchants, and farmers – now with both first and last names.

Particularly the 11th and the 12th century saw this development – coupled with an increase in written documentation that included deeds to property and contracts between individuals. Most people, however, were still illiterate, it was the clergy who were generally among the few that were able to read and write and the common language was Latin. Around the year 1200 there came a high point of written language in the vernacular in the form of poetry and song (Minnesang of the Troubadors), as well as the written and recorded well-known epics such as “Nibelungenlied,” “Parzival,” “Tristan und Isolde,” and various others. We therefore also have a record now of different dialects. If we look at the society, landscape and architecture of that period, we would not be as startled walking around then as if we had come into the country a thousand years earlier. Anyone having traveled in European countries to visit the historical older parts of towns and cities can attest to that.

Let us now turn to a closer look at the origin of proper names. In Appendix A are listed five names each in the five major early categories. Practically all sources follow a similar pattern: names that have a connection to the occupation (Meier, Schmidt, Müller, Schulz, Bäcker); patronymic (Albrecht, Hinz/Heinrich, Kunz/Konrad), or are metronymic (Trienes, Tilgner); describe a trait (Klein, Kohl, Link, Kühn, Neumann); link the meaning to a

geographical feature (Kuhl, Ebner, Bühl, Sonderegger, Busch); or refer to a specific house or dwelling (Bachmann, Bergmann, Roth, Frankenstein, Grünewald). I have chosen names that should be familiar to most of us. Some among these are public figures. At times it is not quite clear into which one category we can ascribe the meaning, thus “Roth” can be the ‘cleared land’ or it could be the hair color, or it could even be a carved decoration on the house (in this case a fox=red). Several other sub-categories exist – the just stated connection to an animal “Fuchs” appears, also “Hahn” and others. However, they are not as prevalent as sources of many proper names – my own feeling is that animal labels do not lend themselves well for this purpose because many invective- or swearwords are animal-based, both in Standard German and in the dialects.

Affe Ochs Kuh Rindvieh Esel Hammel Schwein/Sau/Ferkel Huhn/Gockel Gans Ziege(Zicke) Hund Dackel(Halbdackel) Blindschleiche Kamel Drache Hirsch Zecke

Another limited source are the titles of aristocrats, often with the prepositions of “von”, “zu”, “bei” and “auf”. The “von” originally did not necessarily designate aristocratic lineage, it could just mean that a person “came from” a certain location like our reference to “Sonderegger” – he came from that place that had been harrowed. He could for a time have been called “von Sonderegger”. In the 17th century, those “von” prepositions began to disappear from the names of non-aristocrats, however some of them retained them.

Example: von Seggern here in Falls City, NE

During the time of the Reformation a number of theologians and scholars changed their German names using Latin or Greek translations such as Praetorius (Schulz), Agricola (Bauer), or Melanchthon (Schwarzerdt) and Neander (Pastor Neumann).

Some other factors have also played a role in the creation of proper names. Wars, especially the Thirty Years War from 1618-1648, brought many peoples from other European countries into and through German speaking lands. They left physical, genetic and linguistic evidence. Martin Luther’s monumental achievement of creating a common Standard German written language with his translation of the Bible at the beginning of the 16th century, coupled with Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press had brought order into the multitude of dialects, spellings and vocabulary. However, the chaos of the Thirty Years War caused a major disturbance of this linguistic unity. As a reaction to that disorder, scholars and writers of the late 17th century began to mitigate for a cleansing of language, of applying standard rules of spelling and to “Germanize” foreign names and words. From 1662 until the present time, there have been laws governing not only changed spellings or translations of proper names, but also the naming of children with first or second names. In the highly politicized time of the Third Reich, German names with clear Nordic provenance were encouraged and by law, German Jewish citizens had to add “Israel” or “Sara” to their given names as identifiers.

Even now, there is an official register of approved first names that parents are urged to consult, and should they want to use a name that is not listed - a legal appeal must be made. Thus first names can be interpreted as political statements and when doing research about the meaning of names it can lead you to interesting discoveries.

Research on your own: in 2019 we turn to the Internet as our first access point. If you can read German, it increases your sources by more than half, some have translation features, and others don’t. As with anything that is not systematically peer-reviewed, you need to be wary.

The old German saying: “Papier ist geduldig!” (You can say anything on paper) applies even more so to the digital world. Some interesting sites are those that map the frequency, distribution and the location of a certain name. Another site lists the number of phone numbers for a name. There are sites that are region specific and

sometimes give general traits that are regional such as the suffixes: -e; -le; -ke; -li. Again, someone that has studied German dialects or linguistics can often place a proper name into the most likely region of origin. Members of the AHSGR will be able to see that well in the location – and names - of the villages in Russia and the villages back in Germany. (See Appendix B). If you are very serious about doing research, use scholarly books that are peer-reviewed. Many Internet sites also list links to societies, to works cited and to other reputable sources.