

# РЕЦЕНЗИИ

## REVIEWS

[https://doi.org/10.15826/vopr\\_onom.2025.22.3.038](https://doi.org/10.15826/vopr_onom.2025.22.3.038)

UDC 81'367.622.12 + 81'37 + 81'36 + 81'373.23 + 81'373.21 + 81'44 + 81-114.2

**Eugenia E. ROMANOVA**

PhD, Researcher, Institute of Philosophy and Law of the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences  
(16, Sofya Kovalevskaya St., 620108 Ekaterinburg, Russia)

Email: [evgeniya.romanova@icloud.com](mailto:evgeniya.romanova@icloud.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7658-4212>

## Are Names Really Proper Nouns?

**Review of the books: Reina, J. C., & Helmbrecht, J. (Eds.), *Proper Names versus Common Nouns: Morphosyntactic Contrasts in the Languages of the World*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2022. 263 p.; Stolz, T., & Nintemann, J. *Special Onymic Grammar in Typological Perspective: Cross-Linguistic Data, Recurrent Patterns, Functional Explanations*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2024. xviii + 257 p.**

### Abstract

The review of two books on onomastic grammar outlines the issues raised by their authors without critique or discussion. In these works, grammatical features of proper names are systematically revealed to diverge from those of common nouns, and the distinctions go far beyond the most apparent one: the use of the definite article. In a vast array of languages, number, case, gender, possessive structures, quantification, syntactic distribution — all signal that proper names and common nouns fall into different (sub)categories. Moreover, proper names themselves are not homogenous: personal names and place names can clearly be set apart from each other in morphosyntactic expressions of spatial relations and adpositional selection, among other disparities. While the majority of contributions under review touch upon these issues, there are more original ones that digress from the general line. They either focus on a highly specific problem, or provide more detailed classification of proper names, showing that the division into just personal and place names seems insufficient. The books contain rich empirical data, and more than one linguistic perspective on their analysis. The review should give a taste of the current state of grammar research in onomastics.

**Keywords**

common nouns; proper names; personal names; place names; morphosyntax; linguistic typology; special onymic grammar

**For citation**

Romanova, E. E. (2025). Are Names Really Proper Nouns? [Review of: *Proper Names versus Common Nouns: Morphosyntactic Contrasts in the Languages of the World* by J. C. Reina, J. Helmbrecht (Eds.), and *Special Onymic Grammar in Typological Perspective: Cross-Linguistic Data, Recurrent Patterns, Functional Explanations* by T. Stolz, J. Nintemann]. *Voprosy onomastiki*, 22(3), 307–313. [https://doi.org/10.15826/vopr\\_onom.2025.22.3.038](https://doi.org/10.15826/vopr_onom.2025.22.3.038)

*Received on 11 August 2025*

*Accepted on 8 September 2025*

**Евгения Евгеньевна РОМАНОВА**

кандидат филологических наук, научный сотрудник, Институт философии и права УрО РАН  
(620108, Екатеринбург, ул. Софьи Ковалевской, 16)  
E-mail: [evgeniya.romanova@icloud.com](mailto:evgeniya.romanova@icloud.com)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7658-4212>

## Насколько имена — собственно существительные?

**Рец. на кн.: Proper Names versus Common Nouns: Morphosyntactic Contrasts in the Languages of the World / ed. by J. C. Reina, J. Helmbrecht. Berlin ; Boston : De Gruyter Mouton, 2022. 263 p. ; Stolz T., Nintemann J. Special Onymic Grammar in Typological Perspective: Cross-Linguistic Data, Recurrent Patterns, Functional Explanations. Berlin ; Boston : De Gruyter Mouton, 2024. xviii + 257 p.**

**Аннотация**

Рецензия на две книги по грамматике имен собственных очерчивает основной круг вопросов, поднимаемых их авторами, и не предлагает критического обсуждения материала. В рецензируемых трудах демонстрируются систематические расхождения в грамматических признаках между именами собственными и именами нарицательными, при этом различия выходят далеко за рамки наиболее очевидного из них, а именно употребления определенного артикля. На обширном языковом материале показано, как число, падеж, род, притяжательные структуры, кванторы и синтаксическая дистрибуция служат критериями разграничения существительных на (под)классы. Более того, имена собственные неоднородны: антропонимы и топонимы отличаются друг от друга среди прочего морфосинтаксическим проявлением пространственных отношений и предложного управления. Большая часть статей, включенных в первую из рецензируемых работ, затрагивает эти проблемы, однако в ней есть и более оригинальные статьи, авторы которых либо фокусируются на каком-то специальном аспекте грамматики конкретного класса имен в конкретном языке, либо, опираясь на грамматические признаки, предлагают более подробную классификацию имен собственных, на фоне которой

простое их разделение на антропонимы и топонимы кажется недостаточным. Книги богаты эмпирическими данными, которые подвергаются анализу с разных теоретических позиций. Данная рецензия должна помочь читателю увидеть, на каком этапе находится изучение грамматических параметров имен собственных в современной ономастике.

#### Ключевые слова

имена нарицательные; имена собственные; личные имена; названия мест; морфосинтаксис; лингвистическая типология; грамматика имен собственных

#### Для цитирования

Romanova E. E. Are Names Really Proper Nouns? // Вопросы ономастики. 2025. Т. 22, № 3. С. 307–313. [https://doi.org/10.15826/vopr\\_onom.2025.22.3.038](https://doi.org/10.15826/vopr_onom.2025.22.3.038). Рец. на кн.: Proper Names versus Common Nouns: Morphosyntactic Contrasts in the Languages of the World / ed. by J. C. Reina, J. Helmbrecht. Berlin ; Boston : De Gruyter Mouton, 2022. 263 p. ; Stolz T., Nintemann J. Special Onymic Grammar in Typological Perspective: Cross-Linguistic Data, Recurrent Patterns, Functional Explanations. Berlin ; Boston : De Gruyter Mouton, 2024. xviii + 257 p.

*Рукопись поступила в редакцию 11.08.2025*

*Рукопись принята к печати 08.09.2025*

These two volumes on the grammar of proper names provide a good foundation for research into a field that so far has received relatively little attention. The first is a collection of papers covering various language groups through different linguistic perspectives: from hard-core functionalism in most contributions to “lite” formal semantics and a mixture of theoretical approaches. Thus, it offers a representative picture of the current state of onomastic studies. The second is a monograph by Thomas Stolz and Julia Nintemann, a comprehensive examination of special onymic grammar (SOG) in numerous versatile languages.

I begin with the collection of papers and then turn to the monograph, noting that the two volumes are conveniently linked through the closing article of the former, also co-authored by Stolz, which anticipates themes developed more fully in the latter.

***Proper Names versus Common Nouns: Morphosyntactic Contrasts in the Languages of the World***, edited by Javier Caro Reina and Johannes Helmbrecht, brings together nine diverse contributions. The opening work, *Morphosyntactic Contrasts between Proper Names and Common Nouns: An Introduction*, written by the editors, surveys some literature, lamenting the scarcity of synchronic comparative-typological research into the grammar of proper names and the lack of understanding of their heterogeneous nature. The perspective is strictly functionalist: morphosyntactic differences between common nouns and proper names arise from their semantic and pragmatic properties. The introduction also outlines a range of relevant nominal phenomena: modification (by adjectives,

demonstratives, numerals, relative clauses, and quantifiers), case marking, separately the definite article, and possessive constructions. The editors note that distinctions may fall along different lines: sometimes common nouns, proper names and place names all behave differently, while in other cases two of these categories group together in opposition to the third. For example, in some languages personal names and common nouns behave similarly and must be distinguished from place names; yet, in others, place names and common nouns are grouped together and differ from personal names.

Corinna Handschuh's contribution *Personal Names versus Common Nouns: Cross-linguistic Findings from Morphology and Syntax*, addresses intricacies of terminology, questioning the adequacy of the label "proper nouns". Drawing on extensive cross-linguistic data, she demonstrates characteristic nominal properties (or their lack) in proper names, such as definiteness, case, number, and gender. Particularly interesting is her observation that in some ergative-absolutive languages the case system shifts to nominative-accusative with proper names. Handschuh rejects the idea that proper names are "deficient nouns". On the contrary, they sometimes display richer morphology than common nouns. She examines their syntactic behavior in three contexts serving as tests for distinguishing them from common nouns: apposition, noun phrase (NP) modification, and coordination. Concluding the article, the author raises a question that emerges again and again in different sources: do proper names represent a separate lexical class?

Javier Caro Reina's *The Definite Article with Personal Names in Romance Languages* investigates Romance languages, their dialects and national variants: Balearic Catalan, Galician, Italian, Brazilian Portuguese, European Portuguese, Sursilvan, Asturian, French, Sardinian, Spanish, and Romanian. He compares the Romance languages with other (Indo-)European languages, noting that most do not use definite articles with personal names. He also introduces a curious pragmatic dimension: article use depends on how widely known a person wearing a particular name is. The appropriate scale includes names known universally, nationally, regionally, and personally (p. 59). This hierarchy is asymmetrical: if famous names take the definite article, ordinary names will as well, but not vice versa. His detailed descriptions of individual languages and dialects, covering lexical, grammatical, phonological and even sociolinguistic factors, make the article a valuable reference.

One of the most original contributions is *River Names* by Yves D'hulst, Rolf Thieroff, and Trudel Meisenburg. It seeks explanations for the obligatory use of the definite article with river names in Germanic and Romance languages. Combining lexical semantics and conceptual semantics [Jackendoff 1991] with formal syntactic analysis [Longobardi 1994], the authors argue that river names and

even the common noun *river* itself are underspecified for the boundedness feature, and this underspecification requires syntactic resolution via the definite article. The authors are aware that there are numerous important questions left unanswered. In addition, I would ask: could other determiners fulfill the role of the definite article? Why is “a river” possible but not “a Thames”? If the common noun *river* does not move to the head position of the determiner phrase (DP), what determines this behavior?

Johannes Helmbrecht's *Proper Names with and without Definite Articles: Preliminary Results* surveys 350 languages, classifying them by article use. He reports a range of patterns (especially in place names) with respect to the choice of the article and various semantic or pragmatic factors influencing them. However, explanation is left open, indicating the need for further studies.

In contrast, Elisheva Jeffay and Susan Rothstein's *On Personal Names in Construct States in Modern and Biblical Hebrew* contains clear diachronic and synchronic explanations, using formal notions such as referential DPs, constraints, choice functions, predicate type. The authors analyze a special possessive construction (a construct phrase) in Biblical Hebrew and Modern Hebrew and observe that proper names in the annex position (the one containing the possessor) are allowed only in Biblical Hebrew. On the basis of different distributional patterns of proper names in two historic varieties and some synchronic varieties of Hebrew, the researchers conclude that they can represent different semantic types (predicates vs referential expressions) and therefore different syntactic structures (NPs vs DPs, respectively). Without involving excessive technical detail, the analysis offers depth and precision that contrast with some of the more descriptive contributions.

Damaris Nübling's *Von Heidel- nach Bamberg, von Eng- nach Irland? 'From Heidel- to Bamberg, from Eng- to Ireland?'* explores the semantic transparency and structural integrity of three types of compound noun: common nouns, appellative nouns and proper names (place names, in particular). Using rich material from two German corpora, the author uses three tests to show that such elements as *-berg* ‘mountain’, *-stadt* ‘city’, or *-wald* ‘forest’ behave differently in the three aforementioned groups, highlighting the distinctive grammatical behavior of true proper names.

Iker Salaberri's *D-marking on Basque Personal Names from a Synchronic and Diachronic Perspective* examines definite/specific (D-)marking of common and proper nouns in Old and modern Basque, and in current varieties of the language. He demonstrates complex patterns of D-marking, influenced by a type of a noun, the internal division of proper names into personal and place names, and a dialectal source of linguistic material. The study reveals interesting parallels with the familiarity hierarchy described by Caro Reina.

The final paper, *On Special Onymic Grammar (SOG): Definiteness markers in Fijian and selected Austronesian languages* by Thomas Stolz and Nataliya Levkovych, anticipates the Stolz-Nintemann monograph. The authors demonstrate the validity of the notion of SOG, which can be further subdivided into Special Anthroponymic Grammar (SAG) and Special Toponymic Grammar (STG). Using Fijian and other Austronesian languages, they show that common nouns and proper names are morphologically marked as separate word-classes. In Fijian, the presence of proprial markers is defined by syntactic positions of proper names: the markers are found on subjects, but not on objects. With common nouns, however, the appropriate marker is almost always there. Variation across Austronesian languages suggests two-way (common nouns vs proper nouns), and three-way (common nouns vs personal names vs place names) distinctions. This finding is elaborated in the subsequent monograph.

***Special Onymic Grammar in Typological Perspective: Cross-Linguistic Data, Recurrent Patterns, Functional Explanations*** by Thomas Stolz and Julia Nintemann is a culmination of a large-scale project covering over one hundred languages. It combines a typological breadth with the development of a unified hypothesis about SOG. The work argues that proper names can be further subdivided into personal names and place names by certain grammatical features, such as case, class, number, definiteness, deixis, and spatial marking. Each feature is discussed separately and its realization is illustrated by numerous examples.

The monograph is data-rich, with 51 figures and 32 tables, where the authors offer synchronic and diachronic comparison of exotic language families, ancient languages, and familiar modern ones. The existence of SOG finds support in four of five potential patterns, where the matches between common, anthroponymic and toponymic nouns are found or not found (Table 8 on p. 47). The explanations are mostly pragmatic and semantic. For instance, a certain overlap between common names and anthroponyms with respect to vocative forms is accounted for by the idea of prototypicality: the vocative is prototypically directed towards a human interactor.

There are a lot of findings that can serve as a basis for serious generalisations. So, zero spatial morphology and distinct prepositional constructions with toponyms clearly set them apart from the other groups. Proper names tend to display the same morphology as personal pronouns and/or kinship terms, and so on. The authors argue that anthroponyms and toponyms can be so different from common nouns that they should be isolated into another lexical class. In this way, the work touches upon the millennium-old question as to what underlies the distinction between different parts of speech.

The style is original, the text contains long discussions, extensive lists and research-specific abbreviations, like TOPOs, ANTHS and PROPS, which also makes the monograph special.

To sum up, this work is a profound morphosyntactic study of abundant data and a highly valuable reference book on proper names, and even if its readers may represent different theoretical frameworks and thus disagree with the offered explanations, they will find something of use to themselves.

\* \* \*

Together, these two volumes on proper names can help linguists understand the nature of the subject irrespective of their theoretical backgrounds. The collection of articles offers a wealth of descriptive material and varied perspectives, which can invite further deeper and more extensive research. The monograph is a report on the ongoing project, developing a typological hypothesis on the basis of the found morphological patterns. Both works uncover recurrent patterns: the distinct behaviors of personal names vs place names, the similarities between proper names, personal pronouns and kinship terms, and the sensitivity of proprial marking to morphosyntactic factors such as case, agenthood, possessive relations, spatial relations and even the position of a noun in a sentence. These findings indicate the deeper involvement of grammar in onomastics than is commonly believed. Regardless of their theoretical perspective, linguists will find here an inspiration for exploring the poorly studied yet intriguing grammar of proper names.

### References

- Jackendoff, R. (1991). Parts and Boundaries. *Cognition*, 41(1–3), 9–45. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0277\(91\)90031-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0277(91)90031-X)
- Longobardi, G. (1994). Reference and Proper Names: A Theory of N-Movement in Syntax and Logical Form. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 25(4), 609–665.