



Onomastic analysis of cats' given names

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Abstract

This study was designed to investigate cats' given names in an Arabic-speaking community of Jordan. For the purpose of this study, a questionnaire was prepared and distributed or displayed on the Facebook page *Ask Jordan*. A number of 153 names were collected, studies analyzed and then categorized. The results reveal that, in Jordan, the names of cats fall into different categories classified in accordance with the cat's physical appearance, a cartoon or a movie character, the cat's gender, a classic name, a new name, and a circumstantial name. The results also reveal a difference between names of stray cats and purebred house cats. The study ends with a recommendation for further studies to analyze names of pet cats in other countries.

Keywords: onomastics; given name; physical appearance; cartoon character.

1. Introduction

This paper is a descriptive study within the field of onomastics research on the status of animal names, specifically the names for pet cats in Amman. In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, onomastics is defined as “the science or study of the origin and forms of proper names of persons or places”. This field is concerned with various characteristics of names and naming, and has been tackled through different aspects such as personal names (called anthroponyms), brand names, toponyms (or place names), and common animal names known as zoonyms (American Name Society).

Naming something enables us to communicate about it, whether the object named is human or non-human, animate or inanimate. It is a diversified field in linguistics that has witnessed a growing interest throughout the years. Hajdu (2003) stated that studying names can be traced back to ancient Egypt and arose in the late fourth millennia BC. Onomastics started with studying old Egyptian hieroglyphics in which the Egyptians used symbols to represent their gods' and pharaohs' proper names. Moreover, evidence for naming and the reasons behind names were found in the first book of the Old Testament (Hajdu, 2003). In fact, naming started with the creation of human kind; the first thing the prophet Adam learned was the name of the creations.

Personal names have been studied thoroughly in recent decades. Actually, many studies provide lists of names with their references such as Gardner (1995), Bright (2003) and Barnabas and Peter (2013), among others. Researchers like Ferris and Williams (2005) tackled names from another perspective through studying place names.

In addition, there are studies related to animal names under the name of zoonymics. These studies focused on two areas: the first one are the scientific names of animals and the second one are the names which people use to address the animals. Actually, Bolatovna and Maratovna (2013) have explained that zoonymics is a special branch in onomastics. This branch deals with the names of animals with reference to their appearance, development, functions, and attitudes. They mentioned that naming animals is not something new. In Greek mythology, for example, there were different names for different specific animals such as Cerberus, the name for the three headed angry dog that guards the entrance to Hades, and Pegasus, the name for the winged horse. All throughout history there are other well-known animal names as well, like King Arthur's favorite dog, Cabal, and Isaac Newton's dog, Diamond.

Moreover, Terashima (2003) examined and compared the vernacular names, uses, and attributes that have been given to plants and animals by farmers and hunters. His study was conducted between two groups or tribes, namely the Efe and the Mbuti, who use two different languages. However, many names, uses, and attributes of plants and animals are

common to both tribes. Moreover, they named animals, mainly birds, depending on certain strategies, such as onomatopoeic names. For instance, both groups have at least eight names that come from the call of the birds, leading Terashima to state that there is a strong tie between the name of a bird and its call.

Interestingly, Borkfelt (2011) traced the importance of generic and specific naming in connection to our relationships with non-humans. He concluded that naming things reflects our thoughts about animals and the way keepers of an animal see the animal. He examined names given to animals by scientists, keepers of animals, and the media. Naming is the first action in a language and a name is a representation of values, ideas, and perceptions. Naming animals is something restricted to humans because of language; consequently, it shows control over animals. It is the first act and the most important one in language. However, Heanre (2007) is against naming if naming is a kind of control or show of power over animals.

Scientists have also been interested in analyzing animal names and stating rules for naming them. J. A. A. (1896) claimed that these rules were first set by Strickland, the founder of the modern *Codes of Nomenclature*. These codes draw a picture of the way different kind of species should be named, and these codes of rules for zoological nomenclature have changed throughout the years. For instance, its fifth edition starts using the binomial nomenclature, but later editions use trinomials, which were added to the codes for subspecies naming.

Nissan and Zuckermann (2011) analyzed Hebrew zoological terminology. He examined the occurrences of the neologisation device of taking a place name or a personal name from the Hebrew Bible and remotivating it semantically in order to denote a particular zoological taxon. For instance, a name for a station of the Exodus was remotivated by Abramowitsch (1866, quoted in Nissan and Zuckermann, 2011) as a neologized name for *Mergus*, a member of the waterfowl genus.

Regarding the use of animal names for addressing people, Al-Jumaily and Hameed (2014) investigated their use in Iraq. They considered that Iraqi people tend to use animal names to name their babies referring to the animal's appearance, intelligence, and character. Moreover, Rybatzki (2012) observed Mongolian proper names that are classified into two main categories: first, proper names are related to physiological or psychological features like /batu/ 'confident' and /bajan/ 'rich' and, second, categorization is considered the largest group of personal names. This group consists of proper names taken from the names of animals such as birds, domestic animals, and horses.

The significance of this study lies in the fact that it will highlight animal naming practices and patterns, specifically pet cat names. Despite the significant rise and spread of onomastic studies in all its fields and branches, according to the researcher's knowledge, studies

tackling animal names from a linguistic perspective have been limited. In fact, more recent studies have described animals' names but not the animals' given names. Therefore, investigating the naming practices and tendencies of cats, the naming patterns and types, and the various reasons that people give for such naming will be the basis of this study.

2. Methodology

In order to answer the questions of the study, a quantitative study was conducted using Facebook. The researcher first posted a question on the Facebook page *Ask Jordan*. The question posted was: "If you have a cat, what is the name of the cat and its kind?". After that, people who answered the question were sent a private message asking them if they would like to help in a study about cat names by answering a short questionnaire that consists of eight questions about the cat, its name, gender, age, kind, the gender of the person who named the cat, and his or her age along with the reason for giving the cat its name. There were 85 respondents (35 male and 50 female) who provided 100 cat names in total. In a later stage, the data were analyzed and interpreted in tables, each of which was followed by a simple description and analysis. The names of the cats were related to the reasons for giving the names for them and categorized into five groups.

3. Results and discussion

In this section, different aspects of the collected names are analyzed and the findings are discussed. The data are tabulated into six tables and classified into five main categories based on their meaning and the reasons for naming the cats.

3.1. Names referring to appearance and features

A great number of cats were named for their outstanding physical features; the names in this section are related to their colors, attitudes, or shapes. The participants chose names that refer to the cat's appearance where the name is a color, an adjective, or a kind of food that describes the cat's appearance. Table 1 presents some of these names in reference to the cats' appearances. Moreover, most of the cats in this table are purebred cats, but a few are stray cats. The former are cultivated varieties of cats that people usually buy from a pet store, while the latter are socialized cats that do not live in homes but could potentially become domesticated over time. Furthermore, stray cats are different from feral cats in that feral cats are considered wilder and more aggressive than strays; thus, a stray cat could become a domestic cat but a feral cat could not.

The semantic meanings of the names mentioned in Table 1 illustrate that people name their cats based on their appearance. For example, the table shows that the names of cats may be based on the cat's color (white, grey, black, black and white, beige, or light orange

TABLE 1

Names referring to cats' appearances for purebred cats

NAME	REASON	TYPE OF CAT	GENDER OF CATS
Snowy	White cat	Bred cat	5 (2 male & 3 female)
Smoky	Grey cat	Bred cat	5 (2 male & 3 female)
Fluffy	Hairy cat	Bred cat	3 (1 male & 2 female)
Cookies/Biscuit	Beige colored cat	Bred cat	4 (2 male & 2 female)
Milky	White cat	Bred cat	2 (1 male & 1 female)
Oreo	Black cat on outside and white from underside	Bred cat	2 (1 male & 1 female)
Pepper	Black cat	Bred cat	2 (1 male & 1 female)
Panini	Looks like loaf of bread	Bred cat	1 male
Tinny	Skinny cat	Bred cat	1 female
/Kalbu:z/ 'fat'	Fat cat	Bred cat	1 male
/batata/ 'potato'	Fat cat	Stray cat	1 male
/fustu?/ 'peanut'	Light brown cat	Bred cat	2 male
/nasiḥ/ 'fat'	Fat cat	Both	1 male
/kalbuz/ / 'fat'	Fat cat	Bred cat	1 male
/ʔizḥa/ 'Nigella sativa'	Black cat	Bred cat	1 female
/filḥl/ 'pepper'	Black cat	Both	3 male
/ʔutne/ 'cotton'	White cat	Bred cat	2 female
/mijmij/ 'apricot'	Light orange cat	Bred cat	5 male

hair color). Moreover, other names may be chosen because they best describe the shape of the cat—skinny or fat. Additionally, the table presents that quite often the color or shape of a cat correlates to naming the cat after food. As a result, nine names out of twelve are names for different kinds of food (/batata/ 'potato', /fustu?/ 'peanut', /mijmij/ 'apricot', and Oreo, a black chocolate cookie with a white cream center). On the other hand, there are two adjectives—smoky and snowy—that respectively refer to the grey or white color of the cat. Finally, in relation to a cat's appearance, the table shows names chosen from two languages, namely Arabic and English. Incidentally, only one name is from Swahili; it refers to a fat cat and was named by a female who previously lived in Kenya.

Other than the appearance, there is one name that describes a cat from another perspective; this name is /ʔaʔraf/ 'deaf' and occurred four times. Indeed, there are some cats which cannot hear (or some people who think that their cat cannot hear). For that reason, they named the cat /ʔaʔraf/ referencing a real or imagined defect in that animal.

3.2. Names referring to famous characters

TABLE 2

Names referring to famous characters

NAME	REASON	AGE GROUP OF PERSON WHO NAMED THE CAT	CAT KIND
Luka	Cartoon character	5-24 years	purebred cat
Lulu kiti	Cartoon character	5-24 years	purebred cat
Simsim	Cartoon character	25-45 years	purebred cat
Sharshour	Cartoon character	25-45 years	stray cat
Harhour	Cartoon character	25-45 years	stray cat
/ʔabsi/	Cartoon character	25-45	Both
Ben	Cartoon character	10 year old male	purebred cat
Caesar	Cartoon character	5-24 years	purebred cat
Cleo	Cartoon character	5-24 years	purebred cat
Putchi	Cartoon character	25-45 years	purebred cat
Rambo	Movie character	25-45 years	stray cat
Jaki:ra	Singer	25-45 years	purebred cat
Schmeichel	Football player	5-24 years	purebred cat
Sanfour	Cartoon character	25-45 years	stray cat
Karkar	Movie character	25-45 years	stray cat
Samahir	TV character	25-45 years	both

Table 2 shows that some people in Jordan name their cats after famous movie and cartoon characters as well as sports celebrities. For instance, Kasper Schmeichel is a famous Danish footballer and goalkeeper, so Schmeichel the cat is a male cat that was named after a kid's favorite footballer. On the other hand, Rambo is a crazy stray cat that jumps from one building to another and moves fast and proficiently. For that reason, a male gave the cat

the name Rambo that describes its character. The cat Karkar is a funny, stupid, stray cat that falls down a lot and is therefore named after a comedy character from a movie called *Karkar*. In addition, there is a cat that is named Shakira after the famous singer Shakira. Finally, three cats were named Samahir after a TV character because the cats are crafty and wicked like the Samahir character in the television show.

Moreover, many cats have the same names as cartoon characters as people from different ages and different genders seem to like to name their cats after cartoon characters. For instance, people over the age of 20 chose names from characters of the old cartoons they used to watch when they were young like Simsim, Harhour, Sharshour, Sanfour, and Putchi. Most of these names refer to animal characters with the exception of Simsim and Sanfour, but none of these characters are human.

From the children's side, the names of their cats are a referent to their favorite characters, which could be human like Ben and Luka or a cat like Lulu Kitty. Apparently, the children's cats are purebred ones while most of the adult cats are stray cats except Putchi, which is a small white dog character in a famous cartoon called Bill and Sebastian. Putchi is a tiny beautiful dog in comparison to the cartoon characters, such as Harhour and Sharshour, which are mean wolfs in the cartoon.

3.3. Traditional names

Some participants chose familiar names for their cats as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 presents the common names used to name cats in Jordan, mainly in Amman. The people in this case just named the cat a familiar name because they like the name and consider it a common name for cats. It is also significant to note that many of the names are not Arabic ones. The table also shows gender differences in naming. Males prefer Arabic names while females prefer English ones. However, these names could be classified into two groups: old names and fashionable names. Names like Lusi, Lulu, Bussi, Tasha, and Lula are old names which people gave to cats they used to have ten years ago, while names like Sooty, Susu, Sisi, or Sophie are new and more fashionable names chosen for cats. It is also remarkable that most of the names in this group start with the same sound /s/. When the researcher asked the participants about the names, they said that pet store owners told them that cats distinguish and recognize their names better if it ends with /i:/ or has the /s/ sound. Additionally, gender differences in naming appeared with the second group, where the fashionable names were given only by females.

Finally, there are four Arabic common cat names presented in Table 3. Beside the fact that males prefer these names, these names have a collocation. In other words, /**santar**/ and /**sabla**/ occur together three times and /**zajt**/ and /**zafstar**/ together also. The owners of these cats would have two cats, one /**zafstar**/ and the other /**zajt**/, while the owners for

TABLE 3

Familiar names used to name cats

NAME	No. OF CATS	GENDER OF CATS
Nasha	1	Female
Tasha	3	Female
Lusi	5	Female
Lula	3	Female
Bussi	3	Female
Kitty	5	Female
Lulu	4	Female
Sisi	2	Female
Sophie	3	Female
Sooty	2	Male
ʕantar	4	Male
ʕabla	3	Female
Zajt	2	Male
zaʕtar	3	Male

/ʕabla/ usually have another cat or dog named /ʕantar/. /ʕantar/ and /ʕabla/ are two famous characters who were in love, while /zajt/ and /zaʕtar/ are considered as binomials in the language.

3.4. Cat names and gender differences

Tables 4 and 5 show that gender plays a significant role in naming animals, as each gender chose different names.

TABLE 4

Cat names given by males

NAME	TYPE	REASON
ʔabu: samrah	Proper name	Nickname
ʔabu: anas	Proper name	A name for someone who he used to know

ʔabu: alsakasi:k	Proper name	The cat has long hair on his chin
ʔum ʕamaʕ	Proper name	No reason just like the name
ʔum ʕuʕajn	Proper name	No reason just like the name
ʔum bassam	Proper name	Neighbor name
Nevertiti	Proper name	Like the name
naʕi:m	Proper name	Cousin name
naʕi:m junior	Proper name	Son of naʕi:m
ʕabfah	fat	Fat cat
aybar	Full of dust	Full of dust and dirt
Salwa	stray cat	His sister name
ʕaki:ra	Proper name	With reference to the singer because the cat meow a lot
ʕahi:ra	Proper name	Shakira's sister
xadi:dʒah	Proper name	No reason
/ʕasan/	Proper name	A friend's name
ʕubhi	Proper name	No reason
mhawef	Someone who likes to fight	Strong name
ʕara:rah	Sparkle	Strong name
lu:lu:	Nick name	Common name
bu:b:u	Nick name	Nice name
naddu:ʕ	Nick name	His girlfriend's name
nafnu:f	Nick name	Nickname
katku:t	Nick name	Nice nickname
basbu:s	Nick name for cat	Nickname
nammu:r	Nick name for tiger	Nickname
sanfu:r	Cartoon character	Cartoon character
hammu:lah	Nick name	Nickname
Undertaker	Wrestler	Strong name

Table 4 presents the names that were given to cats by males. It shows that, generally, males choose different names from females (Table 5). Moreover, they attempted to choose names

that are related to people they know. For instance, /**ḥasan**/ and /**Ṣubḥi**/ are names of their friends while **ʔabu: anas** and **ʔum bassa:m** are names for old neighbors. /**naʕi:m**/ is the name of the owner's cousin and /**naʕi:m junior**/ is /**naʕi:m**/ the cat's son. Additionally, names like /**ʔum ḥuṢajn**/, /**ʔimhawef**/, /**ṭabfah**/, and /**ʕara:rah**/ are names which reflect some of these males' character or typical masculine traits, because the semantic meaning for these names is related to fighting and strength. Moreover, most of these cats (15 out of 20) are stray cats that have Arabic names. Conversely, a number of purebred cats were given a nickname. These nicknames mostly share the same sound /u:/ in the last syllable. Additionally, the cats with nicknames are purebred ones.

TABLE 5

Cat names given by females

NAME	TYPE	REASON
lulluf	Nick name	Nice fashionable name
Sarah	proper name	A name that a girl wants to give to her sister if she has one
nata:ʕa	proper name	Nice name
ʕa:di:	Male proper name reflects a soft kind character	The cat has a soft voice
Ramiz	proper name	To collocate with Ramzijh
Ramzijh	proper name	No reason
Ṣatri:s	proper name	Ugly cat
Sophie	proper name	Nice name for a cat
Anna	proper name	One of the relatives
Lilian	proper name	Common nick name
Emmy	proper name	Common nick name
fathi:	proper name	These two names collocates with each other for brother and sister cats
Fathijh	proper name	

Table 5 shows the names given to cats by their female owners, which is in addition to the names discussed before that were given by males. Females choose nicknames which are common in Jordan like Lilian and Sophie for purebred cats only. On the other hand, they choose names that collocate together like /**ramiz**/ /**ramzijh**/ and /**fathi:**/ / **fathijh**/ for stray cats. The owners for these cats first had one named /**ramzijh**/ and the other /**fathi:**/. Later, they both got another cat, so they chose names that went with the first ones.

3.5. Names for a specific occasion

The last category for cat names is different from the others. It is related to the people who like animals and who work as volunteers for some of the animal welfare societies in Jordan. These people save animals, mainly cats and dogs, in Jordan. For instance, if they find a cat in a bad condition, whether purebred or stray, they help it, heal it, give it a name, and then start to look for someone to adopt it. The following table illustrates some of the names they have given to the cats they have saved with the reasons behind the name.

TABLE 6

Naming cats for a specific occasion

NAME	GENDER	TYPE	REASON
Hope	Female	stray cat	The cat have a hope to survive
Hero	Male	stray cat	The cat survived because it is a hero
May	Female	purebred cat	The cat was found in May
Ikea	Male	purebred cat	The cat was found near Ikea
Chance	Male	purebred cat	From the idea of surviving
Angel	Female	purebred cat	To represent the idea of surviving that was surrounded by angels

Table 6 presents the names for cats which are related to the occasion where the owner helped or saved the cat. For instance, Ikea is a baby male cat that was found alone without its mother near the Ikea store. The person who found the cat and looked for a good home for him gave him the name Ikea with reference to the place where he was found. In addition, May is a cat that was helped in May and Hero is a cat that survived after being injured and rescued. The names in this category represent the situation from which they survived.

4. Conclusion

This study explored the names given to cats in Amman and the reason for giving the names. Collecting and analyzing the most frequent cat names showed that cat names can be categorized and have a semantic reference. People do not choose names haphazardly, rather they have a reference for the names. Cats could be named in reference to their appearance or to cartoon or movie characters. They could also have familiar and common names for cats. The latter could be categorized into old names and new names. In addition, cats could be named in reference to a specific occasion. The discussion also shows gender differenc-

es in naming cats, where males usually choose different names from females. Adults also chose different names from adolescents. Finally, it is clear that stray cats have different names from purebred cats. It remains a question for future study to collect and compare names from different areas in Jordan and compare animal names from Jordan and other countries to find out if the names are affected by cultural differences.

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