

Names of Companion Animals: Rovers in the Onomasticon?

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Abstract

The names of companion animals could, from the outside, be seen as freely roving elements in the onomasticon. There are few or no legal restrictions on their given names, so, in theory, a dog, or a cat, could have any kind of word creation as a name. Dogs and other companion animals play a larger role as family members in many countries than ever before, something that possibly has an influence on their names. My major aim here is to establish, from a socio-onomastic viewpoint, whether animal owners in general take advantage of this apparent liberty, or whether they restrict themselves to using otherwise well-established name groups, e.g. anthroponyms or older zoonyms. The first part of the study is devoted to dog names. A large corpus of such names used in Sweden during the last decade is examined. The features of the most popular names given to dogs are studied and their relationship to popular baby names is discussed. This is combined with a study of dog names attested only once in the corpus. The results are supplemented with some findings on general attitudes to names of companion animals, taken from a recent questionnaire survey of animal owners.

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Introduction

It is well known that dogs and other companion animals play an important role as family members in many countries today (Thorsen 2001, Leibring 2015a, Saarelma 2012).¹ This close relationship could and does have an influence on their names – more popular anthroponyms are now used for animals than seems to have been the case in earlier times. However, as there are few or no restrictions on what kind of spoken names companion animals could bear,² a dog or a cat could, in theory, be given any phonetic combination as a name. But is this the case in real life? From a broader perspective, can zoonyms be said to have any specific functions, or roles, to play in the general onomasticon – what relationships exist between animal names and other name categories, e.g. personal names or place names?

In this paper, the vast field of names of companion animals has been slimmed down to the names of dogs, not least because of the very rich sources of names available. My aim is to examine, from a socio-onomastic point of view, the most popular names given to dogs in contemporary Sweden and to compare them with dog names attested only once. I will also discuss the relations between popular dog names and popular baby names. These findings will be related to the results from a recent questionnaire survey on views of companion

¹ For reasons of clarity, I prefer to use the terms *companion animals* and *names of companion animals* rather than the older terms *pet animals* and *pet names*. The last term is ambiguous, as it is sometimes used to define nicknames or certain kinds of bynames of humans (see e.g. Nair and Scherr (2016) in vol.4 of these proceedings, *Collins Dictionary*).

² With the exception of such animals as racehorses, for which there are regulations preventing two contemporary animals having identical names.

animals in general and their names. As an introduction, I will briefly discuss some of the general functions of animal names, for both production animals and companion animals.

Different Functions of Animal Names

The most important function of animal names, as for all proper names, is of course as a communication tool. An animal name can, like a personal name, be used either in direct communication with the name bearer, or in indirect communication, as when the animal is spoken (or written) about.

However, as the Norwegian ethnologist Bjarne Rogan (1994) has pointed out, there are three different sub-functions or aspects of the giving of proper names which, in my opinion, clearly sum up how and why we give names to individual beings or things, such as animals or boats.

First, in Rogan's structure, is the singularising aspect, by which something more than just identifying the individual named is intended. Through its name, the animal is regarded as an individual, is singled out, something which the giving of a name expresses.

The second aspect is the expressive; we can express our attitudes, preferences or viewpoints in a name. One example of this is the messages conveyed by African dog and ox names (Batoma 2009, Koopman 2015) from the name giver to, for instance, neighbours or superiors. Another is when we express irony through a name, as in naming a small lapdog *Belsebub*. Animal names can also be humorous and used in jokes. Among these, we find what can be called question names, where the dog's name is identical to an answer to the question: 'What's the name of the dog?' The answer could be *Guess* (Sw. 'Gissa') or *Ask'im* (Sw. 'Fråg'en') (Nordlander 1880: 425). These names seem to have been quite popular in Sweden in the late 19th century, and are still used, especially for working dogs. And, of course, names can (and often do) express affection and tender feelings towards the animal.

The third aspect or function that Rogan discusses is the ritual. Here, naming after other animals is an important factor. The function of *Nachbenennung* works with animals as it does with humans. We may perhaps want to recall the earlier animal's positive qualities by recycling its name – or to avoid reusing a name that was given to an animal seen as unsatisfactory.

In addition to these three functions or aspects, there is a fourth, of more recent origin: animal names are nowadays used as introducers or reintroducers of new or outdated personal names. I will return to this later in the article.

Material and Method

The name corpus used is extracted from the Swedish Central Dog Register, Centrala Hundregistret (hereafter CHR). This register has been kept for dogs in Sweden since 2004, and is maintained by the Swedish Board of Agriculture. Information on all dogs in the country is entered by the animal's breeder or owner. The register provides data on the dog's

identification number, pedigree name, spoken name,³ breed, date of birth, and owner's name and address. I have used a download made in January 2013, containing entries for over 750,000 dogs. Not all these entries, however, include information about a spoken name, and in some instances the pedigree name is entered in the column for spoken name. For about 500,000 dogs, however, a spoken name is given. Many of these names have few bearers, but a considerable proportion of Swedish dogs have names emanating from a limited pool, as 310,000 of the named dogs have one of the 500 most common names. A majority of the names come from the anthroponomasticon. The toponomasticon is not used as much as are ergonyms (commercial names), so we can infer that not all areas of the onomasticon are equally popular.

The 500 most popular names form the basic material for the first part of my study. Of these names, only 23 can be defined as gender-neutral, in the sense that at least 20 per cent of their bearers belong to the under-represented sex (Leibring 2015a). For the analysis, I have used quantitative methods, combined with some more qualitative considerations, such as the names' origins in the onomasticon and their morphology, and a comparison of the most popular of these names with contemporary usage of them as anthroponyms in Sweden. Only a small subset of my findings will be presented here.

As a contrasting second object of study, I have chosen dog names attested only once in the CHR, beginning with the letter *F*, and have analysed their morphological and semantic features. My aim is to investigate whether there are any specific differences between these rare names and the very popular ones.

The Most Popular Dog Names in Sweden

The 20 most popular names for female and male dogs in Sweden in January 2013, and the numbers of dog bearing them, are shown in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Pos.	Name	Number	Pos.	Name	Number
1	Molly (9)	5,894	11	Nova (26)	1,830
2	Wilma (11)	4,467	12	Lisa (72)	1,748
3	Bella	3,604	13	Mimmi	1,717
4	Ronja (69)	3,532	14	Lady	1,627
5	Alice (1)	2,450	14	Ebba (6)	1,627
6	Selma (34)	2,357	16	Zita	1,527
7	Maja (5)	2,287	17	Elsa (2)	1,497
7	Sally	2,287	18	Kajsa	1,487
9	Tindra (71)	1,958	19	Freja (21)	1,451
10	Doris	1,908	20	Isa	1,392

Table 1. The 20 most popular names for female dogs in Sweden, January 2013

³ This term refers to the name that is used as a call name, or everyday name. The Swedish word is 'tilltalsnamn'. This name can sometimes be part of (or created from) the pedigree name, and sometimes a completely different name. On different formal types of dog names, see Leibring (2014a).

Pos.	Name	Number	Pos.	Name	Number
1	Ludde	3,590	11	Simba	1,686
2	Bamse	3,269	12	Hugo (4)	1,684
3	Sigge (77)	3,169	13	Ville (62)	1,571
4	Rocky	2,497	14	Buster	1,561
5	Charlie (8)	2,394	15	Leo (11)	1,549
6	Zorro	2,203	16	Diesel	1,529
7	Tyson	1,847	17	Lukas (3)	1,510
8	Ozzy	1,776	18	Gizmo	1,490
9	Max (28)	1,725	19	Caesar	1,452
10	Elvis	1,712	20	Rex	1,408

Table 2. The 20 most popular names for male dogs in Sweden, January 2013

The numbers in brackets after several names indicate the name's position on the top-100 list of forenames given to babies in 2013. There is a significant overlap between names for baby girls and names for female dogs, as 16 of the most popular dog names were also found among the top 100 names given to baby girls. The only 'traditional' dog name, not given to any babies at all, is *Lady*.

Among the names given to male dogs, fewer are popular for baby boys; only seven appeared on the top-100 list. However, most of the popular male dog names are loans from other areas of the anthroponomasticon, not the least from the names of popular characters, both fictitious and real. The reason the name pool for male dogs is larger is historical, as more names seem to have been created for male dogs over time (Leibring 2014a). The smallish name pool for female dogs is also reflected in the fact that there are more females per name than males per name among the most popular dog names. The 20 most popular female dog names have around 46,000 bearers, while the 20 most popular male ones only have some 39,000 bearers.

We can observe that the influx from personal names to animal names is overwhelming, especially concerning baby girls and female dogs. The path in that direction has become more of a highway, something that several scholars have pointed out in recent years (Coren 2011, Schaab 2012, Leibring 2015a). There are, however, some interesting facts that suggest a two-way traffic between dog names and baby names.

Influences of Animal Names on Baby Names

From the large name corpus available in the CHR, at least two specific name situations can be identified in which the use of certain names for dogs seems to herald their use as names for babies. These situations or areas can be characterised as (a) testing grounds for first names new as personal names in Sweden, and (b) reintroduction of old-fashioned or outdated first names for babies.

We will look first at some forenames recently introduced in Sweden. Many of these names originate in the Anglo-American tradition, and some are quite popular in English-speaking countries, but have not, until recently, been popular in Sweden. Some girls'

names in this category are *Amber*, *Holly*, *Kira* and *Pixie* – these are all among the 200 most popular names for female dogs, and are now rising in popularity as baby girl names.⁴ They are not, however, as popular as dog names as are the boys' names *Buster*, *Dexter*, *Diesel* and *Ozzy*, which have a similar background. These male names are all found in the top-50 list of male dog names, and they have all slowly begun an upward-moving career as boys' names in recent years.⁵ I would argue that their popularity as dog names is one of the reasons why they have become accepted as baby names in Sweden. Their use as names in contemporary popular culture contributes to them becoming a part of Swedish society as well, but their introduction has partly gone via their being used as animal names.

The second area where names given to dogs can pave the way for their use as baby names concerns the use of old-fashioned or outdated personal forenames as dog names. This phenomenon seems to be more frequent among names for male dogs and boys than among names for female dogs and girls. The three-generation cycle of name popularity is familiar; many baby names return after roughly 90 years (Meldgaard 2001), but the usage of these names as dog names precedes their use as given names for babies. Two Swedish examples of this are shown in Table 3. Let us first study the male forenames *Gösta* and *Torsten*. They were very popular as boys' names 70 to 90 years ago, have been practically out of use as first names for babies for some decades, but have now begun a revival as boys' names. As dog names, they have been popular for over ten years. Then we can look at the male names *Lennart* and *Bengt*, which belong to a later time cycle. Their popularity as boys' names peaked in the 1940s, and they have been virtually extinct as the main forename for small boys for a couple of decades, but in just the last few years they have been given to a few boys. They are also on an upward trend as names for dogs.

Name	Number of dogs in CHR	Number of boys in 2013
Torsten	186	11
Gösta	186	25
Bengt	40	4
Lennart	80	8

Table 3. The frequency of some male forenames as dog names and as names given to baby boys in 2013

With reference to these cases, I would argue that today's dog names (and perhaps names of other companion animals as well) have specific functions in relation to personal names, especially forenames. A two-way traffic, whereby names can wander from humans to animals and back again, has evolved in recent decades, possibly as a consequence of the widespread anthropomorphisation of companion animals. At the same time, we can identify a new testing ground on which hitherto unknown names are introduced as animal names before they 'graduate' to the anthroponomasticon.

⁴ *Amber* was given to 12 girls in 2012, while *Holly* was given to 40, *Kira* to 13 and *Pixie* to 11 (www.scb.se).

⁵ *Buster* was given to 4 boys, *Dexter* to 62, *Diesel* to 3 and *Ozzy* to 11 in 2012 (www.scb.se).

Some Characteristics of Dog Names Attested Only Once

We have now established that there are major similarities between popular dog names and popular baby names, and that the use of anthroponyms for dogs can precede their use as baby names. We have also noted that many dogs have a name drawn from a limited name corpus. Let us now take a look at dog names which in the CHR are given to only one dog. How many dogs in the CHR have a unique name? Are there any specific features common to them? Do the name givers show signs of creativity?

To answer these questions, I examined all the spoken names beginning with the letter *F* in the CHR.⁶ The letter was randomly chosen among the letters less used in Swedish. Of these dogs, around 9 per cent (about 1,650 animals) had a unique name form. Some of these forms were obviously misspellings or typos made when the names were entered in the data files, so it is not possible to give exact numbers. More male than female dogs are among the bearers of unique names, an observation in keeping with the trend for the most popular names, which are used for a larger share of the female dog population (see above).

Among the linguistic characteristics of the corpus of unique names is the use of many hypocoristic forms, e.g. *Flubbe*, *Fluffis*, *Fimpie*.⁷ Various suffixes, some also found in human nicknames, are used. Most names, as among the more popular ones, have two syllables. Many names are obviously created as a play on words, or as puns on more common names, especially well-known dog names and personal forenames. Place names are rare in this context, as among the popular names.

Names attested only once can also be combinations of two popular dog names, e.g. *Bella Fina*, or a combination of a popular dog name (which of course may be a personal name as well) and an anthroponym (*Felix Rudin*, where *Rudin* is a common Swedish surname). Many names contain or are derived from English words, e.g. *Flashdance*, *Fearless*, *Fatzo*. Among the names beginning with *F*, not many other foreign languages seem to have been used.

So, do these findings shed any light on the question whether name givers take the opportunity to be creative and form unusual names? Most dog names, both the popular and the uncommon ones, comply with an unspoken agreement on such names: they should be functional, i.e. easy to say and call out. In Swedish, as in many other languages, this means that a large majority of dog names consist of two syllables.⁸ Of the 500 most popular ones, only 62 have a different syllabic structure. Most of the singly attested names are derived from, or related to, other dog names. Combined with the fact that 500 names cover over 60 per cent of the dog population, this implies that creativity is not really blooming. Another factor pointing in the same direction is that a majority of all dog names are loans from other name areas, mostly from the anthroponomasticon, with the ergonomasticon in second place.

Speaking against this vote for conformity are the facts that there are indeed very many names attested only once, and that many names contain puns, both of which are evidence of creativity. The many different spellings of popular names, e.g. *Tyson*, *Tyzon*, *Taizon*, *Tayson*,

⁶ Around 19,000 dogs in the CHR have a spoken name starting with *F*.

⁷ For the morphological structure of the more popular names, see Leibring 2015b.

⁸ As early a writer as Xenophon advises that names of two syllables are the most functional for dogs and horses.

are also indicative of an enthusiasm for creating names, or a wish for uniqueness. The question remains open.

Attitudes to Animal Names – Results from a Questionnaire

We will now take a look at the name givers themselves. Do they have any opinions on or attitudes to dog names or names of companion animals in general? I will present some results here from an online questionnaire on companion animals sent out during the spring of 2014.⁹ It consisted of open-ended questions aimed at animal owners and was designed to elicit their general views on and experiences of companion animals. The questions of interest for this paper were:

- 1) Do you think there are names that are unsuitable for animals?
- 2) Do you think certain names are better suited to certain animal species than others?
- 3) Can you see any changes over time in fashions concerning animal names?

Of the 59 responses received so far, 57 gave information on the name(s) of the respondents' animal(s), but only 23 (less than 40 per cent) expressed any opinion on the suitability of particular types of animal names or on fashions in animal names. This low percentage is interesting in itself, as a possible indicator of low awareness of these issues.

Regarding the first question, 15 gave a negative answer: there are no unsuitable names. Five informants stated that there were name types unsuitable for animals; of these, four mentioned personal names.

In answer to the second question, 11 respondents felt that all kinds of names were suitable for all animals, while four believed that certain names were better suited to particular animal species. Two informants stated that animal names should contain an /s/-sound, and one that human bynames were a good choice as animal names.

The third question, on changing fashions, was also answered by 23 respondents. Of these, 14 commented that personal names were now much more common. Four informants stated that animal names nowadays were more 'special' and imaginative, while three expressed the opinion that foreign names and names from popular culture were used more than in the past.

Although the very low number of participants prevents any statistically significant conclusions being drawn from the answers, it is interesting that the occurrence of personal names is the feature most often mentioned, both as a modern trend, and as something to be avoided. However, no one mentions the fact that name fashions for dogs and babies (especially girls) seem to be synchronised. One explanation could be that this phenomenon is now so well established that there was no need to comment, another that these respondents had not even noticed it. Most answers seem to express a relaxed and inclusive attitude towards names given to animals, as all kinds of names were seen as suitable by a majority of the respondents.

⁹ The questionnaire (DAGF 1629) was distributed through the Department of Dialectology, Onomastics and Folklore Research, Gothenburg.

Conclusions

To return to the question posed at the start of this paper, whether the names of companion animals are rovers in the onomasticon, I would argue that there are two sides to the answer, at least where dog names are concerned. On the ‘no’ side, the namers of dogs do not use the full potential of onomastic freedom available. For instance, the pool of very popular dog names is rather small (60 per cent of the named dog population have one of the 500 most popular names), and a large share of this name pool is identical to (or borrowed from) the anthroponomasticon. This implies that many dog namers take an easy way out, giving their dog a common personal forename, or choosing a name from a set of conventional and traditional dog names.

On the ‘yes’ side are the many names attested only once, and the many different spellings of common dog names. These factors indicate that many dog owners want their animal to have an uncommon or unique name, the same result as young parents in Sweden nowadays often seek when naming their child (Leibring 2014b: 86-88, Aldrin 2011: 82-94).

The phenomenon discussed above, of outdated first names making their return as dog names before becoming popular as baby names, is another point in favour of the ‘roving’ function. The givers of dog names do not have to be just borrowers in the onomasticon; they can also be rediscoverers or introducers of names later taken over by those giving names to babies.

My present answer to the question in the title will be a hesitant ‘no’: dog names are, on the whole, not rovers. However, there are signs of bubbling name creativity, as dogs’ names do wander around the onomasticon, and in that they are used as trial balloons for new names. As dogs have a very long tradition of being named, and their names have a practical function in life, it could well be that the names given to them are more standardised than those of, say, rabbits, gerbils, snakes or other companion animals, for which there is a shorter tradition of naming, and which are less responsive to their names. Further investigation into the names given to other species of companion animals would therefore be rewarding.

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