

COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF GERMAN ANTHROPONYMS

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Abstract: Anthroponyms, or personal names, are traditionally viewed in onomastics as rigid designators with minimal semantic content. However, from a cognitive linguistics perspective, German anthroponyms—encompassing forenames (Vornamen) and surnames (Familiennamen)—reveal rich conceptual structures, motivational patterns, and sociocultural embeddings. This article examines German anthroponyms through frameworks of cognitive semantics, conceptual metaphor theory, and prototype theory. It analyzes how etymological origins (occupational, locative, patronymic, descriptive) reflect historical conceptualizations of identity, social roles, and environment. A table categorizes common motivational sources with frequency estimates based on contemporary distributions. Findings indicate that while modern usage treats anthroponyms as proper names, residual appellative meanings influence perception, connotation, and occasional metonymic extensions. Implications for cognitive onomastics highlight anthroponyms as windows into cultural cognition and historical worldview.

Key words: Cognitive linguistics, anthroponyms, German onomastics, proper names, conceptual motivation, surname etymology.



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Proper names, particularly anthroponyms (personal names including forenames and surnames), have long been a boundary case in linguistic theory. Classical philosophies of language, from Mill (1843) to Kripke (1980), treat them as rigid designators devoid of descriptive meaning. Yet, cognitive linguistics challenges this view by emphasizing that all linguistic units, including proper names, are grounded in human conceptualization and experience (Langacker, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

In German-speaking contexts, anthroponyms exhibit particularly rich historical and motivational layers due to late surname fixation (around the 12th–15th centuries) and diverse etymological sources (Kunze & Nübling, 2012). Surnames often derive transparently from occupations (e.g., Schmidt 'smith'), locations (e.g., Berg 'mountain'), patronymics (e.g., Petersen

'son of Peter'), or physical traits (e.g., Klein 'small'). Forenames, influenced by Christian, Germanic, and modern trends, carry connotative loadings tied to cultural prototypes.

This article applies cognitive semantic tools to German anthroponyms, exploring how their origins reflect conceptual schemas, how residual meanings affect mental representation, and how they participate in broader cognitive processes like categorization and metaphor. Drawing on the Digitales Familiennamenwörterbuch Deutschlands (German Surname Atlas) project and related studies, it argues that German anthroponyms are not semantically empty but encode fossilized conceptualizations of identity and society.

Theoretical Framework: Cognitive Approaches to Proper Names

Cognitive linguistics posits that meaning arises from embodied experience and conceptual structures (Evans & Green, 2006). Proper names, while primarily referential, retain traces of appellative origins, creating a gradient between proper and common nouns (Van Langendonck, 2007).

Key concepts include:

- **Motivational transparency** — Many surnames remain motivated by their source domain (e.g., occupational names evoke prototypes of labor).
- **Prototype effects** — Names cluster around central exemplars; e.g., Müller as the prototypical German surname.
- **Conceptual blending** — In compounds or modifications (e.g., Berliner for someone from Berlin), spatial and personal concepts blend.
- **Metonymy and metaphor** — Surnames like Fuchs ('fox') metonymically extend to traits (cunning), though rarely in modern usage.

In German, the definite article's variable use with proper names (e.g., der Rhein vs. Rhein) reflects construal: uniqueness vs. type instantiation (Schmuck, 2013).

Motivational Categories in German Surnames

German surnames predominantly fall into four etymological-motivational classes, reflecting medieval social cognition: roles (occupations), origins (places), lineage (patronymics), and attributes (descriptive).

Category	Motivational Source	Examples	Approximate Frequency (%) in Modern Germany*	Conceptual Reflection
Occupational	Profession or trade	Müller (miller), Schmidt	~35%	Social roles and labor as identity core

		(smith), Schneider (tailor)		
Locative/Toponymic	Place of origin or residence	Berg (mountain), Bach (brook), Berliner	~25%	Spatial grounding of self
Patronymic	Father's name (often with suffixes)	Petersen, Johnson (non-German influence), Meier (farm steward)	~20%	Kinship and lineage primacy
Descriptive/Nickname	Physical or character traits	Klein (small), Groß (large), Schwarz (black)	~15%	Embodiment and observable traits
Other (e.g., ornamental, adopted)	Miscellaneous	Rosenthal (rose valley), Stein (stone)	~5%	Aesthetic or symbolic extensions

Table 1. Primary motivational categories of German surnames *Estimates based on data from the Digitales Familiennamenwörterbuch Deutschlands (Kunze & Nübling, ongoing; cf. Kunze, 2004). Frequencies vary regionally.

These categories illustrate cognitive schemas: occupations dominate, suggesting a medieval worldview where work defined personhood. Locative names highlight migration and territorial ties, aligning with image schemas of CONTAINER and PATH (Johnson, 1987).

Cognitive Processing and Connotations

Though desemantized in reference, surnames retain associative potential. Psycholinguistic studies show implicit activation of source meanings (e.g., Richter 'judge' evokes authority) (Valentine et al., 1996). In social cognition, names like Kevin (perceived as lower-class in contemporary Germany) demonstrate stereotype embodiment (Gerhards & Hans, 2009).

Forenames exhibit prototype effects: biblical names (e.g., Maria, Johann) prototype traditionality, while international ones (e.g., Sophie, Lucas) signal modernity. Conceptual metaphors occasionally emerge, e.g., names evoking nature (Rose, Wolf) metaphorically mapping HUMAN IS ANIMAL/PLANT.

Discussion: Implications for Cognitive Onomastics

This study supports the growing body of research in cognitive onomastics that challenges the traditional view of anthroponyms as semantically inert labels. While German personal names function primarily as referential devices in contemporary discourse, their diachronic structure

reveals stable conceptual motivations that continue to influence cognitive processing, social perception, and cultural interpretation.

From a cognitive-semantic perspective, the dominance of occupational and locative surnames reflects a historically grounded model of identity formation in which social function and spatial belonging constituted primary cognitive anchors. This aligns with embodied and experiential accounts of meaning construction, where repeated interaction with work-related and environment-based schemas shaped naming practices. The prevalence of names such as Müller, Schmidt, or Berg suggests that medieval German-speaking communities conceptualized personal identity not as an abstract individual trait but as a relational construct embedded in labor, place, and social networks. The analysis further demonstrates that residual appellative meanings, though largely backgrounded in everyday usage, remain cognitively accessible. Implicit associations linked to surnames—such as authority (Richter), strength (Wolf), or modesty (Klein)—can surface in evaluative judgments, humor, and literary discourse. This supports psycholinguistic evidence that proper names activate associative semantic networks, even when speakers consciously treat them as arbitrary. Such findings challenge rigid designator theories by revealing a gradient rather than categorical boundary between proper and common nouns.

Forenames, in particular, exhibit strong prototype effects shaped by historical, religious, and socio-cultural trends. The contrast between traditional biblical names and globally circulating modern names illustrates how anthroponyms participate in contemporary processes of social indexing. Naming choices thus operate as cognitive and cultural signals, encoding generational identity, social aspirations, and ideological orientation. In this sense, anthroponyms function as semiotic interfaces between individual identity and collective cognition.

Moreover, regional morphological patterns in surnames—such as patronymic suffixes in northern Germany versus locative formations in the south—highlight the interaction between language, geography, and conceptual categorization. These variations suggest that anthroponymic systems not only preserve historical linguistic structures but also reflect regionally specific modes of social cognition.

Conclusion. This study demonstrates that German anthroponyms, when examined through the lens of cognitive linguistics, emerge as conceptually motivated and culturally embedded linguistic units rather than semantically empty designators. Their etymological origins encode historically situated conceptualizations of identity based on occupation, place, kinship, and embodied traits, revealing how naming practices mirror collective worldviews. Although modern language use largely neutralizes the descriptive content of personal names, cognitive residues persist

in perception, evaluation, and cultural discourse. These residual meanings contribute to stereotype formation, prototype effects, and occasional metaphorical or metonymic extensions, confirming that anthroponyms remain integrated within broader conceptual networks. The findings thus reinforce the view that proper names occupy an intermediate position on the lexicon–grammar continuum, combining referential stability with latent semantic structure.

By integrating cognitive semantics with onomastic analysis, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of naming as a dynamic interface between language, cognition, and culture. It highlights the value of anthroponyms as historical archives of social knowledge and as active participants in contemporary meaning-making processes. Future research may extend this approach through experimental methods, cross-linguistic comparison, or corpus-based studies of discourse usage, further illuminating the cognitive life of proper names in natural language.

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