

The Limits of Commemorative Naming: A Consideration through Cases of Name Change for University Buildings

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Abstract

The notion of commemorative naming is well established and the term appears in documents produced by local government authorities and geographical societies. For example, the Vancouver city council provides this definition: ‘Commemorative Naming refers to the naming of a property in honour of outstanding achievement, distinctive service, or significant community contribution,’ though we might broaden this definition in relation to the entity being named and the rationale of naming. The specificity of that definition is of interest because it indexes some of the community’s expectations with respect to commemorative names. Clearly names are not just denotative, but also contain ‘sense’. In this paper, I will consider this matter in relation to name change because that puts the expectations into focus. The first example is of New College becoming Murray Edwards College at Cambridge University: this has not been controversial. The second example is that of Simkins Residence Hall to Creekside Hall at the University of Texas. This has been much more fraught with difficulties because of Simkins’s links with the Ku-Klux-Klan (Brophy 2011). Finally I consider the low-key change of Angsana College to the College of Alice and Peter Tan in Singapore, which while not controversial has raised some eyebrows.

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The Notion of Limits

The rights and wrongs of particular instances of commemorative naming can attract considerable attention. This can arise out of situations of new entities newly christened or entities being rechristened. It is the issue of rightness or otherwise of commemorative naming that will be the focus of this paper. I have not been able to determine when the term ‘commemorative naming’ was first used; the earliest entry for *commemorative* in the Oxford English Dictionary is 1662, but the *practice* of commemorative naming must probably have been going on since the time human beings have started naming people, landscape features or objects. If these are named commemoratively, they can commemorate people or events. There is probably a built-in universal cultural imperative to remember and memorialise, and people who belong together remember similar things: commemorative naming aids in this enterprise of supporting the collective memory. There are of course cultural predilections in the actual form the commemorative name takes. The French, for example, are happier than others about employing dates to commemorate events (e.g. *Place du six juin*, to commemorate D-day in 1944).

I talk about the notion of ‘limits’ to focus my discussion on the moral acceptability or social constraints on what is considered an acceptable commemorative name. I use this looser term, in contrast to terms like ‘rules’ because the discussion will not be legal in nature.

The first limit then is that at least some minimal value is ascribed to an event or person; or perhaps the context (e.g. historical or social context) surrounding the event or person.

The term ‘commemorative name’ has filtered into non-academic language. Tourist guides like *Frommers* (Strachan n.d.) have employed the term in discussing street names for example, and this is seen as a worthwhile task for tourists to be involved in as a way into the history of a place. There, the focus has generally been on names of buildings or streets. What this indicates is that commemorative naming is understood to involve the interest, or perhaps the involvement, of the general public. Public consultation may be involved in these instances of naming. It is also not just a private matter because the public will need to employ these names. Within the tradition of linguistics that I am most familiar with, names are often associated with research in the linguistic landscape (Landry and Bourhis 1997) or of geosemiotics (Scollon and Scollon 2003) of the city. In these names signs convey some message about the community in which the signs operate.

As mentioned above, I have chosen to discuss commemorative naming because of tensions associated with it. On the one hand, names can be seen to signal the cultural and ideological background of the community. On the other, names also serve more pragmatic purposes: witness the discussions about branding and naming rights (see, for instance, Quester 1997). Elsewhere, I looked at the naming of residential buildings and concluded that the economic orientation could best account for the naming practices that seemed to ignore the lack of cultural resonance in the names (Tan 2011). In all of these, the naming attracts public attention precisely because it is not a private matter: the public has a need to employ those names. The public is therefore also drawn to the question of the rights and wrongs of a particular naming. The second limit then is that there should be some community involvement or assent.

My own approach also draws upon the notion of ‘indexicality’. The word is, unfortunately, used in a number of ways. My own focus is on the way linguistic choices (including the choice of particular constructions, words or accents) point towards the speaker’s affiliation or outlook. Names also serve an *indexical* function and point to other semiotic systems in operation within the sociocultural and sociopolitical realms. I take the position that all names, like all linguistic choices, are potentially indexical. It follows therefore that names, particularly commemorative names, cannot be completely meaningless, although I do not necessarily accept the Russellian position that all names are descriptive in nature. My third limit then is that there is at least some minimal level of meaningfulness in commemorative names.

We are also aware of names that are of a commercial nature because they involve sponsorship, endowments or other financial arrangements. The understanding is that the commemorative naming provides opportunities for promotion. Commercial commemorative naming is indexical of the community’s value of enterprise. It therefore follows that commercial naming also conforms to Limit 1 (the particular commercial enterprise is valued) and Limit 3 (the particular naming is indexical).

Finally, it will not have escaped the notice of many that there are limits set by rules drawn up by the empowered. Many city councils maintain an interest in the matter and

guidelines. Examples of these include the rules set up for commemorative naming in Dublin, including the following:

- The person/s must have been born or lived in Dublin or have had strong and/or enduring connections with the city.
- The person/s must have made a unique and outstanding contribution to the life or history of Dublin through outstanding achievement, distinctive service or significant community contribution.

The notion of identity and personal connection to the city is particularly emphasised. This, interestingly, contrasts to the rules for Ottawa:

A commemorative name honours individuals who have: demonstrated excellence, courage or exceptional service to the citizens of the City of Ottawa, Province of Ontario and/or Canada; provided extensive community service; worked to foster equality and reduce discrimination; made a significant financial contribution to a park or facility, and the contribution significantly benefits the community that the park or facility serves (i.e. the park or facility may not have otherwise been possible without the financial assistance) or who has historical significant to the community, City of Ottawa, Province of Ontario and/or Canada.

The city council of Ottawa does not require the individual whose name provides the basis for the commemorative name to have a connection to Ottawa – merely that the individual has contributed to the city and its citizens.

And finally here are the rules in Singapore (for buildings and estates): ‘Avoid using names of persons, living or dead, unless for special reasons.’ Clearly there are some aspects of the rules that are different, and the relevant authorities are free to set up rules for names that come under their jurisdiction.

This then takes us to the fourth limit: authority structures need to be conformed to.

We can now restate the limits that I have highlighted here:

1. The conferring of a commemorative name indicates at least some minimal value ascribed to the event or person
2. Commemorative names generally work when there is some community assent.
3. Commemorative names are meaningful names.
4. Different authorities are free to set up further different restrictions for commemorative naming.

The limits above are of course not mutually exclusive or always distinctive, and they are not only specific to commemorative naming and could very well also apply to other kinds of naming.

Renamings Involving Commemorative Naming

In the rest of the paper, I would like to explore the extent to which the limits mentioned are useful when we look at three particular cases of renamings. I have three case studies from different parts of the world: in the USA, the UK and Singapore. It is not my intention to suggest that each case is representative of naming practice in these three locations. They were selected because of the contrasting approaches adopted and the cases lend themselves well to the discussion. All of them relate to name changes which involve commemorative names: either the original commemorative name was converted to some other category of name, or some other category of name was converted to a commemorative name.

Name changes are of interest because they involve overcoming inertia and generally require more effort, and therefore generate more discussion or debate. This is useful in teasing out the underlying assumptions about commemorative names.

I have also chosen to focus on building names with university connections: these fall slightly under the radar as they are generally not prominent civic buildings. Universities have their own peculiarities, and many inhabit a world with unresolved tensions:

It has been argued that in the past the academic collegial culture was dominant, but this has been replaced today by a managerialist culture Any such contrast is bound to be a simplification, and possibly a reflection of not a little nostalgic thinking about some rather undefined and indeterminate golden age. There are, however, clear changes that support this general thesis. (D'Andrea and Gosling 2005: 17)

The balance between advancing knowledge through teaching and research ... and achieving a business model that is sustainable, progressive and innovative is precarious at best and can spiral out of control in turbulent times (Mukerjee 2014: 16)

This kind of tension can also be compared with that in the field of language planning, where there is often a distinction made between pragmatic and ideological motivation. We can similarly highlight the ideological versus the economic tension in naming. There can be a tradition that highlights cultural or political values and another that highlights sponsorship or commercial attractiveness. Either can be incorporated into a legal or semi-legal framework (notion of authority structures).

There have of course been earlier studies on name changes involving commemorative naming, such as those involving street names (Azaryahu 1992, Faraco and Murphy 1997). The motivation for changes in many of these examples are linked to obvious cases of regime change and are therefore ideological in nature. In such cases the value accorded to different individuals or events changes (Limit 1), and different authorities wield power that enables them to effect this change (Limit 4). We should therefore not be surprised at renaming activity in postcolonial or post-independence situations where there is a changed balance of power with the ability to cause a re-assignment of heroes. The particular examples that I want to discuss do not involve ideological shifts.

New Hall

The first case involves a renaming that is not controversial. New Hall at the University of Cambridge received £30m from Ros and Steve Edwards in June 2008. Ros Edwards (née Smith) graduated from the University in 1981. As a result of the endowment, the college was renamed Murray Edwards. (Murray in the new name refers to Rosemary Murray, the first President of the college.)

The point that is worth noting is that the original name (New Hall) was a ‘placeholder name’ and a descriptive name was chosen and reflects an avoidance of according value to any individual or event (Limit 1).

The second point worth noting is that the new name did not *solely* reflect the name of the benefactors’ family. The college’s first president’s name is also incorporated into the new name, and in fact comes *before* the name of the benefactors’ family name. This suggests that there is a balancing of the economic and ideological factors mentioned earlier: the new name indexes a balancing strategy (Limit 3).

The college’s website also highlighted consultation with alumnae (it is a women’s college), underlining the public aspect of renaming (Limit 2).

Simkins Hall

In contrast to the New Hall name change, my second case is a more vexed one. This involves a hall of residence at the University of Texas at Austin. It was named in 1954 after William Simkins, a law academic who was with the university in the years 1899-1928. In 2010, another law academic Thomas Russell published a paper that indicated Simkins’s involvement with the Ku Klux Klan as a Klansman who admitted to violence against freed slaves (Russell 2010a). He subsequently wrote an ‘op-ed’ piece in the University of Texas paper *The Horn* calling for *Simkins* to be removed from the name of the building (Russell 2010b).¹ This led to two public meetings where the university administration agreed to recommend a change of name, and by so doing accepted that the name of the Hall carried meaning that was no longer desirable (Limit 3) and acted within its powers to change it (Limit 4).

Therefore, in 2010, the hall was renamed Creekside Residence Hall, and the adjoining park had its name changed from Simkins Park to Creekside Park. There was therefore a shift from commemorative naming to descriptive naming (it lies beside a creek!), effectively moving in the opposite direction from the one in New Hall. The original naming had all the right cultural elements – the individual was academically eminent and had the relevant connection with the University. It was his moral eminence that was questioned: had the original namers been misled? Rather than considering another prominent person, commemorative naming was abandoned, a possible avoidance strategy (Limit 1).

Brophy (2011), in writing about the case, grumbled about the complete erasure of the earlier name in the Hall’s publicity material, in contrast to the New Hall case where the

¹ ‘Op ed’ is a North American term for an article *opposite* the *editorial* page to express the opinion of an individual not affiliated to the editorial board.

background to the name change is discussed in its website. Questions that could well be asked are:

- Is there a danger of forcing people to forget?
- Shouldn't commemorative naming also function like an artefact and point to historical predilections?

These questions point to a need to balance of different aspects of value including historical value (Limit 1).

Angsana College

Finally, we turn to an example in Singapore, which we could arguably class as a less 'mature' naming society because of its shorter history. In many of the current buildings of the National University of Singapore which began to be used in 1981, an alpha-numerical system prevails with a single or double letter prefix for the faculty and a digit to distinguish between buildings in the same faculty; therefore, Blocks AS1, AS2, etc. are buildings in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences; and E1, E2, etc. are buildings in the Faculty of Engineering. Perhaps this could be called a referential style of naming.

However, the building that has undergone a name change is one that forms part of the expansion programme of the National University of Singapore. In this particular set of buildings, a tropical trees theme has been developed for naming purposes. This constitutes a vague associative naming, indexing the region. This also represents a deliberate effort to name differently. The three buildings were initially named Angsana (Malay name of a tree native to the region), Cinnamon and Tembusu (another Malay name). Cinnamon is perhaps a little unfortunate because the public tends to be more familiar with the spice than the tree whose bark produces the spice.

However, as a result of a significant endowment resulted in a name change in January 2013, the college was renamed as the College of Alice and Peter Tan. This marks a switch to commemorative naming, with a clear economic motivation, although with a nod towards cultural rightness by referring to the children having gone through the university. The Singaporean newspaper *The Straits Times* reports, 'Citing the Tan family's request for privacy, it [the college website] only said in the online statement that "Mrs Tan's six children are all NUS alumni"' (Straits Times 2013).

The newspaper reports initial disgruntlement about the lack of a consultation process (Limit 2), and the lack of information about who Alice and Peter Tan are as this jeopardises the value and meaningfulness of the commemorative name (Limits 1 and 3). However, the university is of course within its rights to rename buildings in its campus (Limit 4).

The grumbles have since subsided, but these grumbles point towards expectations about commemorative naming, and questions continue to be asked:

- Is the ‘rightness’ of a naming that is purely economic in motivation questionable? Does Murray Edwards approach (of not solely employing the names of donors) soften it?
- Is there something about university buildings that makes it different from other buildings? The business model sits uneasily in a university context.
- Is there a contradiction in the request for privacy?

Quick Conclusions

In this article, I have tried to tease out acceptable limits to commemorative naming. These are not limits in a legal sense, but in terms of general acceptability. There can be variation to it in different cultural contexts and they could perhaps be prioritised differently. In the first two case studies discussed, there seems to be an attempt to keep these limits. The University of Cambridge, in the case of the New College renaming, seems to have resisted the business model of commemorative naming and did not introduce a commemorative name based solely on the donors’ names, and by so doing seems to have upheld the notion of cultural value for commemorative naming. The University of Texas, in the renaming of Simkins Hall, also reacted to the fact that the value accorded to the individual has changed and as a result have moved into an avoidance strategy by employing an alternative naming method. The Angsana College situation raises issues in terms of value and meaningfulness of the new name. Perhaps this just demonstrates priority accorded to the authority of the namer.

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