A Remark on Social Semiotic Value of Personal Names in Selected Fiction Samples

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Abstract

This paper is intended as a comment on an area of sociolinguistic studies that is closely related to the topic of personal and social identity. It is based on an analysis of corpus comprising three 20th century British novels and on a subsequent field research. The main focus is on the symbolism that personal names and forms of address may carry in the current context of British society and, consequently, on the reflection of social hierarchy in general, and social class in particular on the way some personal names are perceived and used. From the theoretical perspective, this paper draws on Roger Fowler's (1996) concept of text as discourse, and Mikhail Bakhtin's (2008) heteroglossia, also incorporating the textual-functional perspective represented by the Prague Linguistic Circle as well as the work of M.A.K. Halliday. The ensuing analysis attempts to support the view that social indexicals as highly relevant agents in constructing our social reality can be successfully re-signified in reflexive acts of communication (cf Agha 2007).

Introduction

As the perspective adopted in the discussion presented herein is not only linguistic, but also to a large extent sociological, it should be first explained why the data used in this analysis are drawn from fiction samples rather than from more 'authentic' language sources such as everyday talk. I will therefore begin by clarifying the premise that text is a discourse and as such it is sufficiently authentic from the sociolinguistic point of view, before further elaborating on the subject matter of this paper.

It has been a well established linguistic fact that language variety should be investigated in all its functions (Jakobson 1960) and its full

potentiality (Mathesius 1983). Particularly since the 1980's, the language of literature has been considered a trustworthy source of authentic experience of the target culture (*cf* Kramsch and Kramsch 2000; Fowler 1996). I find it useful to first define what an authentic text is and briefly comment on the view that text should be treated as discourse. I agree with Crossley (2007), who defines an authentic text as 'a text originally created to fulfil a social purpose in the language community for which it was intended' (Crossley at al. 2007, 17). If we consider that a novel also fulfils the purpose of bringing to our attention new and alternative ideas that promote the negotiation of relevant and, possibly, controversial social issues in a given language community, then, I argue that it represents authenticity as convincingly as any other sample of language in use. Thus, the three novels I refer to in this paper can provide such authenticity.

To comment on the concept of text as discourse, I wish to refer to Fowler's (1996) seminal work on linguistic criticism, where he asserts that 'treating text as *discourse* stretches the capability of linguistics as presently constituted, taking us towards a theory of language in a full and dynamic sense, language functioning within historical, social, and rhetorical contexts' (Fowler 1996, 17). To include the aforementioned contexts, I chose the three novels I analyse not only on the basis of common characteristics, but also to incorporate historical aspects of social existence and to provide a fuller and more dynamic perspective.

Namely, the novels analysed here are *Room at the Top* (1963, RT in the following text) by John Braine, *Stars' Tennis Balls* (2001, STB in the following text) by Stephen Fry and *The Line of Beauty* (2004, LB in the following text) by Alan Hollinghurst. Symbolically, the time span between the first publications of these works coincides with the duration of the reign of Elizabeth II, a fact that might signal considerable differences in the social life of a community but that might also provide evidence of surprisingly little change in certain areas. The central theme in the three works discussed is the negotiation of identity and upward social mobility, therefore dealing with the issue of social class and hierarchy. Significantly, all three protagonists strive to become members of a higher social class and we are witnesses to how unsuccessful this endeavour proves to be.

Despite the above context, it is important not to read the protagonists' self-presentation as self-contained indicators of English

identity construction. My overall aim in this paper and elsewhere is to eventually contribute to the larger picture of how the written versions of personal experience reflect and also shape the socio-cultural realities of one language community. The general focus herein is on the English and the English socio-cultural background, excluding the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish social and cultural environment for the reasons of practicality, the scope of the data and the validity of the results. Another reason lies in the fact that British identity is typically assessed as institutional and inclusive, whereas the 'lesser', geographically more limited identities such as English can be more readily characterised as ethnic and exclusive, therefore in my view more yielding to analysis (*cf* Ichijo 2003).

The specific part of identity negotiation I have chosen to discuss in this paper concerns one of the most frequently used linguistic means of establishing social contact, i.e. the way we use names as forms of address. In the following text, I first comment on relevant theoretical resources to offer a broader context of this particular area of study. By describing the corpus gained from the three analysed novels and also by providing essential information about the authors, I intend to facilitate the understanding of the factors that shape social roles and motivate the actions of the protagonists in question. Before elaborating on the retrieved data and their interpretation, I outline the method I used, which consists of few easily replicable steps. For the purpose of clarity I include several graphs presenting the amassed data visually.

Since in this paper I am commenting on some sociological aspects of the life of a national community, I emphasise that I am constantly aware of my position as an outsider to British society. However, I suppose this challenge can be viewed positively as the necessary distance from the analysed object and an alternative sensitivity to the issues at hand. Moreover, as Fowler (1996) says, the role of the reader is almost as relevant as that of the author in 'producing' meaning. Therefore, my 'reader's' bias will be present throughout the following analysis bearing in mind that it is a condition *sine qua non*.

Theoretical Points of Departure

The synopsis presented here of the use and perception of personal names in selected discourse is highly practically oriented. Therefore the theoretical resources I refer to below form the necessary background of the current analysis, but do not directly relate to the method or data selection that is applied here. It should be emphasised that the general framework adopted in this paper is based on the *functional-textual* theories of language as opposed to the *structural-generative* ones. The tradition of the former was established in the 1930's by the Prague Linguistic Circle, and further elaborated on by M.A.K. Halliday (*cf* Halliday and Hasan 1989). Functional-textual theories generally focus on the reflection of the communicative needs of a community through the linguistic patterns it exploits. Structural-generative theories are defined by the psychological orientation of their approach to the human mind and the focus on cognition (*cf* Chomsky 1968).

To further support Fowler's (1996) concept of a text as discourse quoted above, I should refer to Bakhtin's view that literature is *dialogic* in its structure. This dynamic notion of texts is encompassed by, among others, the term *heteroglossia* (Bakhtin 2008), which suggests the multiplicity of voices one single character can and does adopt in communicative situations. *Heteroglossia* applies also to the ways individuals use their names and are addressed by others.

In their seminal paper, Brown and Gilman (1960) introduced the semantics of *power* and *solidarity*. The semantics of power occur in interactions where the participants use different pronouns of address (e.g. French singular *tu* and plural *vous*). It logically follows that the semantics of solidarity occur in interactions where the same pronouns of address are used. However, this concept does not apply to all languages equally, and neither does it apply to all forms of address. In such cases, the language user has to rely on contextual information and lexical forms of address other than personal pronouns. As the current analysis evidences, the particular variant of a person's name that the speaker chooses to use is another example of such non-pronominal expression of power or solidarity.

As I am dealing with the concept of social class, the field of social relations and social semiotics is of high importance. Agha's (2007) model of *reflexivity* in communication, based on effective re-signification of

traditional social indexical values, best describes the perspective here adopted in analysing the interactions presented herein.

Corpus Description

In his article on linguistics and poetics, Jakobson (1960) states that in poetry 'the internal form of a name, that is, the semantic load of its constituents, regains its pertinence.' (Jakobson 1960, 376). This concept can be applied equally in prose. In these particular fiction samples, the protagonists' names function as relevant parts of their original identity but might not accurately correspond with the new, desired identity. Thus, we can witness similar pertinence in the semantic load the names carry as if they had been used in poetry. Also, due to this potential discrepancy between the original and desired identity markers, a name can provide the addresser with a relatively powerful tool to belittle the addressee (be it even the name-holder addressing himself). As the data presented below show, names are in some situations used as such tools.

To begin with, I wish to briefly introduce the three authors whose works are here analysed. All the three novels can be, to a certain extent, considered autobiographical, thus the lives of their authors might offer a useful insight.

John Braine was born in 1922 (died in 1986) in Bradford, West Yorkshire. He spent most of his youth at the place he was born. He became a librarian and did his war service in the navy. *Room at the Top* was his first novel and it was published only in 1957, although its first synopsis was ready and rejected in 1951. The original name of the book had been 'Born Favourite' and the name of the protagonist was changed from Bob Mayne to Joe Lampton in the published work (Dover 1998). Whether the title change contributed to a more positive reaction from the publisher isn't clear, nevertheless, the novel was accepted for publication four years later.

Steven Fry is an actor and writer. He was born in 1957 in Hampstead, London in the family of an English scientist. His mother is Austrian of Jewish descent. When he was young his family moved to Norfolk, where he grew up. He obtained a degree in English from Queen's College in Cambridge.

Alan Hollinghurst was born in Stroud, Gloucestershire in 1954 in a family of a bank manager. He studied English at Magdalen College in Oxford, where he also became a lecturer. Later, he lectured at University College London and joined The Times Literary Supplement to work there as a deputy editor.

To offer the necessary background information on the protagonists of the novels, I will now briefly refer to the narrative time frames of the respective works and to the basic demographic facts. The protagonist of RT (*Room at the Top*) is called Joe Lampton and was born in 1922. He comes from Dufton and moves to Warley. There is a real village of Dufton in Cumbria, however, it was suggested by Dover (1998) that the fictive town of Dufton is actually based on Barnsley in South Yorkshire. At the time of the story Lampton is twenty-five and is employed as a civil servant. He was brought up in poverty by working-class parents. The narrative time frame of the novel is September 1947 to September 1948. The quote below documents Joe's personal view on his origin:

> [RT 16] The possession of charm wasn't in itself a guarantee of success, but it seemed to follow ambition like a pilot fish. It wasn't a highly esteemed quality in Dufton, though. Bluntness was the fashion; as Charles said, everyone behaved as if they were under contract to live up to the tradition of the outspoken Yorkshirman with a heart of gold underneath a rough exterior. The worst of it was, he'd add, that underneath the rough exterior their hearts were as base and vicious as anyone's from the Suave and Treacherous South. (18)

The protagonist of STB (*Stars' Tennis Balls*) is called Ashley Barson-Garland[2] and was born in 1963. He comes from Manchester and, thanks to his friendship with a son of an MP, moves to Kensington - London. His roots, however, are in North-West London, where he spent his childhood. When the story begins he is a student of about seventeen years of age. He grew up in a lower-middle class family. The narrative time frame of the

story is June 1980 to autumn 1999. Below, Ashley comments on his family roots:

> [STB 20]   The Move North, that was another nail in the coffin. Another element of the Terrible Mistake. Your dad died and Mum got a job teaching at a deaf school in Manchester. Dad had been an officer. In the RAF, it grieves you to admit, not in a smart army regiment. He never flew, so there was no romance to him. [...] Then he died of complications from diabetes, a rather bourgeois, not to say proletarian disease, and you, your mum and your sister Carina moved north. (Carina! Carina, for God's sake! What kind of name is *that*? [...] There's a world of difference between saying, 'Have you met the Lady Carina Fitzalan-Howard?' and 'This is Carina Garland.') (30)

Nick Guest is the protagonist of LB (*The Line of Beauty*) and was also born in 1963. Nick Guest comes from Barwick (a small town either in Devon or Somerset, not specified in the book). As Ashley, thanks to his own friendship with a son of an MP, he moves to Kensington Park Gardens in London – symbolically into a room under the roof. At the beginning of the story Ashley is a twenty-year-old student. The narrative time frame of this novel is the summer of 1983 to 1987. The following quote exemplifies Nick's identity negotiation:

> [LB 11] ... when he told Leo that his father was an antiques dealer the two words, with the patina of old money and the flash of business, seemed to combine in a dull glare of privilege. Among his smart Oxford friends Nick managed to finesse his elbow-patched old man, with Volvo estate full of blanket-wrapped mirrors and Windsor chairs, into a more luminous figure, a scholar and friend of the local aristocracy. (33)

As might be clear from the above overview, all the three protagonists are presented throughout a certain time span that shows their personal development. This is emphasised by individual language change – in

direct speech as well as in meta-commentary (Joe Lampton within one year, Nick Guest within four years, and Ashley Barson-Garland over 20 years). This development, as can be expected, brings about different forms of address as the stories unfold.

Focusing specifically on *naming* in the analysed corpus, I wish to describe in greater detail what has motivated the use of some of the names. Fry (2001) had allegedly almost completed his novel (STB), when he realised his story was more or less a modern version of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Based on this revelation he decided to change all the characters' names into anagrams of the names of characters in the original Dumas novel. The following table has been adapted from Wikipedia's entry on Stephen Fry[1]:

Table 1: Naming of Characters in STB

Monte Cristo	Stars' Tennis Balls	STB Role
Baron Danglars	**ASHLEY** Barson-Garland (anagram)	Ned's classmate responsible for his abduction
Edmond Dantes	**NED** Maddstone (anagram)	classmate of Ashley
Monte Cristo	**SIMON** Cotter	Ned's second name after he returns from the imprisonment
Caderousse	Rufus Cade (translation)	Ned's and Ashley's classmate, involved in Ned's abduction
De Villefort	Oliver Delft (anagram)	detective unlawfully placing Ned in a mental hospital

Ashley comments on his own name and its 'strategic' alteration as follows:

> [STB 23] I shall add my mother's maiden name of Barson. Why not? *They* have been doing it for years. I shall be Barson-

Garland. It has a ring, I think. Damn it, I could triple-barrel myself. Barson-Barson-Garland, how would that be? A *little* too much, I think. But Barson-Garland I like. It palliates the Ashley, makes it almost tolerable. (31-32)

In the other two novels no explicit information on naming was available, therefore the names used therein will be commented upon in the analytical part of this paper.

Method and Hypothesis

Initially, the corpus was delimited by extracting all the textual discourse that pertains to identity negotiation. This was determined based on the reoccurring key words topically related to the expressions of personal or social identity. This corpus was further analysed for the occurrence of personal names. All forms of address referring to the protagonists were listed and categorised. The categorisation was stratified along two essential criteria: the level of formality expressed by the form of address and the particular person (and their status) that is addressing the protagonist. Based on this, the elementary statistic data were obtained.

In the next part of the analysis these data were compared to the social reality and background of the protagonists, and preliminary results were drawn. As these were based on my subjective assessment, I designed a simple questionnaire, the purpose of which was to verify or disqualify a part of the preliminary interpretation concerning the names of selected characters. The questionnaire was aimed at British native-speakers born or living in England. Respondents were presented with a set of names of characters from all three novels and were asked to express their 'rating' of each name, matching it with a particular social class or a community (see below in Table 2). They were not informed these were names of fictional characters, nor were they aware of the three respective novels and the narrative context. The names were chosen based on the relevance of the characters in the narratives and on the frequency of their occurrence. Eventually, they were asked to rate their own name.

Here, I find it necessary to emphasise that what is essentially being assessed is the authors' choice of naming and forms of address and the authenticity thereof. In other words, I attempt to determine whether

these choices accurately reflect the social reality and status of the protagonists in the eyes of the reading public.

Therefore, my primary hypothesis asserts the following:

If a name of a fiction character is assigned successfully, i.e. credibly, to symbolise his/her respective social class membership, the perception of the name's intended social semiotic value is not contingent on the narrative context.

Data and Interpretation

To begin with, the primary data obtained in the first part of my analysis are presented below. Further on, the secondary data obtained from the questionnaires are described. All the characters and their names, respectively, that appear in the following discussion were chosen based on their narrative relevance. The relevance was judged both qualitatively, in terms of the intimacy of their relationship to the protagonist, and quantitatively, in terms of the frequency of occurrence. Eventually, both the primary and secondary data are compared to offer more conclusive results.

Throughout the whole analysed corpus, Joe Lampton (RT) is addressed 163 times, Nick Guest (LB) is addressed 78 times, and Ashley Barson-Garland (STB) 29 times. The following diagrams show the most salient frequency (vertical axis), authorship (listed in the box) and form (horizontal axis) of personal reference to Joe, Nick and Ashley in the order of occurrence in the texts. The captions under the diagrams explain the abbreviated forms of address:
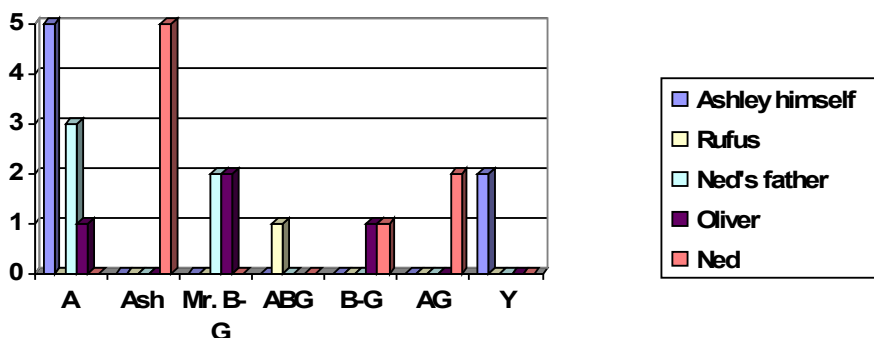
Figure 1: Forms of Address – Joe Lampton (RT)
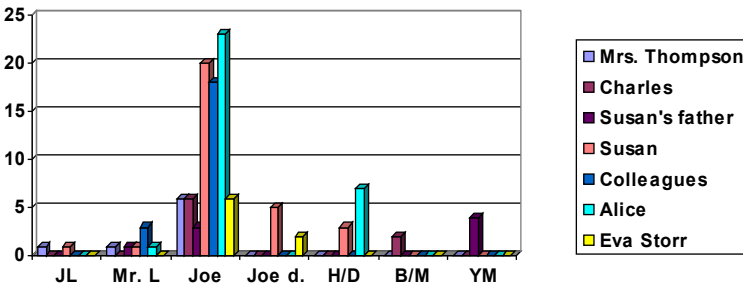
NB: JL - Joe Lampton, Mr.L - Mr. Lampton, Joe d. - Joe darling, H/D – Honey, Darling, Dearest, B/M – (Old) boy/man, YM – Young man.

Figure 2: Forms of Address – Nick Guest (LB)
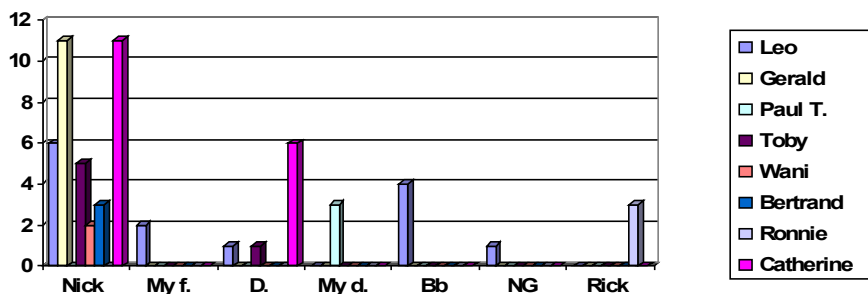
NB: My f. – my friend, D. - darling, My d. – my dear, Bb – baby/babe, NG – Nicholas Guest.

Figure 3: Forms of Address – Ashley Barson-Garland (STB)

NB: A - Ashley, Mr. B-G – Mr. Barson Garland, ABG – Ashley Barson Garland, B-G – Barson Garland, AG – Ashley Garland, Y – you poor sap/you cheap, creepy, sad.

The first fact that brings itself to attention is the discrepancy between the number of instances of personal address in the three novels. The highest number (163) relates to Joe Lampton, Nick Guest is addressed roughly 50% less frequently, and Ashley Barson-Garland is directly approached by a different character only with 20% of Joe's

frequency. This fact can be quite easily explained by their different roles in the stories. Joe comes to live and work in a new town, where he does not know anybody. Moreover, he soon meets two lovers with whom he maintains close relationships. For Nick, the situation differs only in the detail that the family he lodges with is already very well known to him, therefore there is no need to be referring to him formally and, as well, the frequency of personal introduction is reduced. Most of Ashley's discourse stems from his internal dialogue, hence the lack of personal address.

The different social roles that are documented by the presented forms of address can be specifically described as follows. For Joe, his roles are: lodger (Mrs. Thompson), best friend (Charles), a daughter's lover (Susan's father), lover (Susan and Alice), colleague and flirting friend (Eva Storr). For Nick, his roles are: lover (Leo and Wani), a son's friend, later a daughter's companion (Gerald), classmate (Paul T.), college friend (Toby), a son's colleague (Bertrand), drug purchaser (Ronnie) and household friend (Catherine). For Ashley, the roles are more limited: his own alter-ego, college friend (Rufus), assistant researcher (Ned's father), suspect, business partner (Oliver) and classmate (Ned).

When we look at the degree of formality expressed through addressing the protagonist in relation to the occurring roles, we can observe that the reader's expectations are fully met (see Figure 1, 2, and 3 above). The most significant examples can be illustrated by the instances on the extreme ends of the formality-familiarity scale. In addressing Joe (RT), these would be represented by Mrs. Thompson (the role of a lodger) using the form 'Mr. Lampton' at their first encounter, and on the other hand by Alice (the role of lover) using various terms of endearment. The most formal way of addressing is given below, however, within one conversation the *tenor* (Halliday 1985) changes to show solidarity rather than distance (emphasis mine):

> [RT 4] 'I'll call you <u>Mr Lampton</u> if you like,' she said, 'but I'd rather call you <u>Joe</u>.' [...] 'And my name is <u>Joan</u>,' she added.
> 'That'll be fine, <u>Joan</u>,' I said. And from then on I always used her Christian name; though, oddly enough, I never thought of her as anything else but <u>Mrs Thompson</u>. (9)

In Nick's case (LB), the most striking result appears in relation to his long-term lover and employer Wani, who addresses directly him only once. This could be caused by many factors. Apart from Wani's personal traits, among which self-obsession stands out most, his family background makes him a member of a class well above Nick's; this is not to mention Wani's carefully concealed sexual orientation.

Ashley (STB) is addressed with limited frequency for the reasons stated above. Nevertheless, in his case the data show the widest stylistic range out of the three studied corpora. The reason might lie in the manner most of his internal dialogue is recorded in, i.e. his diary. If we refer to the influence the *mode* (Halliday 1985), or the channel of communication, can exert on the produced discourse, we could assume that the more diverse stylistic range in STB is an example of higher lexical density occurring typically in written language as opposed to higher syntactic complexity occurring in the spoken language (Halliday 1985). The scale is delimited on the formal end by Ned's father, a conservative MP, calling Ashley 'Mr. Barson-Garland' and on the familiarity end by Ashley addressing himself in a deprecating manner (see Figure 3 above). To illustrate, the given example displays similar shift from distance to solidarity as in the quote from RT above (emphasis mine):

> [STB 37] 'Very good of you to join us, <u>Mr Barson-Garland</u>,' said <u>Sir Charles</u>, shaking my hand in courtly style. 'How absurd of me, I can't keep calling you that. Ned hasn't told me your Christian name.'
> '<u>Ashley</u>, sir,' I said, as Ned buried himself in confusion and the menu.   (69)

Having commented on the primary data, I will now proceed to describe the secondary data represented by the answers to the name questionnaire. My respondents all come from England and currently hold jobs in the Czech Republic. They are in their 30's, all hold university degrees and see themselves as members of the middle-class (most of them rated their own names as being associated with this particular class or otherwise rated them as neutral). When asked what criterion they personally use to decide on class membership, all of them listed two

criteria as the most relevant: education and the type of professional career.

Originally, there were thirty respondents, however, as I did not clearly instruct them to give only one rating for each name, two thirds of the questionnaires brought ambiguous data. As such, they can be highly informative, nevertheless, since my mini-research was primarily aimed at verifying the response to the authenticity of the chosen names, I eventually decided to include only those questionnaires that provide unambiguous answers.

Table 2 below presents the six categories (horizontal axis) that were used in the questionnaire as a rating scale for the respondents' answers. Each row presents the rating rendered by one respondent (referred to by an acronym in the leftmost column). The colour-coding of the names serves the purpose of easy identification of the particular novel they belong to as marked in the heading. The number of the individual names representing each novel is based on the most frequent character occurrences in the original texts, however, all three corpora are not equally represented. This inconsistency is dealt with in the following Name Questionnaire Data graphs (see Figure 4 and 5 below) where the number of names per novel was reduced to the three most frequent to show the class rating by respondents in a more accessible manner. These selected names are underlined in the table below.

Table 2: Name Questionnaire Overview (RT, STB, LB)

	LOWER class	Class-NEUTRAL/ Universal	MIDDLE Class	UPPER-MIDDLE Class	UPPER Class	Regional/ Ethnic
A		Simon Gordon Ashley Nick Catherine Rachel Joe Susan		Toby Gerald Alice	Edward Rufus Portia	Antoine Leo
S		Simon Joe Alice Susan	Nick Catherine Rachel	Ashley Toby Gerald	Edward Gordon Rufus Portia Leo	Antoine
J M	Joe Gordon Rachel Alice Susan	Simon Ashley Gerald	Nick Catherine Toby Leo		Edward Portia Antoine Rufus	
R	Joe		Nick Alice Susan Gordon	Catherine Toby Leo Rachel	Edward Simon Ashley Rufus Portia Gerald Antoine	
P K	Rachel	Simon Nick Catherine Joe Susan			Edward Ashley Rufus Portia Toby Leo	Gordon Alice Gerald Antoine
C	Joe Susan		Gordon Nick Toby Leo Gerald Rachel Alice	Edward	Simon Ashley Catherine	Rufus Portia Antoine
J P	Susan	Simon Nick Catherine Gerald Joe	Ashley	Gordon Rachel Alice	Edward Rufus Portia Toby Leo	Antoine
K	Ashley	Nick Catherine Rachel Joe Susan	Edward Simon Gordon	Rufus Gerald Alice	Portia Toby Leo Antoine	
P J			Ashley Gordon Nick Leo Rachel Joe Susan	Edward Simon Catherine Toby Antoine Alice	Gerald	Rufus Portia
R S	Joe		Nick Alice Susan Gordon	Catherine Toby Leo Rachel	Edward Simon Ashley Rufus Portia Gerald	Antoine

For increased clarity, the following two graphs simplify the secondary data. First, Figure 4 presents the three most frequently occurring names from each novel and their ratings. From RT these are Joe and his two lovers Susan and Alice; from LB Nick, his friend Catherine and her father Gerald; from STB Ashley, his classmate Edward and Edward's assumed name Simon after an identity change. Second, Figure 5 illustrates the respondents rating of the names of the three protagonists.
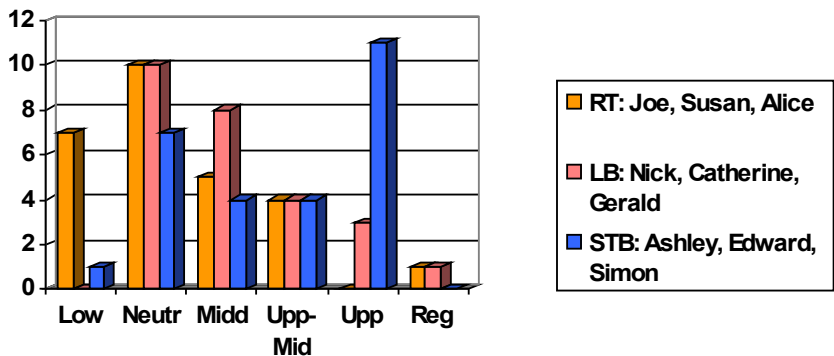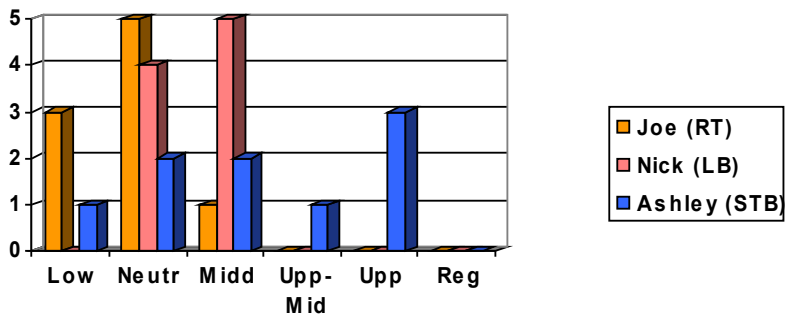
Figure 4: Name Questionnaire Data - Overview

RT: Joe, Susan, Alice

LB: Nick, Catherine, Gerald

STB: Ashley, Edward, Simon

Figure 5: Name Questionnaire Data – Protagonists

Joe (RT)
Nick (LB)
Ashley (STB)

Returning to Table 2, if we regard the dividing vertical line in the middle of the chart as the dividing line between the lower and higher social classes herein represented, our first observation about the differences between the analysed corpora could be that STB names occur most often in the higher classes (upper), RT names typically occupy the lower rungs, with LB names distributed more evenly around the mid-section. Although this is only a superficial estimate, when correlated to the narrative context and the social roles of the given characters, results from the concomitant survey may be predicted.

It should not be surprising that all the respondents agreed on the relevance of the name-holder's personal choice of a name variant over the original form of the name itself in terms of self-presentation. To illustrate,

the name of one of the LB characters is Catherine, and she and her family choose to use this particular variant of her name. Her father is an MP, her mother comes from an aristocratic family. We could, thus, assume that Catherine is upper/upper-middle class.

When my respondents were asked to rate the name Catherine, they agreed it is a class-neutral name, however, depending on the particular variant chosen by the holder, the semantic load can change in its perception from neutral to more class-specific. If Catherine chooses to use the full form of her name, it was assessed as representing upper-class membership rather than being neutral or evidencing to the lower class status. A similar situation occurred with the name Edward, where all agreed it was an upper class name (possibly with royal associations). Nevertheless when used in an abbreviated form such as Ed, or Ned, it was perceived as universal or neutral. This particular tendency seems to be typical for the analysed samples.

The two highest scores for each corpus always include the 'neutral' category (see Figure 4 and 5), which could confirm the above mentioned respondents' pre-conception of a name being perceived either as neutral or class-bound based on the degree of formality associated with its use. Thus names such as Catherine might have caused a certain hesitation in answering the questionnaire, resulting in the name being classified as 'neutral'.

When relating the questionnaire results to the social class of the protagonists, I find it most useful to focus on Figure 5. Joe, who is working class, has a name that is perceived as neutral or working class. Nick, who is lower-middle class, is perceived as having middle class or neutral name, and Ashley, who is also lower-middle class, is perceived as having an upper class or neutral name. The perception of the name Ashley displays more diversity than any other name in the questionnaire. Interestingly enough, Ashley is the only character that explicitly comments on his own name:

> [STB 5]   Maybe your name, the name you hated so much, the name that shamed you, that you had believed to be so *middle class*, maybe, if one of *them* shared it with you, maybe it was an all right name after all. Could it be that 'Ashley' was, in fact, upper middle class, or even – you never know – *aristocratic*? (22)

> [STB 15]   Mother and Father gave you that name. And
> the criminal part of it is that, as a name, it's only *just* off.
> Roy or Lee or Kevin or Dean or Wayne, they're the real
> thing. *Echt Lumpenproletariat*. Dennis and Desmond and
> Leonard and Norman and Colin and Neville and Eric are
> revolting, but they are honest. *Ashley*, though. It's a
> Howard or a Lindsay or a Leslie kind of name. It's *nearly*
> there. And that, surely, is the saddest thing of all. (27)

Were we to believe that Fry was naming his characters based on
their counterparts in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and that Ashley Barson-
Garland's name is an anagram of baron Danglar, this naming strategy
would concern only the surname. In that case, my data seem to suggest
that the author was remarkably successful in choosing a name that
evokes rather ambiguous class associations. The two above quotations
might stand as a proof that creating this impression was the author's
original intention.

Conclusions

To summarise, the aim of this brief paper on the social semiotic value of
personal names used in selected fiction samples was to determine
whether in the analysed corpus personal names can function as
diacritical of social class and status, and whether they are perceived as
such independently of the narrative context. The premise on which the
analysis is based is that if a fiction character is named successfully, i.e.
credibly from the reader's perspective and supporting the image of a
particular social status, the character's name should be perceived as
displaying this intended social semiotic value even when judged
independently of any narrative or class context. This hypothesis seems to
be proven valid by both the primary and secondary data as shown
above.

Concerning the diachronic perspective referred to in the
introduction, the obtained results suggest that the time span between the
first publications of the analysed novels does not seem to have any

considerable impact on the perception of names as symbols in the system of social hierarchy.

Another significant result the data seem to convey is on the question of the *potentiality* (*cf* Mathesius 1983) of certain personal names being perceived as class-neutral. Based on the results presented above, we might assume that personal names function as social indexicals and as such they are highly relevant agents in the process of negotiating our social and personal identity. The semantic potentiality of certain class-neutral names can be exploited in specific contexts determined particularly by the level of formality obtaining between communication participants. As was illustrated above (see Table 2), names such as Catherine or Edward might be examples of such class-neutral names when judged as discrete symbols. However, once a specific form of the name is chosen, it acquires new social connotations and thus allows for possible re-signification of the social semiotic value that was initially neutral.

Notes

[1] Based on Wikipedia entry on Stephen Fry, [accessed 2 August, 2006], available at: < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Stars%27_Tennis _Balls>

[2] The actual protagonist is Ned Maddstone, however, as Ashley equals Ned in narrative relevance and as he is the character I analyse, I refer to him as the protagonist.

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