

# Cognitive Systems in the Naming of Finnish Ships

Anita Schybergson

*Finland*

## Abstract

This paper deals with Finland's stock of ship names (nautonomasticon) mostly recorded over the period 1838-1938. The material is supplemented with names of modern sailing yachts. The study clarifies the categories of names that appear, formation, lingual origin, functions and semantic qualities. Traditional onomastic methods are used alongside interdisciplinary and socio-onomastic approach. Cognitive linguistic theories have provided the tools for exploration of the metaphorical meaning of the names, and the semantic domains that the names create.

The interdisciplinary perspective has made it possible to explain certain trends in the stock of boat names, for example the predisposition towards names from classical mythology and the continuing rise of place names during the latter part of the period. The cognitive linguistic methods have revealed that the greater part of the vessel names can be interpreted as metaphors, in particular personifications, and that many names also form semantic networks and cognitive systems. The results indicate that there is a mental nautonomasticon that consists of a standard set of traditional ship names, but they also reveal the existence of conscious or unconscious cognitive systems (rules and conventions) that guide the naming of boats.

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## Introduction

Names of ships have been documented throughout the millennia, from the time of the Pharaohs to the present day. *Praise of the Two Lands* was a large Egyptian vessel made of cedar wood, built ca. 2680 B.C. (Kennedy 1974: 14). In Ancient Greece and Rome as well, vessels were given names, often god names such as *Isis*, *Castor* and *Pollux* (Casson 1994: 110-111). Ship names have thus existed for 4,700 years and probably longer, although written evidence is lacking. Ship names are colored by the culture in which they occur. During the Middle Ages, Christianity permeated the culture of the whole of Europe. Vessels were named after saints and figures from the Bible. *Gracedieu* 'grace of God' was among the most common religious names (Sandahl 1994: 275). During the Renaissance, interest in Classical literature and thought reawakened in Europe and names such as *Hektor* and *Herkules* became dominant in Western European war fleets during the 17th and 18th centuries. One type of ship names which became popular during the 18th century was feminine first names. Up to 40% of names in international ship registries could be women's names (Karlsson 1970: 17, 108-109). Contemporary history and trade interests are also reflected in vessels' names. Until the middle of the 19th century, Romanticism dominated thinking. In the Nordic countries, Romanticism brought with it a new enthusiasm for the Viking Age and names from Nordic mythology and the ancient saga literature became popular. *Ellida*, *Frej*, *Oden*, *Thor* and *Vikingen*, among others, were found in the trade fleets of the Nordic region (Berg 1993: 28, Karlsson 1970: 61). In the wake of Romanticism, people in Finland also chose mythical

names from the national epic, the Kalevala, alongside Old Norse names. Vessels and the seafaring industry have changed, but traces of Classical, Renaissance and Romantic ship names persist in the modern onomasticon, in Finland as well as in other places.

## Materials and methods

In my 2009 dissertation, *Cognitive Systems in the Naming of Finnish Merchant Vessels 1838-1938*, I focused on the names of Finnish merchant vessels during the period 1838-1938 (2,066 attestations). The data have been complemented in my subsequent research with a larger data set (2,774 attestations) that includes the names of small cargo boats from the Finnish archipelago from around the same time (1865-1938) and a data set (2,574 attestations) that contains the names of pleasure boats (yachts) from the decades around 1900 (1850-1920). I have identified which categories of names occur: the names' origins, frequency, morphology, to which language they belong, their function and semantic properties. I use traditional onomastic methods and quantitative calculations, but also an interdisciplinary approach, in the sense that the names are elucidated using historical facts from economics, politics and culture. With the help of theories from cognitive linguistics, I study the metaphorical and prototypical qualities of the names, as well as the semantic networks to which they belong. The three data sets containing ship names – names of trade ships from Finnish cities, rural cargo boats from the archipelago and pleasure boats – invite comparison and interpretations of name variation in relation to social and cultural context (for example, *Concordia*, the goddess of concord, and *Enig* 'In agreement'). The comparison gives the study a socio-onomastic dimension.

## The quantitative analysis

The quantitative analysis has provided an overview of the Finnish nautonomasticon (i.e. Finnish ship name practice) during the period in question. The following principal categories of ship names can be distinguished:

- Borrowings from both feminine and masculine first names, as well as surnames: *Sofia, Johannes, Runeberg*;
- Names formed from the lexicon of the language (ordinary Swedish and Finnish words): *Freden* 'peace', *Tähti* 'star';
- Borrowings from mythological names: *Neptunus, Freja, Wellamo* (sea goddess in the Kalevala);
- Borrowings from place names: *Finland, Imatra, Africa*.

Smaller name classes also occur, consisting of novel formations, corporate names and names that cannot be identified. Personal names dominate among all the types of ship names investigated. For trade ships, the distribution is as follows:

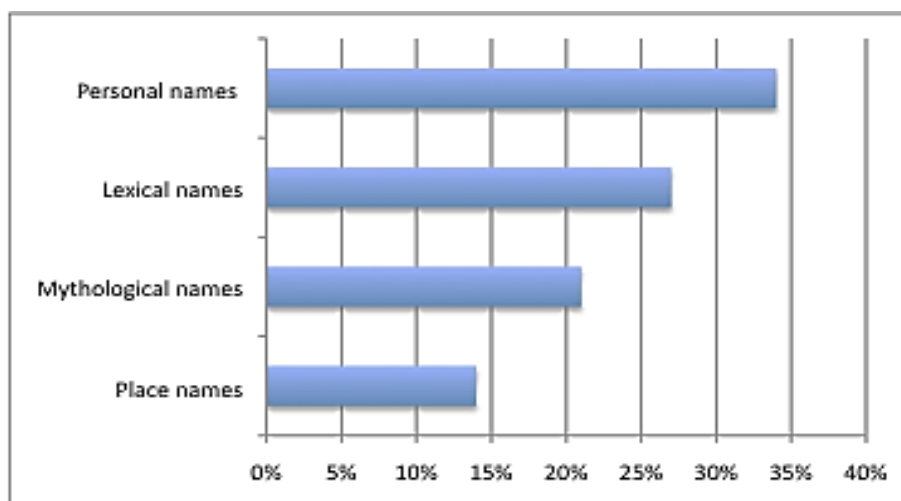


Fig.1. Principal categories of names among urban ships 1838-1938

The names of small cargo ships from the archipelago and pleasure boats (sailing yachts) represent the same general categories, but the distribution among the categories is somewhat different.

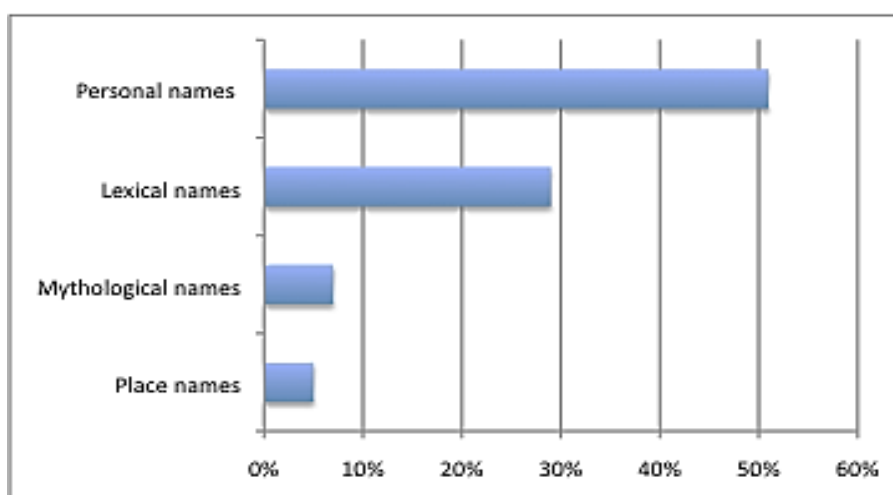


Fig.2. Principal categories among the names of ships owned by members of the rural population 1865-1838

The names of trade ships from the cities are characterized by the large number of mythological names, predominantly names from classical mythology. Another distinctive characteristic which emerges clearly in the mid-19th century is a large number of names from the national epic Kalevala and names in the Finnish language. In the cities we can also find a large proportion of ship names that are borrowed from place names. Cargo ships from the archipelago and pleasure boats for the most part have feminine forenames. The names of pleasure boats are frequently novel formations. A comparison between urban trade ships, cargo boats from the archipelago and pleasure boats shows that the same types of names

occur in all three groups. On the other hand, there are also clear differences, due to the social milieu and the use of the ships, for economic profit or for leisure and pleasure.

## Interdisciplinary Perspectives

An interdisciplinary perspective can explain the distinctive characteristics of the Finnish nautonomasticon. Names from Classical mythology – *Argo*, *Ceres*, *Juno*, *Minerva* – occur in large numbers in the early part of the period. In 1838, almost one-third of the ship names come from Classical mythology. At that time, Finland had recently separated from Sweden and had been incorporated into Russia. Those in power in Russia were opposed to contacts with the old motherland, Sweden; in their eyes the names of Classical gods were almost certainly a less provocative alternative to Swedish names. The Classical names of course reflect the strong position that Classical education held in Finland – stronger and more lasting than in the other Nordic countries. All indications, however, suggest that the names were also perceived as a neutral and diplomatic choice at a time when it was important not to challenge the rulers or advertise radical political orientations.

Finland was, as mentioned above, an autonomous part of the Russian Empire, but thoughts of independence gradually strengthened, and patriotism was often expressed through ship names. Among other things, people chose names in Finnish and names from the national epic, the Kalevala. The increase in Finnish ship names is like an avalanche in the urban fleets during the period around 1850, despite the fact that Swedish remained the language of culture as a result of the Swedish period. This rapid increase in Finnish names is related to the fact that patriotic sentiments were attached to the Finnish language and the mythical prehistory of the Finns as it was represented in the Kalevala. Names such as *Toimi* ('commission') and *Usko* ('belief, hope') occurred early and were followed by many other Finnish names. In the mid-19th century, it was a patriotic gesture to give ships Finnish names and mythical names from the Kalevala, such as *Aallotar* and *Sampo*. Finnish names gradually became popular among cargo boats from the archipelago as well and persisted long after they had become outdated in the cities.

Names of recreational vessels sometimes express political stances as well. General Governor Bobrikov's (1898-1904) Russification effort aroused abhorrence and vehement resistance around the turn of the 20th century. The boat name *Cagalen* alludes to a secret organization which led the passive resistance to Russification. In 1904, the Russian-Japanese war broke out with an attack on the Russian fleet at Port Arthur. Some ten new Finnish yachts were named after the Japanese admiral, his flagship, other Japanese war ships and the Japanese commander-in-chief in the war: *Togo*, *Mikasa*, *Sikishima* and *Oyama*. The Finnish yachtsmen's sympathies in the war were evident and become even more obvious when many boats were given the name *Banzai*, which is a Japanese war cry.

During the century 1838-1938, the fundamental economic structure of society altered and thereby also people's way of thinking. It is obvious that this also influenced ship names, so that certain types of names were perceived as old-fashioned toward the end of the period, while other types of names became more common. When regular steamboat traffic along the coast emerged, a large number of vessels were named after places, for instance, to specify

destinations. New steamboat companies adopted practices of systematic naming in which the whole fleet had similar names.

## Theories from Cognitive Linguistics

With the help of theories from cognitive linguistics I have studied the semantics of ship names and their nature as stylistic figures. Cognitive linguistics has, among other things, emphasized the metaphorical nature of language and the ability of metaphors to structure thought. Many ship names can be viewed as metonymic, inasmuch as the names emphasize a relationship between the ship and a larger entity, as with the ship name *Finland*. Other ship names point to the affinity between the ship and the sea, its waves and winds. Some examples of this are *Aalto* ‘wave’, *Meri* ‘sea’, *Ocean* and *Passat*. While these names emphasize a relationship within one cognitive area, other metaphoric names imply a comparison between two different cognitive areas and accentuate similarities between them. The ship name *Örnen* ‘The Eagle’ connotes the strength and superiority of the bird in comparison to other birds and its quick movements. The star metaphor has strong positive connotations; it is connected with beauty and success. Such ship names as *Capella*, *Nordstjärnan* ‘the Northern Star’, *Sirius*, and *Vega* occur among all types of vessels. Among metaphorical ship names, personification is especially common, for instance *Thor*, *Atalanta*, *Prinsessan* (‘the princess’). The large number of first names found among the ship names, such as *Maria*, *Johannes*, *Olga* and *John* are also personifications. The metaphors derive their strength from the fact that they emphasize certain properties and obscure others, a strength that is exploited more and more in modern seafaring, where it is necessary to create an attractive brand.

It is easy to find vessel names that are related in their content and that can be viewed as forming domains in semantic networks. During the time of navigation by sailing ships, speed was among the most desirable qualities. The following figure illustrates semantic connections among names connected with the concept of speed. Unfortunately, the picture cannot reproduce the complex and dynamic nature of the network, but it does show how name givers show similar paths of association with starting points in the semantics of the names.

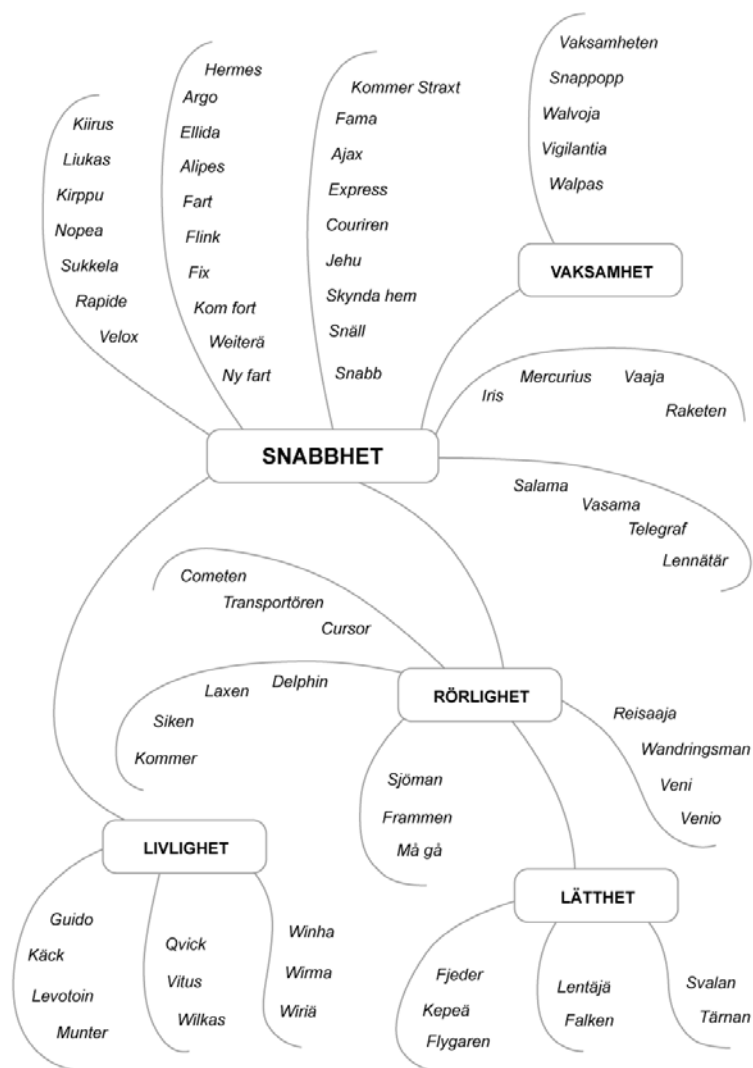


Fig. 3. Semantic connections among names connected with the concept of speed

## Conclusions

Seafaring is the most international of all economic activities. Vessels travel over the world's oceans and the namers find models in prevalent international naming trends. Investigations of vessel names are, however, rare even in an international perspective. Therefore it is, in my view, worth to continue systematic and typological investigation of ship names and compare the nautonomastica of different countries. It is also productive to analyze names in an interdisciplinary perspective in relation to intellectual movements and historical facts. Of course, one should also pay attention in future research to social and cultural variation, i.e. apply a socio-onomastic approach. In a multifaceted approach to this name type, cognitive linguistics justifies its position.

Anita Schybergson  
University of Helsinki  
Finland  
anita.schybergson@pp2.inet.fi

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