

# Pet Names as Seismographic Instruments in a Changing Society

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## Abstract

The present paper is based on a socio-onomastic study which focuses on the names of cats and dogs in Saxony-Anhalt (Germany). The aim of the study is twofold: firstly, to find out why pet owners use a certain name, and secondly, what people think about or associate with that name. Initially, a survey was conducted that included more than 600 questionnaires. Most of the data used here was collected from October 2012 to July 2013. Special emphasis was placed on linguistic and socio-onomastic strategies in the naming process. The results of the study reveal that the outlook on pets within a changing socio-cultural environment is reflected in the individual names given to them. There is, for example, a growing tendency towards humanization of the animal. In addition, pet owners increasingly project their dreams and longings onto the animal. The aim of the paper is to show developments of pet names from the viewpoint of two different trends: the deconstruction of traditional boundaries between humans and animals and the human-centred use of pet names to speak about the things which are important to *us*.

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## Introduction

Pets or companion animals – according to Belk the term *companion animal* ‘is more in vogue’ (1996: 123) – have lived with humans for thousands of years. Cats and dogs can be said to be prototypical examples of co-habiting animals.

With advancing technology and cultural developments their role and position in society has undergone a considerable change. The early associates of humans filled a variety of needs, many of which, such as hunting, guarding and providing warmth and companionship, related closely to survival. Today most humans no longer rely on animals to help them find food or provide them with physical warmth. However, animals are still in our homes. Keeping a pet is a voluntary behaviour, and the survival of this behaviour suggests a strong human-animal bond across time, change, and cultures (Staats *et al.* 2008: 279, Herzog 2010: 72-74).

Keeping a pet is also a form of behaviour that can meet basic, unchanging human needs such as the need for companionship. In addition, new human needs emerge in modern technological societies, among them the need to avoid loneliness, to keep active or cope with a hard time. Few would admit that they keep pets as toys or valuable property. For most of us pets such as cats and dogs have personalities that are distinctive and effective in their relationship with humans.

According to an old joke, quoted in Woodward and Bauer (2007: 169), dogs and cats can be understood by the basic manifestation of their world views. Regarding owners a dog thinks: ‘This person’s great. She feeds me, she pets me, and she plays with me. She must be a

god’! A cat, on the other hand, thinks: ‘This person’s great. She feeds me, she pets me, and she plays with me. I must be a god’!

It is in fact the name of an animal that transforms it into a pet, an individual with a personality, a member of the family – in short into something tangible for the owner, something onto which they can ‘project human traits’ (Belk 1996: 132). As Phillips (1994: 120) points out:

We produce biographies for some animals, and these are animals that we name: pets, race horses, prize bulls, Bambi. In giving an animal a name and using that name to talk to and about the creature, we interactively construct a narrative about an individual with unique characteristics, situated in a particular historical setting, and we endow that narrative with a coherent meaning.

This function of animal names is nicely described in Martin Amis’ novel *Money* (1984: 286) in which the narrator refers to his friend’s dog, a former street dog:

His name was *Shadow*, short for *Shadow That Comes in Sight*, an old Indian name, Apache or Cheyenne. I very much approved of this. You don’t want dogs called *Spot* or *Pooch*. You don’t want dogs called *Nigel* or *Keith*. The names of dogs should salute the mystical drama of the animal life. *Shadow* – that’s a good name.

The name thus plays a key role in the owner’s access to the mystery of their pet. This explains why participants in the present study, regardless of age, gender or social position, were more than willing to give information about naming their pets. The naming of animals does not take place in a vacuum and outside of society. And, in addition, pet owners increasingly project their dreams and longings onto the animal. In a way, pet names can thus be seen as seismographic instruments in a changing society.

## The Survey

The present paper is based on a socio-onomastic study which focused on the names of cats and dogs in Saxony-Anhalt (Germany). The aim of the study was twofold: firstly, to find out why pet owners use a certain name, and secondly, what people think about or associate with that name. Most of the data used here was collected from October 2012 to July 2013 (see Bergien 2015).

Initially, a survey was conducted that included more than 600 questionnaires. Special emphasis was placed on differences and similarities between cat and dog names. In addition, pet owners were asked to give examples of what they considered to be typical cat or dog names. In the study, official (registered) names were distinguished from unofficial names (for a more detailed distinction between official and unofficial cat names, see Felecan 2014). Especially cats and smaller dogs frequently have more than one unofficial name, as for

example in the case of a Chihuahua whose official name is *Chico* but who is also called *Schlumpi*, *Lutz*, *Zwerg* ('dwarf') or *Ratte* ('rat').

The first part of the survey included 230 questionnaires: 114 for dogs and 116 for cats. It is interesting to note that 184 out of 230 questionnaires were filled in by female pet owners, which in a way can be seen as a first result. In the second part of the survey, participants (with or without pets) were asked to evaluate three names each from the corpus of cat and dog names respectively. Participants were also asked to write down what they considered to be typical cat and dog names. In the following section I will concentrate on selected results and a few general observations.

## Results

The presentations in Figure 1 and 2 give an overview of naming categories in official and unofficial names. The category *Appellatives* refers to names with an appellative base, for example *Hummelchen*, *Biene*, *Hund*, *Komtess*, *Dicker* for dogs or *Kiwi*, *Mütze*, *Dicki*, *Bumminator*, *Katzilla* for cats. A few names (e.g. *Siys*) are opaque.

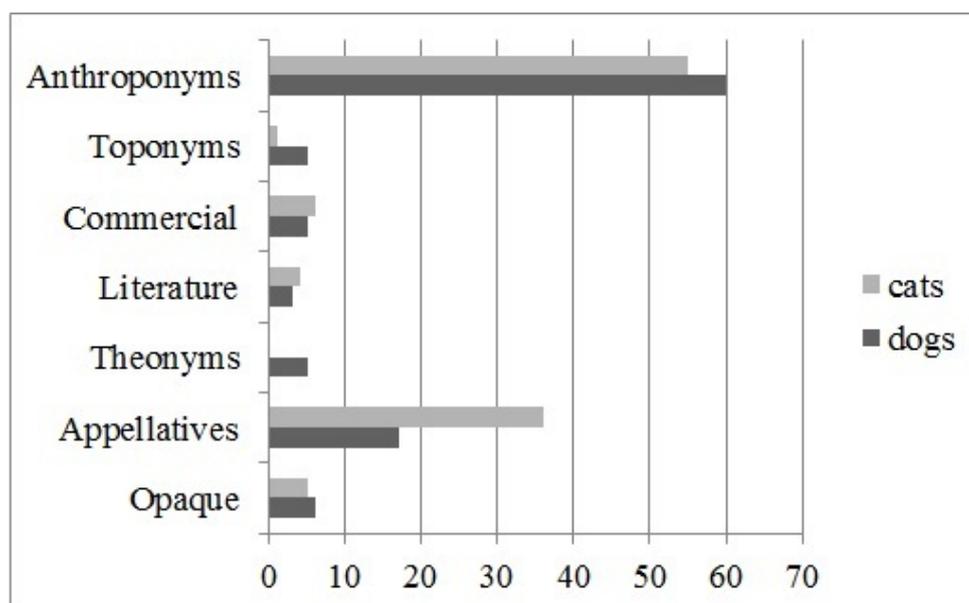


Fig. 1. Categories of official pet names according to origin (absolute figures)

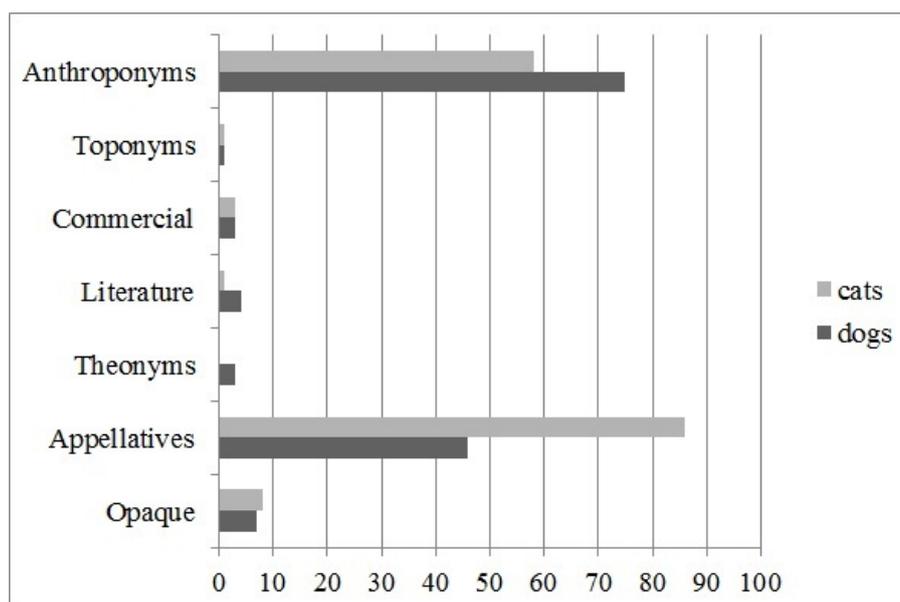


Fig. 2. Categories of unofficial pet names according to origin (absolute figures)

With regard to dog names, Figure 1 and 2 reveal that these names become more individual. There are only a few names such as *Jimmy* or *Bal(o)u* that occur more than once. In addition, there is a growing tendency towards anthropomorphism. This observation is supported by Schaab (2012) who studied more than 1000 dog names. Many names from the corpus of the present study can also be found in the top lists for children's names in Germany (e.g. *Paul*, *Lilli*, *Maja*, *Lenny*, *Max*). In most cases the name clearly specifies the sex of the dog. So, *Jimmy* is used for a male, *Lilli* for a female dog. The name *Charly*, however, is used for both, male and female dogs.

With cat names the results are slightly different. Cat names, too, become more individual, but multiple instances of individual names occur when the name is derived from an appellative base, for example *Krümel* ('crumb'), *Lucky*, *Miezi*.

The process of anthroponymization is slower compared to dog names. The reason is that names from an appellative base clearly dominate in the group of unofficial names. In addition, cat owners seem to be less strict when it comes to sex marking. One cat owner named her kitten *Adelheid*. When it became clear that she actually had a tom cat, the name *Adelheid* was nevertheless kept.

In contrast to dog names, cat names in the corpus under discussion frequently do not specify the sex of the animal. This may, among others, be related to the high frequency of diminutive forms ending in *-chen*, *-i* and *-lein* especially in cat names (*Lanachen*, *Moppelchen*, *Gingi*, *Schätzelein* (the exact translation would be 'little treasure')). It could be argued that this indicates a tendency towards seeing cats as something, maybe a soft toy, to cuddle and snuggle and thus taking away some of their independence and individual ('shadowy') character. Yet, it may also indicate enjoyment of animals in their infantile behaviour, their dependence on our care, and their capacity to create amusing chaos (Figure 3).

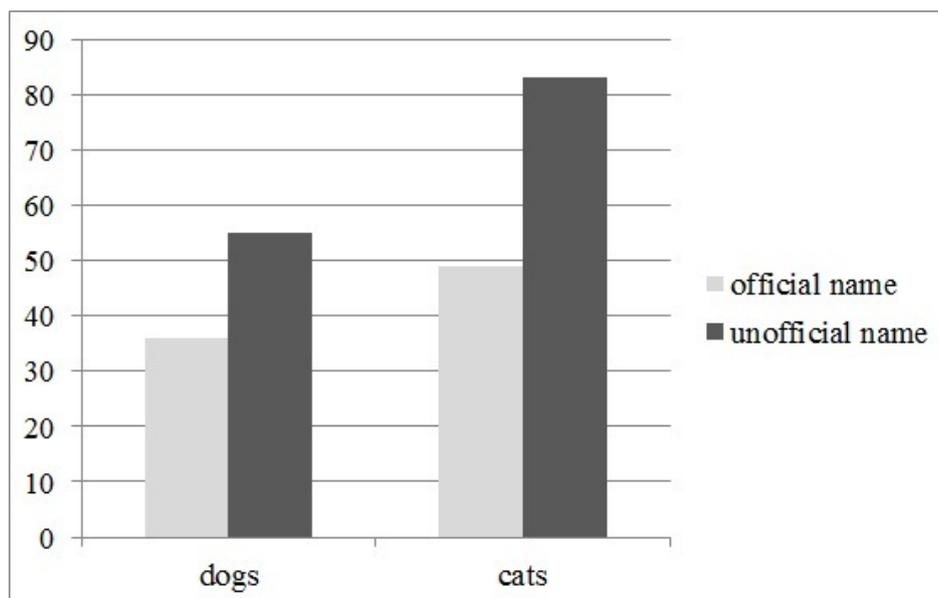


Fig. 3. Number of diminutive forms (absolute figures)

In both groups, cats and dogs, commercial names, such as *Red Bull*, *Ecstasy* (from ‘Ecstasy’) for cats; *Illy* and *Jack Daniels* for dogs, were less frequent than expected. This is especially interesting, since one third of the participants in the survey were younger than 18. This may support findings which indicate tendencies towards anthropomorphism and away from pets as property or valuable objects.

As to the reasons for the choice of names, physical characteristics are much more important for cat names compared to names of dogs (Figure 4). Aesthetic reasons may be sound symbolism, e.g. onomatopoeia or iconism, or general beauty (according to the taste of the pet owner) of the respective name.

The category *Other* refers to different criteria: one participant wrote, for example, that he named his Yorkshire Terrier *Leonid* because the dog’s eyebrows resemble those of former Soviet politician Leonid Brezhnev. This is, however, more than naming according to physical characteristics. Depending on the socio-cultural context and background knowledge of the name users, aspects like manners and temperament may also be involved in the construction of a metaphorical relation.

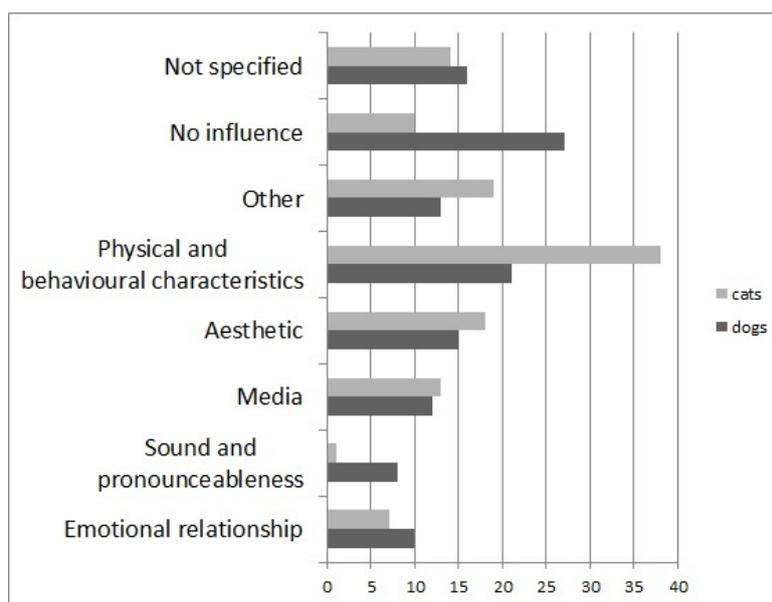


Fig. 4. Factors influencing name choice (absolute figures)

In the second part of the survey, participants (with or without pets) were asked to evaluate the following names according to their appropriateness as cat or dog names: *Oskar*, *Sergeant Felix*, *Rocky* for dogs and *Ecstasy*, *Hopsi* (from the verb ‘hop’) and *Red Bull* for cats. The overviews differentiate between male and female participants’ responses (Figure 5).

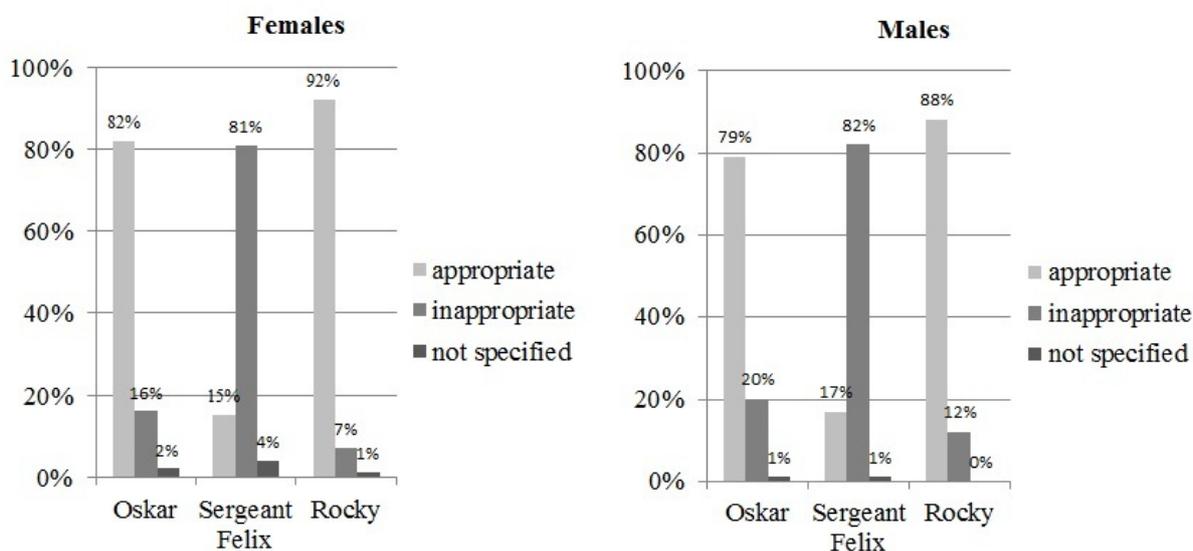


Fig. 5. Evaluation of selected dog names

There are clear decisions for *Rocky* and *Oscar* as appropriate dog names. The vote ‘inappropriate’ for *Sergeant Felix* is also very clear. *Felix* is traditionally considered a typical cat name, and *Sergeant* does not seem to fit a dog’s role as pet and companion. It is interesting to observe that dog names (perhaps with the exception of very small dogs), generally speaking, do not reflect ironic or humorous language use. This is different in cat names, where examples such as *Katzilla*, *Bumminator* or *Herr Lehmann* could be found.

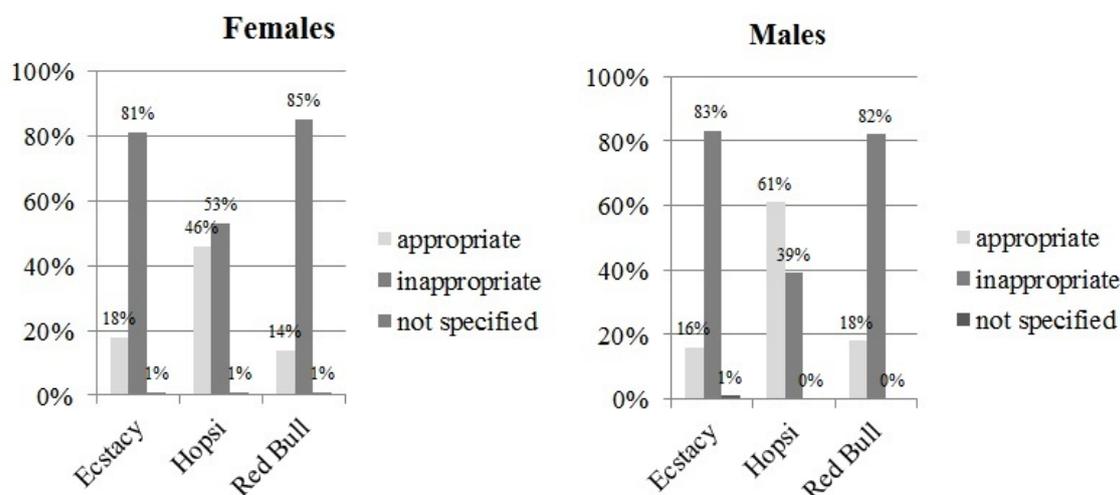


Fig. 6. Evaluation of selected cat names

Male and female participants agree in their rejection of *Ecstasy* and *Red Bull*. This may again support the fact that pets are not so much seen as property, but as companions. The only example in which male and female participants disagree is *Hopsi*. Unfortunately, participants did not have to give reasons for their decision. It would have been interesting to find out why male participants are more tolerant in this case (Figure 6). Participants were also asked to indicate what they considered typical cat or dog names. The most frequently mentioned names are listed in Table 1 (dog names) and Table 2 (cat names).

Male		Female	
Name	Number	Name	Number
Bello	96	Rex	86
Rex	79	Bello	76
Max	16	Rocky/Hasso	12

Table 2. Ranking of the most frequently mentioned dog names

Male		Female	
Name	Number	Name	Number
Kitty	39	Felix	39
Muschi	38	Muschi	26
Felix	35	Garfield	20

Table 3. Ranking of the most frequently mentioned cat names

The ranking lists show that *Bello*, *Rex*, *Max*, *Rocky* and *Hasso* are the most frequently mentioned names for dogs, and *Kitty*, *Felix*, *Muschi* and *Garfield* the most frequently mentioned names for cats. For the topic of the present study it is interesting to note that these names do obviously exist in our cultural memory, but with the exception of *Felix*, *Rex*, *Rocky*

and *Max*, which appear only one time each in the corpus (*Max* only as a cat name!), they are no longer used by pet owners.

Finally, the following 13 names are used for dogs as well as for cats, which indicates an interesting development away from typical dog or cat names (Table 3).

Name	Number (dogs)	Number (cats)
Bal(o)u	3	1
Benny/Benni	2	1
Carlo	1	1
Charly	4	1
Hugo	1	1
Jackie/Jacky	2	1
Lilli/Lilly	1	2
Mütze ('cap')	1	1
Püppi	1	1
Rocky	2	1
Susi	1	2
Teddy	2	1
Willy	1	1

Table 4. Names used for both cats and dogs

## Concluding Remarks

Pet names can be compared to seismographic instruments in that they signal profound changes in the human-animal bond. Today, we treat cats and dogs as companions or quasi-human equals rather than pets and we behave as guardians rather than owners, although these animals did not freely choose to be with us. We may even say that pets act as part of our extended self and their names thus reflect the way we view ourselves in the contemporary world.

The need for uniqueness and distinctiveness may lead to the complete disappearance of certain names from the lists of currently used names, which then paves the way for new and more expressive naming patterns. It remains to be seen if the inclusion of larger corpora from different regions reveals differences in this process.

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