BOOK REVIEW

ASPECTS OF SIGNED NAMES

Liina Paales. *Kurtide nimepärimuse aspekte: puudelisuse ja kurdiksolemise folk-loristlik uurimus*. [Aspects of Deaf name lore: A folkloristic study of disability and Deafhood.] Dissertationes Folkloristicae Universitatis Tartuensis 17, Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus 2011. 208 pp.

On August 30, 2011, Liina Paales defended her doctoral degree Kurtide nimepärimuse aspekte: puudelisuse ja kurdiksolemise folkloristik uurimus (Aspects of Deaf name lore: A folkloristic study of disability and Deafhood) at the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore of the Institute of Cultural Research and Fine Arts, University of Tartu. An overview of the thesis is given on the basis of the published version.

Whereas the naming elements of a language, such as appellatives, are used to combine similar objects, events or activities together into the same class, proper names are used to differentiate similar kinds of entities, such as people or places, from each other. In more simple terms: the appellative *table* referring to 'a one-, three- or more legged surface' will remain the same, be the entity curved- or straight-legged, or whether its surface is made of wood, metal or glass of any shape. But on the basis of a mere proper name we cannot find out what *Clinton* or *Mary* looks like, nor can we know who in a group of persons might be Mary, except that we know that *Mary* refers to the female sex. In these examples of proper names used in English-speaking cultures the linguistic elements have nothing else in common except that they refer to people (male or female) or geographic locations. (Yes, there are places called Clinton and Mary!)

However, we as rare and minority language researchers claim that proper names may have intension, i.e., they contain relevant semantic information which can be analysed. Countless experienced researchers of indigenous cultures and languages have described such names in their research. Perhaps the most widely known examples come from the personal names of the indigenous peoples of the American and African continents, such as *Áwákaasomaahkaa* 'Running-Antelope' (Lombard 2011), or *Angula / Nangula* '(a boy / a girl) born in the morning' (Saarelma-Maunumaa 2003). Sign languages are also included amongst the group of languages that have a descriptive name reserve. Unfortunately, the dominant western-oriented linguistics and onomastics rarely take into account these non-canonical languages in their theories, and the evidence they offer is not considered sufficiently weighty to question the well-established scientific views.

Liina Paales's thesis *Aspects of Deaf Name Lore* provides linguistic and cultural evidence contrary to the canons of onomastic theories, since also in Estonian Sign Language (ESL) most of the personal and toponymic names are associated with an external context, which is also evident in the sign. In a person's name this signifying element could tell us something about the individual's outward appearance at the moment the name was given, for example, the hairstyle or use of spectacles, or the appearance of visible birthmarks. Thus in ESL a person could have such names as CURLY or EYE-GLASSES or PIGMENT-ON-THE-HEAD. It is important to note, however, that sign

language names are not – as outsiders often assume – nicknames or additions to the official spoken language first and family names or place names; they are rather a fundamental part of the idiomatic phrasing of sign language in all registers.

Sign Language can also include into the name something about the person's non-visible background. For example, people keen on fishing or running may be given the name FISHER or RUNNER, but the name can also tell us about the family context, even in a quite obtuse manner (e.g. POOR). Similar place name examples in ESL would be, for example, the sign for the fishing town *Kallaste* that denotes 'a hat with an upturned brim like that of a fisherman' and the sign for 'orthodox' referring to the place *Pechory / Petseri,* where a monastery is situated. The sign may also have something to do with the name of the entity in spoken language (e.g. SEA < Meri, 'Sea').Those names which cannot be directly translated into sign language are often paralleled by other, similarly written words in the dominant language as is the case with the place name KNEE for the town *Põlva* (cf. *põlv* 'knee'). According to Paales this strategy is very common when producing names in ESL (and it is utmost productive even in Finnish Sign Language; cf. Rainò 2006).

Language community members almost always know or have an intuition about to what the name refers. Paales states that the discussion of naming conventions and informing about them is an integral part of sign language storytelling tradition (it also exists amongst the Blackfoot Indian tribes; cf. Lombard 2011). In her articles Paales cites different versions of etymologies for names that she has collected. However, she does not differentiate between first- and second-hand knowledge of the person referring to the proper names used, that is, whether the knowledge of the name has come from the name bearers or from other members of the sign language community (consisting of approx.1500 people in Estonia). Rather than presenting all interpretations of the names as etymologically equal, Paales should have considered or brought out this very basic problem in onomastics connected to folk etymology or at least she could have described in detail the interface between name-lore and folk etymology.

Although the constraint of description, and *metonymic* description in particular, set basic linguistic rules for the formation of proper nouns in sign language, only the bearer's knowledge of the origin of his/her own name can be relied on. Other people's understanding of the origin of the name is mostly based on guessing or second-hand information – and therefore 'lore', unless they themselves have participated in the name-giving process. It should also be noted that metonymy only works in one direction. For example, the squinting of an eye may give rise to a sign for a proper noun, where *the index finger touches the cheek below the eye*. But any proper noun sign produced near the eye may refer to the function of the sense organ itself as well as to other elements close to the eye, such as a birth mark or visible scar at the time of name giving, which may no longer be seen. However, the users of sign language are not always aware of this one-way-metonymy (Rainò 2004), and therefore, may regard the conclusions drawn from the names accurate. But a scientist should be more prudent.

The signs for proper nouns are an essential part of language skills and knowledge of the deaf culture and its narrative tradition. This shared knowledge of language speakers connected to nomenclature and name lore (even though it is not always true), provides Paales with the working platform through which she is approaching her research material. Adapting Ben-Amos (2009), Paales examines the names *as folkloristic text frag-*

ments, an aspect which offers her also an escape route not to face the problem regarding folk etymologies. Nevertheless, choosing this innovative approach, she has aroused refreshed interest towards onomastics within sign languages studies. This perspective also offers onomasticians a fresh opportunity to investigate names as discursive units with new tools, and perceive the linguistic and cultural context related to the names within a wider framework. This approach could even provide the folkloristic name-lore its own place in onomastic research rather than brushing it into the background.

However, as a researcher of nomenclature in ESL, Paales does not – at least with this dissertation – get much deeper than other onomasticians who have been more strictly bound to linguistic or onomastic frameworks. Despite her unusual research perspective, her conclusions are nevertheless almost identical with previous studies in most sign languages: she

Liina's name sign.

states that even in ESL there are arbitrary and descriptive names and, for example, the latter can be further divided into sub-categories according to descriptive features in more detail (physical appearance, behaviour or origins of the name bearer, etc.). In one of her latest articles included in her dissertation "Name Signs for Hearing People" (Folklore 47/2011), which describes the variety of names assigned to people outside the realm of the sign language users, she is still not able to reach further than a scattered catalogue of the people to whom the name signs are given. These disorganised categories include the following: People related to the deaf community (teachers of deaf schools, sign language interpreters, deaf culture and sign language researchers, hearing children of deaf parents); Athletes, singers, actors; Religious name signs; Estonian and Finnish public officials; Russian and German heads of state; Presidents of France and the United States, and Leaders of other countries. (For some reason, Paales wanted to describe the 'supreme heads of state' through six different categories!)

The latter category of statesmen is always resounding, since even the less pleasant aspects are raised as the topic of naming speech – and name-lore. For example, in French Sign Language, the meaning of 'splayed teeth' refers to Mitterand, and in other signed languages expressions meaning 'pointy ~ big ~ red nose ~ ear' are associated with Presidents Halonen, Putin, Yeltsin and Sárkoszy. Nevertheless, in this article as well as in the summary of her doctoral thesis, Paales eventually manages to connect, very briefly though, the fragmented pieces of her research. She considers the role of name signs, in respect to the title of her work, from within the community and raises the following as one of her main hypothesis: It is through the use of name signs and telling stories connected to these that a sense of belongingness is created within the community of language users. Simultaneously the sarcastic hidden messages carried in the nomenclature for hearing people deal with the feelings that the members of the minority language attach to the representatives of the majority.

Paales's dissertation offers something to ponder even for a wider reading audience than us, mere researchers. Familiarising ourselves with the sign languages in our region and the nomenclature embedded in these languages, we would all get a whole new perspective on ourselves, our environment, and even to our own language.

Have you ever noticed which head of state is missing his thumb? (*Yeltsin*)

And who was the mighty person adorned by a wart on his nose? (*Kruchev*)

And which island in Estonia – despite its flat surface – is called "bumpy"? (*Muhu! (<"muhk")*)

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