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HUMOROUS NAMES IN THE LIGHT OF INCONGRUITY THEORY

The article addresses the humorous function of proper names in the light of incongruity theory. It aims at proving that, although names are often defined as pragmatically “transparent,” they may possess some humorous value due to semantic and pragmatic shifts resulting from the disturbance of ordinary patterns of proper names identification and interpretation. After a brief introduction, the author discusses different variants of incongruity theory as presented in the works by Victor Raskin and Thomas C. Veatch as well as their possible application to the study of humorous names. The second part of the paper provides an analysis of the humorous effects of proper names which includes anthroponyms, toponyms, trade names, football team names and names in literature. The first section of this part concentrates on names in which humour is unintentional and seems to be induced by the context, while the second section focuses on names which are intentionally humorous, i.e. supposed to amuse from the moment of their creation. The author argues that the incongruity theory can provide a useful framework for the study of the different mechanisms responsible of the semantic shifts which determine the variation of pragmatic values of proper names.

Key words: English language, theoretical onomastics, proper names, linguistic humour, humour theory, incongruity theory, pragmatics.

1. Introduction

Although theorists concerned with onomastics do not always agree about the most basic matter of onomastics — determining a precise boundary between proper names and common nouns, an average language user seldom has trouble with this distinction in everyday communication. Distinguishing between proper names and common nouns is done (in practice not

in theory) almost automatically — through picking up names from context and/or interpreting their semantic and pragmatic functions (they name and identify entities without predicating their features)¹. In this way the recipient is able to construe as proper names even the words which have been unknown to him or her and of whose functions as names he or she has not been aware of. The opposition “lexicon — onomasticon” seems to be distinctly perceptible in the communication practice [Gasque, 1991, 219].

Therefore, the everyday communication, which includes encountering thousands of proper names, leads the language user to acquire a specific sense (but undoubtedly not always an awareness) of the nature of a standard proper name. Consequently, the user has particular expectations concerning the proper name. The vast majority of the textual appearances of names fulfils these expectations (which, as was said above, conditions the creation of these expectations), whereby the names are perceived as stylistically and pragmatically neutral. When these expectations are not fulfilled, when the name appears abnormal, atypical, pragmatically “not transparent,” the recipient finds themselves in an uneasy situation. These disappointed expectations can be interpreted as a realisation of *incongruity*, which is the basic category of the contemporary research on the linguistic humour.

2. Incongruity as the essence of the linguistic humour

The basis of the contemporary theories of humour can be traced already in Aristotle's works. He claimed that what is funny is usually connected with a defect (Poet., 1449a). This thought was developed by some subsequent philosophers, among whom we should mention Francis Hutcheson who pointed at bringing contrary ideas together (“greatness — littleness”, “sacredness — sacrilege”, etc.) as a source of humour. A similar idea was advanced by another philosopher, James Beattie. He claimed that humour arises from the conjunction of incongruous elements, caused by their proximity, similarity, the causal relationship or contrasting juxtaposition. On the other hand, Kant claimed that laughter is an attribute of mind induced by an unfulfilled expectation (on the origin of incongruity theory see [Billig, 2005, 57–85]).

As can be easily seen, all presented theories emphasize essentially one thing: the source of humour (laughter) lies in the contrast caused by the juxtaposition of contrary elements². The ideas of the philosophers have been developed into linguistic theories based on the concept of incongruity. One of the best known is the theory proposed by Victor Raskin [1985] who claimed that the essence of humour is constituted by contradictory scripts, i.e. two different pieces of information which overlap the text. Raskin's most important thesis is that the text contains humour if: 1) the text is wholly or partially consistent with two different scripts; 2) these two

¹ The problem concerns proper names that the recipient has not known before and which therefore they cannot identify as such based exclusively on their linguistic competence. In printed texts the task is to some extent facilitated by the fact that proper names start with a capital letter. However, to identify an unfamiliar word as a proper name in a text in which no capital letter is used might be a great problem [Wacholder et al., 1997].

² It is not the only possible approach. One may also mention the theory proposed by Hobbes (the person who laughs holds a higher position than the person who is the target of the joke), the theory of the released energy proposed by Freud, the theory of configuration suggested by Maier, etc. More on this topic see [Attardo 1994; Chłopicki, 1995].

scripts are in opposition; 3) the scripts overlap the text completely or to some extent [Raskin, 1985, 99]. Any joke can be quoted as an example of Raskin's theory, for instance:

(1) During Christmas Jack calls to his mother:

"Mummy, mummy, the Christmas tree is burning!"

"You don't say burning but shining," says his mother.

"Mummy, mummy, the curtains are shining too."

The text of the joke fulfils all the conditions of the script theory: 1) it can be read according to two scripts: 'something is burning' as 'something produces light' and as 'something is on fire'; 2) scripts hidden behind the two meanings of the phrase 'something is burning' ('lights on the Christmas tree' on the one hand and 'fire' on the other) are in opposition; 3) the scripts overlap one text.

An extremely significant contribution of the Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH) is that it considers humour as an attribute of a text. It is crucial as it makes the essence of humour independent of the recipient's reaction (laughter) as well as the sender's intention (the desire to make somebody laugh). Thus the text can be funny without being perceived as funny. Its perception (and also the ability to create humorous texts) is conditioned, in Raskin's theory, by "humorous competence." Besides, the scripts are usually put in oppositions that can be generalised, for example: "good — bad", "life — death", "true — false" [Raskin, 1985, 113–114; Chłopicki, 1995, 64].

Raskin's theory, which applies mainly to the texts of jokes, was revised, complemented and presented as a general theory of verbal humour [Attardo & Raskin, 1991; Ruch, Attardo, & Raskin, 1993]. The novelty of this approach consists in the complementation of the script theory by some additional elements which are supposed to facilitate a more complete description of humour not only of the texts of short jokes but also in a broader approach. The elements are: script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target (object) of the joke, narrative strategy and language [Attardo & Raskin, 1991, 325]. This theory enables researchers to study a much wider scope of texts and to examine these texts in a multifaceted, interdisciplinary perspective (not all of the enumerated factors can be examined from the linguistic point of view).

Thomas C. Veatch's theory is another specification of the general incongruity theory. It presupposes that what is necessary and sufficient for the humorous effect to arise is a simultaneous co-occurrence of two visions of the same situation in the mind of the recipient. The first being a basic, normal vision of the development of the action (N) and the second vision implies a violation of some elements of the normal situation (V). Veatch summarises this as following: "Humor occurs when it seems that things are normal while at the same time something seems wrong" [Veatch, 1998, 163]. However, Veatch supposes that there must be a feeling of disturbance at the initial stage, the tension caused by the expected unpleasant consequences is then relieved and the normal state is finally restored. The opposition "normal — moral violation" represents "the most fundamental of emotional differences" [Ibid., 164], it can, however, be made more specific: "good — bad", "acceptable — unacceptable", "orderly — disorderly" [Ibid.].

Similarly to Raskin's theory, Veatch's theory also indicates the subjective nature of the perception of humour ("humorous competence"). Veatch writes about the recipient's vision of the situation and not about objectively existing circumstances [Ibid., 165–166]. Therefore, the both approaches imply different ways of interpretation of the same situation: some people

perceive it as amusing while some other do not. Another common feature of the two theories is the necessity of a simultaneous perception of two opposed visions: “if the two interpretations are not simultaneously present, then humor perception cannot occur” [Veatch, 1998, 167]. Both these factors: the subjective nature and the simultaneity of the opposed interpretations, will be of great significance for the further consideration of humorous names.

The above views on the nature of verbal humour constitute the theoretical basis of this article which aims at proving that proper names can be interpreted as humorous and that the humour of proper names is conditioned by the incongruity present in the recipient’s interpretation of them.

3. The types of incongruity occurring in proper names

Provided that proper names are different from appellatives in respect of their semantic properties (i.e. proper names do not possess meaning in the sense that they do not predicate), it is possible to assume that the basic kind of incongruity is focused on the opposition “meaningless — meaningful”. When, while communicating, the recipient encounters a proper name and interprets it as having a meaning in the above sense, the situation can be construed as abnormal. Depending on their humorous competence, the recipient can then see a humorous element in the proper name.³ In terms of scripts, the opposition “meaningless — meaningful” constitutes a juxtaposition: “name — not-name” (the latter being interpreted as a common noun).

We should now consider the mechanisms of perception / interpretation of a proper name. When one encounters a proper name, they usually treat it (perceives / interprets) as a name, and therefore do not ascribe any meaning to it, even when some “meaningful elements” remain in the name and can be detected by the recipient. Many names invented nowadays (for instance some names of restaurants and pubs) are clearly created from words belonging to the appellative lexicon of the respective language. The names *Tea Rose* (a restaurant) and *The Moon Under Water* (a pub) consist of common English words, yet their literal meaning is not perceived in their interpretation. Perceiving a word as a proper name entails a statement: “this means nothing (does not predicate anything).” Therefore, nobody expects to find tea roses in the mentioned restaurant (although of course there may be some decorations referring to the name, or the guests may be presented with such flowers) or a moon in the pub. As can be seen, no incongruity occurs in the perception of such names — the proprial status of the names is not contrasted with the meaning of the common nouns they derive from.

However, a different interpretation occurs in these situations:

(2) When I came to this college for the first time, I remember that our teacher told me a funny misunderstanding. The student was from China and the question was “What is your name?” The girl said, “What,” but the teacher asked angrily, again and again. Her answer was the same, “What.” Later on, the teacher told her to spell it. She wrote “Wat” and we laughed, and I thought it was the same sound as the English word.⁴

(3) Our pastors and several elders were at a regional meeting over a weekend, so the pulpit was filled by other Lay Leaders of our church. Both of our pastors’ names

³ In a similar way — through the perception of “meaningful” elements in the name — the source of humour is characterised by Gasque [1991, 219].

⁴ Some examples come from Internet forums and are quoted without any changes.

were Richard. So during the time of prayer, this fellow actually said, “Today, we need to pray for our Dicks.” Somehow, the room stayed quiet.

The examples (2) and (3) illustrate the most general, but also very characteristic type of incongruity: “proper name — appellative.” The recipients expect to hear a proper name, but, due to some circumstances, interpret the received lexical unit as a common noun. Therefore, they feel that the communication progresses in a way that diverges from ordinary expectations and norms, and only then they ascertain that the word is a proper name and thus the statement has a correct structure. The realisation of the incorrect interpretation and the simultaneous existence of a correct interpretation become the source of humour. This is a classic example of the tension between N and V, crucial to Veatch’s theory, the opposed situations being the source of humour (and the reactions of the participants confirm it).

Perceived in the recipient’s interpretation, the opposition “proper name (no meaning) — appellative (some meaning)” is the primary type of incongruity which causes the humorous perception of proper names. This overriding type of incongruity is actualised most often in the case of old, traditional names which are firmly embedded in language and culture and whose meaning is obscure. This group includes surnames, first names, toponyms and geographic names. There is a great number of names which can be perceived as “meaningful,” for instance:

(4) Surnames: *Slow, Jelly, Onion, Poor, Grave, Stranger, Pigg, Ash.*

(5) Toponyms: *Burnt Corn, Deadhorse, Boneyard, Monkey’s Eyebrow, Angels Camp, Hells Kitchen, Last Chance.*

It has to be admitted that the humorous perception of these names depends, to a great extent, on the recipient’s individual predispositions (the so-called “sense of humour” or the “humorous competence” [Raskin, 1995]). The fact that the names are perceived as “meaningful” can sometimes be not enough. The humorous effect can be reinforced when the name appears in a certain situational context. Then, this context serves as a “catalyst” [Lew, 2000, 131]⁵ “releasing” the joke:

(6) The guy was called John *Sunday*. He parked his car in a restricted place once. However, he managed to convince the police officer not to give him a traffic ticket when he produced his driving license, as the inscription on the sign said: “No Parking Except Sundays And Holidays.”

A name has a greater humorous saturation⁶ (and therefore a greater probability of a humorous interpretation), when its incongruity is not only of the “meaningless — meaningful,” but also of the “neutral — not neutral” type. This kind of opposition is characteristic of proper names based on (or at least sounding similar to) words which are colloquial, vulgar or referring to certain topics, such as human body, physiology, scatology or sexuality:

(7) Surnames: *Cock, Glasscock, Willy, Bottom, Shufflebottom, Handcock, Hickinbottom, Winterbottom.*

⁵ In Lew’s work, the term *catalyst* refers to the elements facilitating a double interpretation of particular words in the text.

⁶ On the gradation of linguistic humour see [Veatch, 1998, 169–171].

(8) Toponyms: *Glasscock, Cocktown, Big Cockup, Little Cockup, Cockintake, Titty Hill, Fort Dick, Climax, Assloss, Colon.*

A similar interpretation can occur in the case of proper names that depreciate their denotations. The process applies especially to the names that accidentally “match” the entities they refer to:⁷

(9) Surnames: *Nutter, Daft, Haggard, Smellie.*

(10) Toponyms: *Savage, Worms, Muck City, Bootlegger Crossing, Siberia, Squabbletown, Weedpatch.*

Another type of incongruity can occur in anthroponymic clusters, especially when the first name and the surname or the two parts of a double-barrelled surname are matched well or on the contrary, they are a complete mismatch. Situations of this kind can be particularly intriguing, since the (probably unwanted) humorous effect could have been avoided by choosing a different first name or by abandoning one part of the surname. Some examples with this kind of incongruity are: *Constant Craps, Santa Claus, Burns-Butts, Crapp-Beer, Cockman-Dickman, Long-Ouch, MacDonald-Berger, Smelley-Farkas, Staples-Bottoms, Stolen-Ford, Batman Bin Suparman, Sue Yoo (Attorney), Hooker Salvage, Short Dick.*

Sometimes the incongruity can take a different, more specific form which is conditioned by the category the proper name belongs to. It is connected, to some extent, with the naming conventions which apply to the respective class of names or with the productiveness of some formal elements. The category of trade names is an example that worth considering. Trade names (names of companies and their products) constitute a semantically and pragmatically interesting group, as they are supposed to: characterise the company / product, connote the profile of the firm, and moreover, evoke a positive attitude, create a particular emotional atmosphere and be a part of the client’s / user’s lifestyle. In this case the transparency of the meaning does not necessarily leads to the emergence of an incongruity (which applies not only to this category of proper names, but also to other names created nowadays, in which lexical units keep their meaning perceptible when used as proper names). The incongruity emerges only when the name says something negative about the company or product: *Wreckless Drivers* (chauffeur service), *Go Away* (travel agency), *Crazy For You* (psychiatry centre), *Ill Advisors* (medical consultants), *eggslut* (restaurant), *Stiff Nipples* (air conditioning service), *herpes pizza*, *Hore’s Stores* (a clothing shop), *Analtech* (thin layer chromatography), *Cari Lang Hairapist* (hairdresser), *Golden Gaytime* (ice cream snack), *Lazy Bastards* (maintenance services), *Hooker’s Funeral Home*, *Badcock & more* (home furniture).

The above presented examples illustrate the incongruity of the “serious — silly” type, which can be regarded as a realisation for the “high — low” opposition. Since the proper name is an external identifier, a linguistic label of a particular entity, the majority of the onymic classes can be interpreted as “high” by default. In this sense, proper names are “serious” from the pragmatic point of view, as they represent their denotations in all situations of communication, including the most formal and official situations and texts. Therefore, the enumerated company names have to appear for example in the documents exchanged with contractors and clients, which

⁷ Names of this kind are called *aptonyms*, see [Nilsen & Nilsen, 1991; Rutkowski, 2002].

still more emphasises their being “atypical” (incongruity). This, in turn, can negatively influence the image of the company.

A similar situation occurs with some “atypical” street names which also have to appear in documents and other official uses, which does not always correspond to their semantic content (actual or associative): *Ha-Ha Road, Frying Pan Alley, Silly Lane, Lazy Lane, Grump Street, Hag Lane, Butt Hole Road, Virgin Street, Bucket of Blood Street*.

Another interesting group is constituted by sports team names. Thus, some five-a-side football teams create their names from parts of the names of famous football clubs keeping this reference unambiguously perceptible, e.g.: *Borussia Teeth, Bayer Neverlosen, Inter Malamb, Man Chest Hair United, AC AlittlesilhouetteofMilan, Real Sosobad, Real Ale Madrid, Surreal Madrid, Dyslexia Untied, Ajax Treesdown, Royal Mail-drid, Arselona, Deportivo Moron, Outer Milan, Manchester Obesity, Bayer own Bier*. Here, the incongruity emerges due to the discrepancy between the levels of the teams. Another group of incongruous football team names is based on profaning the “high” status of the official name, e.g.: *Stroke Titty, Multiple Scorgasms, Load of Kaka, Fotballaget Fart, Semen Padang, Botswana Meat Commission, Løv-Ham*.

Somewhat different to the overriding type of incongruity (“meaningless — meaningful”) emerges when a name from one language is transferred to another. In this case, foreign proper names can be interpreted as “meaningful” due to their paronymic attraction to lexical items within the borrowing language. Here are a few examples of foreign names whose pronunciation coincides with some English appellatives and which, thus, can be interpreted as funny: *Chew Kok, Hoo Flung Pooh, Hu Flung Dung, Kis Myass, Pee Don Yu, Tai Mai Shu*.

Due to the fundamental pragmatic property of all above-mentioned categories of proper names (which serve as official names used to designate their denotata in every type of situation), their humorous interpretations can be presumed to be unintentional, not present at the moment of the creation of the name. The humorous effect appears only in a particular context or at the moment of the first contact with the name (the user is supposed to become gradually accustomed to the name).

4. Creation of humorous names

A different kind of phenomena occurs while creating names which, according to their creator’s intention, are supposed to contain humorous elements. The humour of such propria is then intentional, which, from the very moment of naming, distinguishes these names from those in which the humorous effect is unintentional, i.e. perceived only when the name is mistaken as an identically sounding appellative [Cieślukowa, 1990, 116–117]. Here, the name is supposed to amuse from the moment of its creation.

Such names can be of different categories and emerge in different situations of communication, for instance in everyday social communication, journalism, satirical texts, jokes and literature. Moreover, the invention of the humorous names that function as proper names should be distinguished from funny pseudo-names created exclusively for one text or situation and from units created by distortion of already existing names.

The category of nicknames abounds in units saturated with intentional humour. Informal names are given to people in almost every micro-community, and their pragmatic motive is usually the desire to highlight some features of the nicknamed person and/or to express particular feelings towards the person [Ibid., 113]. Especially interesting may be the subcategory

of “ridiculing” nicknames. Their “antagonistic” or “confrontational” character seems to additionally increase the degree of humorous saturation: according to the disposition theory, a joke seems funnier when its recipient dislikes or feels resentment towards the target of the joke [Veatch, 1998, 170].⁸ In other words, even a slightly funny nickname amuses more, when it is given to a disliked person. “Ridiculing” nicknames, which are often expressive and extremely abusive, are readily given in unequal social interactions, in which the nicknamed person holds a higher position than the nicknaming person. According to the cited theories, the humour of such nicknames can partly compensate for the inequalities. The nicknames given to managers and bosses may be a case in point:⁹ *shit for brains*, *penguin*, *Helmet Head*, *TIC* (thing in the corner), *Rumplestiltskin* (“because he’d jump up and down and screech when things didn’t go his way”), *Bumbler* (“he mumbled and bumbled his way through everything”), *El Jefe*, *TLB* (Tubby Little Bitch). The basic incongruity “meaningless — meaningful” is in the case of these nicknames reinforced by the opposition “serious — silly (ridiculed)” which results from the social position of the two persons.

Humorous proper names appear also in the fictional worlds of literary works. A great number of them are due the “semantic” and the “grotesque-ludic” trends of literary naming [see Kosyl, 2004, 224–225]. Names of this kind are meaningful, they are created not only to identify but also to characterise the named entities — most often places and people. The works of some authors abound in such names, for instance, some characters in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* bear names of this kind: *Argus Filch*, *Madam Rolanda Hooch*, *Professor Arsenius Jigger*, *Madam Poppy Pomfrey*, *Madam Malkin*, *Neville Longbottom*, *Ludovic Bagman*, *Cornelius Fudge*, *Sniveller*, *Batty*, *Dogbreath* and *Nearly-Headless Nick*. Similarly, the fictional world of Terry Pratchett’s *Feet of Clay* is inhabited by *Cheery Littlebottom*, *Coffin Henry*, *Constable Visit-The-Infidel-With-Explanatory-Pamphlets*, *Bjorn Tightbritches*, *Lars Skulldrinker*, *Mr Oresmiter*, *Doughnut Jimmy*, *Snori Shieldbiter*, *Olaf Stronginthearm*, *Constable Downspout*, *Fred Colon*, *Mrs Slipdry* (a midwife), etc.

Another case is constituted by jokes whose humour is created by the names appearing therein. In their perception, the proper names are interpreted as appellatives because of their spelling / pronunciation being identical or close to common nouns of the respective language:

(11) A grenade thrown into a kitchen in France would result in *Linoleum Blownapart*.

(12) Although Nobelists tend to have dynamite personalities, Niels was a Bohr, and *Linus* was a *Pauling*.

These examples demonstrate how significant can be the role fulfilled by the recipient’s competence which requires not only a sense of humour but also a certain extralinguistic knowledge.¹⁰

⁸ To learn more on this topic see [Chłopicki, 1995, 15]. Among other theories one should also mention the superiority theory, according to which the person who laughs holds a higher position than the person who is laughed at [Ibid., 7, 11], and Freud’s interpretation which states that the creation of biased jokes and nicknames is a way of releasing the accumulated energy [Freud, 1993; Nilsen & Nilsen, 1991].

⁹ The nicknames and their explanations were retrieved from the Internet forum arstechnica.com.

¹⁰ To interpret the jokes (11–12) properly, the recipient should have some basic knowledge about Napoleon Bonaparte, they should know the meaning of the words *bore*, *abhor* and *appalling* and to be aware that both Niels Bohr and Linus Pauling were Nobel Prize winners.

5. Conclusion

The incongruity theory is of course only one of many theoretical perspectives from which it would be possible to study the data considered in this paper. For publications that examine this topic based on other methodologies, see [Nilsen, 1982, 1991; Nilsen & Nilsen, 1991; Rutkowski, 2003]. However, none of the works is exhaustive, and a wider study of the humorous effects produced by proper names would undoubtedly be of a great interest. Considering proper names as parts of speech acts involved in provoking different kinds of recipient's response enables us to see how a name can shift from its semantically "transparent" and pragmatically neutral state associated with "properhood" (the concept coined by Richard Coates) to a certain semantic "opaqueness" when the name acquires a specific pragmatic (if not semantic) value without losing its proprial status.

As illustrated in this paper, humour in the names always results from "reading" the names together with the meaning of the appellative word(s) they derive from. The "normal" use of names implies that they are semantically "transparent" and insignificant. However, under some circumstances, they can be interpreted as "meaningful", this interpretation thus can be a source of humorous effect. As it was shown in this article, a name can be endowed with humour in two ways. Firstly, by emerging in a specific context which makes it no longer a simple identifying mark and ascribes to it a certain meaning that seems incongruous in this particular context. Finally, frequent in the literature is the creation of meaningful, intentionally not "transparent" names formed directly to produce humorous effect. The incongruity theory could thus provide a useful framework for the study of the different mechanisms responsible of the semantic shifts which determine the variation of pragmatic values of proper names.

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ЮМОРИСТИЧЕСКИЕ ИМЕНА В СВЕТЕ ТЕОРИИ НЕСОВМЕСТИМОСТИ

Статья посвящена юмористической функции имен собственных в свете «теории несовместимости» (Incongruity Theory). Автор показывает, что имена собственные, обычно определяемые как прагматически и семантически «прозрачные», могут наделяться значением, вызывающим смеховой эффект, в силу нарушения стандартных принципов

идентификации и интерпретации проприальных лексических единиц. После краткого введения автор дает обзор различных версий теории несовместимости, в том числе теории семантических скриптов (Semantic Script Theory of Humour, SSTH), представленной в работах Виктора Раскина и Томаса Вича, а также оценивает возможность их применения для анализа имен собственных. Вторая часть статьи содержит анализ реализации юмористического эффекта именами собственными, в частности, антропонимами, топонимами, эргонимами, поэтонимами, названиями футбольных команд. Первый раздел второй части посвящен именам, юмористический эффект которых носит ненамеренный характер и индуцируется из контекстов, во втором разделе, напротив, исследуются имена, чья юмористическая функция заложена в них уже на этапе создания имени. Автор приходит к выводу, что «теория несовместимости» может служить методологическим основанием при изучении различных механизмов, отвечающих за «семантические смещения», которые, в свою очередь, определяют вариативность прагматической функции имен собственных.

К л ю ч е в ы е с л о в а: английский язык, теоретическая ономастика, имя собственное, языковой юмор, теория юмора, теория несовместимости, прагматика.

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