

The practice and the semantics of product naming of puppets: Names of ventriloquist dummies across languages

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Names for puppet products present an interesting case of product onomastics: (i) Puppets usually represent (conceptually) living entities and receive individual names by their owner. (ii) Puppets are commercial, mass-produced items with de-individualizing product names. While the onomastic literature on puppet names has focussed on the first aspect (see Pohl 2024), I will primarily investigate the second. I will connect an onomastic and a formal semantic approach, based on data of a multi-lingual catalogue of non-customized ventriloquist dummies/puppets.

Data

I study the products of the Germany-based company *Living Puppets*, but refer to other companies for comparison. I compare the German, Dutch, French, and Spanish versions of puppet names, as provided by the internet store <https://lemondedelamarionnette.com/>. Preliminary results are based on 50 out of 245 puppet names in the investigated languages. About 50% of the puppets are merchandising from shows – international (*Sesame Street*), or local (*Wiwaldi Show*, <https://www.bigsmile-entertainment.de/wiwaldishow>).

Preliminary results:

(1) Names of merchandizing puppets are kept the same in all languages, even for local shows, though addressing titles and descriptive parts may differ (German: *Omi Flönz* [from *Wiwaldi Show*]; French: *Dame Flönz Marionette*; English: *Lady Flönz Puppet*, Spanish: *Marioneta Lady Flönz*).

(2) In German, arbitrary names dominate for the other puppets – be they human, animals, or phantasy creatures. The other languages dominantly use purely descriptive names – German: *Bonsche*; English: *Pink Monster Puppet*.

(3) The same puppet “character” can come in different sizes, but will keep a constant core name (with possible additions) in German (*Bonsche*, *Klein Bonsche*), but not necessarily in the other languages (French: *Monstre Rose Marionette*, *Pinky Baby Marionette Monstre*).

(4) Each product has an individual product number (*Bonsche* is W854 or W778 depending on size, www.living-puppets.de)

Contrast with other companies:

The Puppet Company (UK, <https://www.thepuppetcompany.com/>): Out of the 42 products offered on the reference web site, the sock puppets may have proper names – accompanied with a descriptive label (10 out of 20), whereas puppets with more “realistic” shapes (humans, animals, monsters) only have descriptive names (English: *Amazon Macaw Puppet*).

Steiff (Germany, <https://www.steiff.com/>): All products have a name, usually accompanied by a description, which stays across languages (German: *Schnucki Hase*; French: *lapin Schnucki*).

The semantics of puppet product names

Names of industrial products challenge the mono-reference and direct reference of names (Nübling et al. 2012). Puppets add further complexity: Semantically/conceptually, we observe steps from the (fictitious) real world individual (Ernie from Sesame Street), to the conceptual object of the puppet “character” (*Ernie*), to its various product designs (*Ernie* 65cm, 45cm, ...), till the concrete puppet object as bought and used by the puppeteer. I relate these semantic entities to the various types of product labels from my data.

The following semantic and naming processes can be observed: (i) de- and re-individualizing on the way from the real world model for the puppet, across the above product steps; (ii) different types of names or descriptions referring to different (though contingent) semantic/conceptual steps. The cross-linguistic data exemplify variation in naming for the same semantic/conceptual entities.

References

Nübling, Damaris, Fabian Fahlbusch & Rita Heuser. 2012. *Namen: Eine Einführung in die Onomastik*. Tübingen: Narr.

Pohl, Inge. 2024. Möhritz, Ferdinand, Tango und Mr. Wuff: Onomastische Studie zu Namen von Kuschartieren. *Namenkundliche Informationen* 116: 297-236.