

Onomastic ideological assemblages. A model for understanding personal name conflicts¹

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Abstract

I present a dynamic model for analyzing onomastic conflicts to explain why some personal names become involved in conflicts while others do not. The model takes a linguistic anthropological approach and is based on the concept of a “language ideological assemblage” (Kroskrity 2021). An assemblage includes the ideas and feelings people have about names, how names are created and used in cultural contexts, and how these are influenced by political structures, economic processes, and institutions. Examining onomastic ideological assemblages takes into account how conflicts are rooted in competing ideologies about names and how name conflicts at different scales interact with each other. The four scales of conflicts are: personal, interpersonal, institutional and societal. Examples are drawn from Canada and focus on how multicultural and multilingual societies can be organized to produce inequalities.

Keywords:

onomastic ideologies; ideological assemblage; name conflict; scales of conflict; multicultural societies

Nyckelord:

onomastisk ideologi; ideologisk assemblage; namnkonflikt; multikulturellt samhälle

1. Introduction

What can we learn from studying name conflicts? Research on personal name conflicts demonstrates how connections between language and identity are created as part of social processes and social structures that are inherently unequal. Those inequalities affect naming choices and practices. In multicultural and multilingual societies like Sweden or Canada, we might expect conflict

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because there are so many differences and inequalities to navigate. However, not every name is subject to debate, controversy or mistreatment. We can better understand why some names are involved in conflicts while others are not when we examine the onomastic ideologies within particular social and economic contexts that contribute to name conflicts across all scales.

1.1 Four Scales of Conflict

It is helpful first to identify four scales on which personal name conflicts operate, differing according to how many and which kinds of actors are involved, and the scope of the conflict. My analysis then considers ways in which the scales overlap and influence each other in relation to name conflicts.

1.1.1 Personal Conflicts

At the smallest scale, personal conflicts involve identity-based tensions surrounding name choices and name meanings that are constrained by social locations such as race, gender, class, religion and ethnicity. Personal conflicts can refer to an individual's internal struggle over a name, produced by competing needs, ideologies or affiliations. For example, research on personal conflicts about names has investigated how multilingual, racialized or mixed religion parents choose appropriate names for their children that satisfy criteria for appropriateness originating in more than one tradition (Le Gall & Meintel 2014); how these same children later negotiate different versions of their names according to their assessment of particular contexts (Mena 2024); how adopted children are named deliberately to create new family connections (Pilcher, Hooley & Coffey 2020); how transgender people painstakingly select new names for themselves (Obasi et al. 2019); and whether a spouse's surname is adopted after marriage (Lillian 2007).

1.1.2 Interpersonal Conflicts

Interpersonal conflicts often involve mistreatment or unequal treatment of some people based on their names. For instance, discrimination in hiring processes is sometimes based on stereotypes invoked by names (Duguet et al. 2010; Zschirnt 2020). Unconscious biases that underlie assumptions about people based on their names can also lead to housing discrimination (Carpusor & Loges 2006) and interpersonal conflicts in the form of social exclusion or perceived disrespect (Pennesi 2024).

1.1.3 Institutional Conflicts

Institutional conflicts stem from traditions, laws, policies, formal regulations, and technologies that constrain the form, structure and use of names. For example, problems arise when names do not conform to the conventions of a paper or web form, whether due to the length of the name, the composition of the name, variations in the name, the linguistic origin of the name, or the chosen orthography (Dechief 2009). There also may be individual or collective resistance to institutions that impose naming practices or assimilation (Alia 2007; Pennesi 2019).

1.1.4 Societal Conflicts

At the largest scale, societal conflicts grow into debates about personal names in public spaces or names of public assets. This includes choosing or changing names of streets, bridges, schools, parks, buildings or cities named after individuals linked to controversy. Research taking a critical toponymies approach delves into these ideological struggles over naming agency, identity, values, and the representation of history (Alderman 2002; Azaryahu 2011; Berg & Kearns 2009; Brasher et al. 2020; Rusu 2021). Societal conflicts are never only about names, rather public name debates offer a convenient site for competing actors to vie for power.

1.2 Onomastic Ideological Assemblages

Linguistic anthropologists illuminate how language is central to constructions of identity and society. Names are both linguistic units and cultural signs that highlight connections between language, identity, social structures and cultural processes (vom Bruck & Bodenhorn 2006). Paying attention to language ideologies can be insightful when probing these connections. Language ideologies are largely implicit ideas and feelings about the nature, structure and function of language, based in moral and political-economic positioning, which vary across social and cultural groups (Woolard 2020). What I am calling **onomastic ideologies** are those language ideologies specific to personal names. I contend that competing onomastic ideologies underly naming conflicts. Divergent answers to the following questions point to onomastic ideologies.

- How strongly are names equated with individual or group identity?
- What are the meanings of particular names?
- Can names be changed? Which ones? By whom?
- What does a good name mean? How should it sound? How should it look?

- Can a person have multiple true or real names?
- Who should have the power to choose, use, and change names?
- How important is spelling or pronunciation of names? What obligations or prohibitions surround treatment of particular names?

Sometimes several ideologies work together in a coherent set of naming practices and understandings; however, people may hold contradictory onomastic ideologies at the same time.

Here, I follow Paul Kroskrity (2021) in using a “language ideological assemblage” approach to understand conflicts surrounding names as rooted in onomastic ideologies.

Language ideological assemblages are dynamic configurations of human actors and their beliefs, feelings, and conceptions about language(s) and [names] as they are produced and expressed within their individual milieus and the intersubjective worlds of mutual influence from institutions, political economic structures, state power, technologies, [and] global systems (Kroskrity 2021, 139).

The assemblage concept considers the beliefs and feelings people have about names as inextricable from the social, economic and political environment in which they are embedded. This is useful when analyzing conflicts about personal names because these contextual factors are crucial to understanding how the ideological differences are manifest.

In what follows, I analyze several cases of personal name conflicts based on three sources of data. First, I draw on interviews I conducted from 2012–2017 with immigrants to London, Ontario and Montreal, Canada (Pennesi 2016; 2019; 2024). The main topic of the interviews was experiences related to their names in the context of integration into Canadian society. Second, I consider examples from my current research on commemorative naming issues reported in the Canadian news media from 2020–2024, particularly the renaming of streets and schools. Part of this project is an online survey² my team administered in 2024, asking Toronto residents their opinions about decisions to rename public places commemorating three historical figures: Henry Dundas, Egerton Ryerson and John A. Macdonald. Respondents were recruited through social media posts on Facebook, Reddit and X to groups or threads centering on Toronto, Ontario (e.g. Midtown Toronto Residents, r/toronto,

²I worked with an undergraduate research intern, Safaa Ali. The survey remains open in Qualtrics at: https://uwo.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4J7O8FqO8wH5L0y.

#Toronto). One researcher also handed out flyers with a QR code for the survey along Dundas Street. The survey provides brief descriptions of the reasons each namesake was first honoured and then criticized. It then asks whether respondents agree with renaming the relevant public assets, and for them to explain their reasoning. The third source of data for the present analysis are the 25 usable responses from the survey collected on 22 August 2024. I only consider survey questions referring to Dundas and Ryerson here. The initial aim of the survey was to learn whether Toronto residents were knowledgeable about Dundas and Ryerson as historical figures, and to see if their reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with institutional decisions to rename public assets were the same as those given by institutional actors quoted in the news media. While obtaining a representative sample from this type of online survey is impossible, one screening question asked if respondents reside or have resided in Toronto. We excluded any responses from those answering “no” to that question.

For each case I discuss below, I present the ideological roots of the conflict as they are entangled with political and economic inequalities, as well as how the conflicts are resolved in contrasting ways. Then I draw connections to related conflicts at larger and smaller scales. My aim is to explain why some names are involved in conflicts while others are not. Some names and minor details have been changed to protect the privacy of those who requested it; however, pseudonyms were chosen to match the gender, ethnicity and language of the original name.

2. Personal Conflicts: Dariush and Hashim

Dariush immigrated to Canada as a refugee from Iran in the 1980s (Pennesi 2019 p. 94 f.). As a member of the Bahá’í faith, he faced religious persecution. When Dariush’s daughters were born in Canada, he gave them traditional Persian names: Shirin and Yasmin. Dariush worked in restaurants and making deliveries. Eventually, he completed his education and when I met him, he was a social worker assisting immigrants. One of Dariush’s friends was another Iranian immigrant named Hashim. Hashim struggled to find work for a long time. Dariush tried to get him a job at one of the places he worked but they did not hire Hashim. Dariush’s boss said that despite Hashim’s fluent English, he could not work in customer service with that name. To fit in better, Hashim began calling himself *Harold*. Now he is known as Harold to everyone, including other Iranian-Canadians. Hashim and his wife had four sons. They gave them all English names. Hashim reasoned that having a name

which marked him as both foreign and Muslim had hindered his search for employment. He did not want his sons to have the same trouble if he followed the Muslim practice of giving them Arabic names or even common Persian names like *Amir* or *Hassan*.

On the other hand, Dariush told me he would never consider changing his name because it was a gift from his father. *Dariush* is a noble name. Three rulers of the Iranian Empire were named *Dariush*, meaning “holding firm the good” (Schmitt 2011). For Dariush, it is a strong and important connection to his Persian heritage and to his family. When he left Iran, Dariush lost everything: his house, his money, his family, his country. He would not give up his name because it is the only thing he has left of Iran. Dariush gave his daughters Persian names too, so they will remain connected to their heritage as well. He disapproves of his friend Hashim changing his name to *Harold* because he sees it as a rejection of the Iranian community. He said he told Hashim there is no need to act like the English Canadians when they will never accept you anyway. Dariush refuses to call his friend by his English name.

2.1 Competing Ideologies

The two men faced similar personal conflicts but made different choices about what to name their children and what name to use for themselves in Canada. On the surface, it might seem like a simple matter of individual choices. Looking more closely, however, it becomes clear that these differences are rooted in a more complex conflict of onomastic ideologies, as well as socio-political constraints. This case illustrates the strong ideological connections between names, language and identity that underlie the personal name conflicts many immigrants struggle with. They believe the name represents both outwardly and inwardly one’s identity as a member of society and as a family member. Personal conflict arises around naming choices during the immigration process because the family is now a member of two societies and there is a separation between ethnic identity and national identity. When naming traditions and ideologies from the original language and culture differ from those dominant in the new society, it can be difficult to choose an appropriate name. And if the ideology allows for only one true or real name, the pressure to get it right is even stronger. When adults like Hashim do change their own names after immigrating, it can provoke an internal conflict of identity and allegiance.

2.2 Political and Economic Factors

Both Dariush and Hashim share the ideology that names are gifts from fathers to their children. Additionally, they both recognize the exclusion and discrimination immigrants face in Canada. These beliefs supported Dariush's resolve to keep his name out of respect for his father and his country of origin. It is also an act of political resistance to proudly bear his Persian name amid the English-speaking Canadians who would exclude him. In contrast, Hashim chose the gifts of his sons' names wisely so the names would help them succeed in a society where English and Christianity are dominant. His difficulties in finding a job reflect a common experience. Research from Canada (Oreopoulos & Dechief 2011), the USA (Bertrand & Mullainathan 2004), Norway (Midtbøen & Rogstad 2012), and Sweden (Arai & Thoursie 2009; Bursell 2007) consistently shows that candidates with "foreign-sounding names" suffer from hiring discrimination and are called less frequently for job interviews. Onomastic ideologies are entangled with racism, xenophobia and other systems of inequality so they become mutually reinforcing. Hashim's choices of English names for his sons and himself were grounded in the material need to find work and that took precedence over any other personal allegiance.

2.3 Scaling Up

For Hashim, the personal conflict about what to name his sons was scaled up as he anticipated interpersonal conflicts. His choice in the present was influenced by an imagined conflict in future. But even in resolving his personal conflict and avoiding one interpersonal conflict, Hashim created another interpersonal conflict by changing his name to Harold and giving his children English names. It signalled to other Iranians that he was aligning more with Canadian values and practices. At least one community member interpreted that as a rejection of his culture and the gift from his father. This illustrates how name conflicts at the personal and the interpersonal scales are intertwined and how these are influenced by ideological, political and economic factors.

3. Interpersonal Conflicts: Jihad

Interpersonal conflicts often arise in the workplace and during interactions with strangers. The case of Jihad is illustrative.

Jihad, an experienced and highly qualified Iraqi engineer, applied for almost 700 jobs across Canada in the first six years after immigrating (2004–2010) and he never got a single call (Pennesi 2016 p. 50). When an employment

counsellor advised him to “be neutral” and use a different name, Jihad did not like that idea. He was desperate to find work so Jihad began using *Jay* on his résumé. When he was finally hired, he had to write his legal name on the payroll forms. The administrator expressed disbelief and asked if *Jehad* was really his name. Later that day, the company called Jihad to cancel his scheduled training and he lost the job.

Jehad’s wife, Sara, told me that once when they were shopping for a washing machine, she found one on sale. Sara called to her husband who was in a different part of the store, “Jehad!” Hearing that name, a woman screamed and everyone looked at Sara with fear and shock. Sara vowed she would never call her husband’s name in public again.

3.1 Competing Onomastic Ideologies

Jehad faced discrimination based on onomastic ideologies and Islamophobia. For Arabic-speaking Muslims, the word *jihad*, which is the basis for Jihad’s name, refers to an internal struggle for self-improvement or self-control “against one’s evil inclinations” (Peters & Cook 2014). It is a common male name with positive connotations. In contrast, non-Muslim Canadians tend to associate *Jehad* with the English definition of *jihad*, which indexes radical Islamists or terrorists waging war against non-Muslims as part of religious duty³. Therefore, some people react to Jihad’s name with fear and suspicion.

Interpersonal conflicts like these occur when onomastic ideologies of the dominant group are privileged in interactions with members of minority groups. In Jihad’s case, ideologies concerning representation were activated in the hiring managers. The hiring managers’ rejection of him was likely influenced by the idea that names reflect one’s personality, behaviour, or values, together with the negative connotations of the word *jihad*. In response, Jihad shortened his name. This echoes Reisæter’s (2012 p. 232) findings that immigrants sometimes change their name to avoid interpersonal conflicts when the name sounds like a word in the dominant language that has negative connotations. Unconventional names originating outside the dominant system are often mistreated (mispronounced, misspelled, ignored, forgotten, incorrectly parsed, misinterpreted) as linguistic entities and this extends to mistreatment of the person in the form of microaggressions involving their names. For instance, Jihad frequently had to endure questions about his name: Is that really his name? Why does he have that name? Is he a terrorist? Sometimes he was hurt

³<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/jihad>

by their reactions of shock, fear, laughter, and surprised facial expressions, such as when his wife called his name in the store. Interpersonal name conflicts reflect social inequalities and reinforce hegemonic onomastic ideologies. Lower status people have their names mistreated as lower status names, while higher status people are more likely to have their names respected.

3.2 Political and Economic Factors

Political and economic factors are an important part of the onomastic ideological assemblage influencing Jihad's interpersonal conflicts. Islamophobia in Canada has been growing since 2001 when Al-Qaeda organized terrorist attacks on the US, and the US and its allies subsequently began "The War on Terror", invading Iraq and Afghanistan. News coverage of those wars and others in Syria and the Middle East generally associates Muslims with violence. All of this results in fear and suspicion of Arab Muslim immigrants, even as the number of Muslim immigrants in Canada increases (Statistics Canada 2023). Policies that do not recognize foreign university training, certification and expertise make it difficult for professional immigrants to find work in their field without Canadian work experience or established professional networks. The belief that names are equated with identity leads to the inference that a foreign name indicates a foreign person. This ideology coupled with other political economic factors create conditions for interpersonal name conflicts.

3.3 Scaling Up and Down

Like Hashim, Jihad had a personal conflict about whether to use a different name to mitigate interpersonal conflict in finding a job. He made the concession to just use his initial because he did not feel right changing it. Sara, Jihad's wife, would not use her husband's name in public to avoid interpersonal conflicts, but that left her with a personal conflict because it felt wrong to call him by a name that was not his. All the interpersonal conflicts about his name left Jihad feeling alienated and disrespected. Moreover, this interpersonal conflict scales up to the institutional sphere as well. Due to his prolonged unemployment, Jihad's application for permanent residency in Canada was delayed. When he finally had all his paperwork in order, the Canadian government required him to provide extra documentation in relation to his name, his education certificates, and places he previously lived and worked in Iraq. Essentially, they subjected him to top level security checking because of his name. Meanwhile, his wife and children had their applications approved. Jihad's file was several hundred pages long and after eight years, he still did not have his permanent resident card.

4. Institutional Conflicts: Najmuddin and Saháíʔa

Comparing the following two institutional name conflicts reveals further complexities in onomastic ideological assemblages.

Najmuddin immigrated to Canada from Indonesia (Pennesi 2019 p. 92 f.). Like many Javanese Indonesians, he has a mononym: a single name rather than a forename and a surname. Mononyms are often unique to individuals and used as primary identifiers in Indonesia (Reid 2010). In Canada, mononyms conflict with institutional naming practices which do not allow for blank forename or surname fields. Canadian institutional agents sometimes solve the problem by repeating the name in both fields, however, this leaves Najmuddin vulnerable to ridicule. When he travels, airport officers routinely detain Najmuddin for not having a surname on his passport and he is sometimes separated from his travelling companions. Aside from the inconvenience of delays, being detained makes him feel like he is a criminal trying to get away with something, as though he is not really who he says he is.

Institutional conflicts also occur in the professional sphere. Najmuddin is an academic, so his name is the most important way people he does not know identify him and his work. *Najmuddin* is marked with an Arabic suffix *-uddin* that follows Muslim Indonesian conventions. In bibliographies, sometimes the name is nonsensically separated into two components: *Muddin*, *Naj*. When his publications are inconsistently cited by others unfamiliar with mononyms, it makes them difficult to find. He gets blocked in online applications when his name is rejected for having a blank first or last name field. Email messages he sends to colleagues get deleted as spam because they are deemed suspicious by automated filters. All of this has serious implications for Najmuddin's career because his work is interrupted or delayed, or not even recognized. Najmuddin's case is not unique. English dominates the academic sphere and internet norms worldwide, including expectations for name structure. As Sheherazade & Ardiantiono (2020) argue, the scientific community must modify institutional practices to be more inclusive of scholars with mononyms from Indonesia and other Asian countries.

In addition to immigrant names, Indigenous names are also affected by institutional conflicts. The next example comes from a widely reported case in the Canadian media.

Shene is Chipewyan, a member of one of the Indigenous nations in Canada's Northwest Territories (NWT). Chipewyan is one of eleven official languages

of the NWT. Shene gave her two daughters Chipewyan names, *Saháí?q* and *Ná?ël*. When I interviewed Shene in 2018 she said these names connect her daughters to their Chipewyan heritage and to their family, they instill a sense of pride as Indigenous women, and they contribute to the valuing and revitalization of the Chipewyan language (Pennesi 2019 p. 95 ff.). The problem is that the Chipewyan spellings of *Saháí?q* and *Ná?ël* include a letter for the glottal stop and other diacritical marks to mark high and low vowel tones. Canadian institutional documents only allow the accent marks used in French, so all others are simply left out. The glottal stop symbol does not exist in the Latin alphabet and would need to be replaced with another letter or punctuation mark, such as a hyphen or apostrophe. Shene's refusal to register *Saháí?q* with an incorrect spelling on the birth certificate meant that her daughter did not exist in government records and therefore was not eligible for any benefits. After a year of missing out on various tax credits and government benefits, Shene decided to register an alternative spelling of *Saháí?q* on the birth certificate. She did the same when *Ná?ël* was born (Taylor 2022).

Meanwhile, Shene pursued legal action to have her first daughter's name spelled correctly on the birth certificate because Chipewyan is an official language. Since Shene began her case in 2014, several laws now allow for names to be spelled in Indigenous languages on official documents (Indigenous Languages Act 2020; Official Languages Act 1985/2024; Vital Statistics Act, NWT 2011/2023). However, ten years later, these provisions are not practically in force and the Chipewyan spellings still cannot be printed on birth certificates. The government agencies claim this is due to technological limitations and costs related to updating multiple systems to make them compatible (Brohman & Hinchey 2015; Jenetta Day, Registrar General, Vital Statistics, NWT, personal communication). While the Canadian government declares an ideological commitment to the language and naming rights of Indigenous people, these rights are not manifest materially due to institutional barriers.

4.1 Competing Ideologies

Names mean different things to institutions than they do to individuals. James Scott and colleagues (2002) demonstrate how governments and institutions use names as reference labels to identify individuals so they can be registered, located, taxed and governed. Legal identities are tied to the establishment of permanent personal names, especially surnames, which endure through generations. Standardization of names makes this work more efficient and manageable. In the cases of *Najmuddin* and the Chipewyan names, we see how

standardizing the form of names (e.g. given name + surname; only Latin alphabet) makes individuals legible to the state. Names of citizens are made to conform to regulations or be altered by state agents empowered to do so as part of the process of making them citizens. Therefore, Najmuddin gets a double name, while *Sahq̓iʔq* and *Náʔəl* are spelled incorrectly on the birth certificates.

Alterations to his name are distressing to Najmuddin because they conflict with his onomastic ideologies. In his Indonesian culture, names are seen as invocations, imbued with expectations for newborns (van der Meij 2010). This association is well-established by adulthood as part of one's personal identity and individuals are expected to preserve their names, making name changes rare. Najmuddin simply endured the mistreatment of his name by institutions because it was inconceivable to him to have another name.

Shene believed that she had the power to choose the name of her children, including the spelling. She confronted a competing onomastic ideology underpinning the government's naming policies, which places a high value on conformity, thus limiting her orthographic options. She also believed that names appearing on official identity documents such as birth certificates carry more ontological weight (Pina-Cabral 2010) than names written on other documents. This belief compelled her to engage in a legal battle to exercise her naming rights. But while she won her case, there was no practical resolution due to political and economic factors.

4.2 Political and Economic Factors

Najmuddin's and Shene's cases seem similar in that they are both forced to comply with limitations imposed by government standardization of names and technologies. Yet, the political and economic contexts reveal some important differences.

Institutional recognition of her daughters' Chipewyan names took on great significance for Shene in the political context of colonial oppression of Indigenous peoples and their languages in Canada. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) reports that all Indigenous languages are endangered in Canada today (TRC 2015). According to the TRC, this is largely because for 150 years, Indigenous children were forced to attend boarding schools, usually located great distances from their families and home communities, to minimize their influence on the children. Indigenous children's names were replaced with English or French names or even with numbers.

Residential schools were notoriously under-resourced, largely unregulated, and poorly maintained. Children suffered abuse, malnutrition, sickness and death. Most of those who survived a decade or more in the system left having forgotten or rejected their Indigenous languages, cultures and religions. The devastating impacts of isolation, abuse and poor education continue to affect Indigenous communities today. Despite this attempted genocide, Indigenous peoples, along with their languages and cultures, continue to exist and fight for recognition, rights and self-governance. As I have argued elsewhere, “Shene’s choice of a Chipewyan name for her daughter[s], her choice to relocate so she could give birth in the NWT where Chipewyan is an official language, her insistence on the proper Chipewyan spelling, and her move to publicly and legally challenge the government’s constraints on naming can thus be understood as an enactment of indigenous sovereignty” (Pennesi 2019 p. 97).

As ‘original inhabitants’ Indigenous peoples in Canada have collective rights that immigrants do not have. These rights enabled Shene to mobilize financial and legal resources to pursue her case in court. As an official language, Chipewyan spellings should be allowed on birth certificates and the NWT government did acknowledge that. However, enduring systemic racism means that funds are not allotted to upgrade technological systems that would allow for the printing of Indigenous scripts on identification documents. Therefore, the ideological assemblage includes a shared recognition of rights, but the institutional conflict remains unresolved in this particular political and economic context.

Najmuddin’s case shows contrasting onomastic ideologies at work. Analysis of media discourses (Pennesi 2019) reveals a common expectation that, as newcomers, immigrants should adapt as needed to the laws and practices of the new country. By immigrating, they are volunteering to accept new constraints on their agency. Therefore, it is more difficult to mobilize support for resolving institutional name conflicts for immigrants. Furthermore, newcomers lack networks and resources to pursue collective action aimed at changing institutional policies. Finally, staff in immigrant-serving organizations may sympathize with their clients’ struggles and do what they can to remedy errors with names on an individual basis, but they report a lack of capacity (e.g. time, the power to influence policy) to advocate for changes outside their organization that would have a collective impact.

4.3 Scaling Up and Down

For Najmuddin, solving the institutional conflict his mononym presented by using his name as both forename and surname creates new conflicts at smaller scales. The double name provoked interpersonal conflicts in the form of ridicule and questions from others, which led to his feeling excluded. It also created a personal conflict for Najmuddin in that by allowing an alteration of his name, he believed he was not taking proper care of it. He also said he did not feel like himself when using the double name.

The institutional conflict also resulted in a personal conflict for Shene. She was forced to go against her beliefs about the importance of correct name spelling to get government benefits for her daughters. It pained her to mistreat the language, the names, and the Chipewyan identity they represented. Shene's case also scales up to a societal conflict because it made the national news and was discussed over a period of a few weeks in 2015 and then again in 2022. The institutional conflict over names fit into national debates about historical unjust treatment of Indigenous people and was interpreted in the context of ongoing colonialism and national reconciliation.

In sum, the cases of Najmuddin and Saháí'ą demonstrate how institutional conflicts about names can be intimately connected to personal, interpersonal and societal conflicts. Identifying the onomastic ideological assemblages at the root of these conflicts sheds light on the similarities and differences in how each of these names are treated in Canadian society.

5. Societal Conflicts: Ryerson and Dundas

To illustrate ideological assemblages underlying societal conflicts, I examine two cases of renaming public assets in Toronto, Canada: Ryerson University and Dundas Street. In both cases, the original namesakes are considered by decision-makers to be unworthy of commemoration because of their contributions to colonization and harms perpetrated against Black and Indigenous people.

5.1 Ryerson

When Ryerson University changed its name to Toronto Metropolitan University, it made national news because it is an established and well-known university in Canada's biggest city (CBC News 2021a). This highly publicized name change paved the way for similar decisions to be made by boards of

education in the province of Ontario that also oversaw schools named after Egerton Ryerson. Table 1 shows six educational institutions in Ontario named after Egerton Ryerson which have been renamed in the past three years.

Table 1. Institutions commemorating Egerton Ryerson, with new names.

City	Old Name	New Name	Year of Change
Brantford	Ryerson Heights Elementary School	Edith Monture Elementary School	2022
Burlington	Ryerson Public School	Makwendam	2021
Cambridge	Ryerson Public School	Blue Heron Public School	2023
Hamilton	Ryerson Elementary School	Kanétskare Elementary School	2022
London	Ryerson Public School	Old North Public School	2021
Toronto	Ryerson University	Toronto Metropolitan University	2022

While *Ryerson* is a familiar name among Ontarians, the man honoured in school names was not well known before the renaming controversy. According to a research report prepared for Ryerson University (Standing Strong Task Force 2021), Adolphus Egerton Ryerson (1803–1882) was a Methodist minister and an influential leader in education policy in Ontario during the 19th century. He was superintendent of education in Canada West (present-day province of Ontario) for over three decades. Ryerson was responsible for setting up government-funded, standardized, mandatory public education in elementary and secondary schools to teach academics and Christian moral values for the betterment of individuals and society. Journalists reporting on replacements for the Ryerson name frequently describe him as both “the father of public education in Ontario” (Sly 2019) and one of the “architects of the residential school system” (CBC News 2021b).

During his time as superintendent of education, Ryerson recommended a separate school system for Indigenous children in Canada to become “industrious farmers” (Starr et al. 2021 p. 53) who were assimilated to white Christian European culture and forms of knowledge. He believed in a race-based socio-economic hierarchy that could be supported by public education. Ryerson wrote legislation that enabled the segregation of Black students in inferior schools and did nothing to address complaints of racial discrimination. He also supported the creation of residential schools for neglected, orphaned and criminal children so that their presence would not deter attendance of “respectable” children at the common schools. In sum, Ryerson has been lauded since 1889 for promoting publicly funded, compulsory, high-quality, standardized education aimed at producing law-abiding, industrious citizens; however, this system was designed to benefit only the privileged children of white families,

while children from Indigenous, Black and disadvantaged families could only attend segregated schools that were structured to keep them in the lower socio-economic classes (Starr et al. 2021).

The residential school system was gradually shut down over several decades, ending in 1996. All the while, Indigenous communities and their allies called for Indigenous autonomy regarding education, racial justice, equality, decolonization and reconciliation (TRC 2015). The public discourse that dominates in Canada now prioritizes the pursuit of social justice (for Indigenous people and others), recognizing the value of Indigenous languages and cultures, and protecting the rights of individuals, families and communities. Recently, Canada has seen a surge of support for reviewing commemorative names in public spaces and replacing those of public figures known to have contributed to systemic racism (Korycki 2023). Schools named after Ryerson are some of the targets of this form of “symbolic resistance” (Alderman 2009) or “symbolic retribution” (Azaryahu 2011). In response, three of the Ontario elementary schools (kindergarten to grade 8) named after Ryerson have replaced his name with Indigenous words or an Indigenous person’s name, in an explicit symbolic act of reconciliation (See Table 1). Kanétskare is Mohawk for “by the bay” in reference to the school’s location. Makwendam means “to remember” in Anishinaabemowin, pointing to the association between Ryerson and the tragedy of residential schools (Halton District 2021). Edith Monture was a Kanyen’kehà:ka member of Six Nations of the Grand River who became the first female Indigenous registered nurse and the first woman to vote in Canada, due to her service in the United States military (Conn 2023).

The process for renaming Ryerson University was elaborate and costly, an indication of the significance of the change. A dedicated webpage⁴ explains that the new name, *Toronto Metropolitan University*, was selected after consulting an advisory committee, legal experts and naming consultants. With the amount of resources dedicated to the renaming and the attention focused on it, it is clear that renaming the university was treated as an opportunity for re-branding and marketing rather than (just) a move toward reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.

Remarkably, I found no significant objection to any of these school name changes reported in the news. Only six of the 21 survey respondents who answered whether they agreed with changing the name indicated disagreement, and their other answers showed opposition to de-commemorative renaming in

⁴<https://www.torontomu.ca/next-chapter/new-name/>

general, not specifically *Ryerson*. In comparison, the decision to rename Dundas Street in Toronto was so controversial, the planned change has been halted indefinitely. Interestingly, some survey respondents were against renaming Dundas Street even when they agreed to renaming Ryerson. Close examination of the onomastic ideological assemblages of each case can help explain these divergent opinions.

5.2 Dundas

In summer 2020, nearly fifteen thousand people signed an online petition⁵ calling for Toronto City Council to rename Dundas Street “to honour a more appropriate person, place or event.” The petition frames the rationale in relation to protests against racial injustice that took place all over North America that summer:

In the wake of two weeks of protests against police murder and racial injustice, Toronto City Council can take a constructive and symbolic step toward disavowing its historic associations with persons who have actively worked toward preserving systems of racial inequality and exploitation.

City of Toronto staff studied the matter extensively and undertook an involved consultation process (City of Toronto 2023). Eventually, City Council voted to rename Dundas Street and other civic assets commemorating Henry Dundas. The consultation process to choose a new name has been ongoing for the past three years because replacing *Dundas* is a major undertaking in Toronto. Dundas Street, which goes through the heart of Toronto today, started as a military road named *Dundas* in 1793. It is 23 kilometres long, with 730 street signs and numerous businesses bearing the name *Dundas*. There are two subway stations, a library, and public transit routes named *Dundas*.

Dundas is a common commemorative street name found in many Ontario cities. Henry Dundas was a Scottish lawyer and member of parliament, who was elevated to the peerage as Viscount Melville in 1802. He is honoured in place names because of his influential service in many central positions in the British government in the late 1700s and early 1800s.⁶ Dundas was known as an abolitionist, but in 1792, a motion in the British House of Commons to immediately abolish the transatlantic slave trade was amended by Dundas to end slavery on a *gradual* basis. He reasoned that the motion would be defeated if

⁵<https://you.leadnow.ca/petitions/let-s-rename-dundas-street-in-toronto>

⁶<https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/get-involved/community/recognition-review/re-naming-dundas-street/>

it proposed immediate abolition, but gradual abolition would be more acceptable to the other legislators. The amendment was adopted in the House of Commons, which then determined the end date should be 1796. However, in the years that followed, Dundas argued against other proposals for abolition, stating that abolition was not practical while Britain was at war with France and with the Haitian Revolution underway already disrupting the slave trade. During that time, Dundas was Secretary of War and Britain was the largest purchaser of slaves (mostly employed in military efforts). Dundas' arguments prioritized economic and military interests over human lives. It was 1807 before the Slave Trade Act was enacted. As a result of this fifteen-year delay, more than half a million Africans were enslaved and transported across the Atlantic, many to British colonies. In the current interpretation of history, many people blame Dundas for the delay and hold him accountable for the enslavement of those 500,000 people.

Many Torontonians disagreed with the proposed name change for Dundas Street and a counter-petition was started to keep it.⁷ Resistance was voiced mostly online, occasionally pointing to support from historians outside Canada who have written in favour of Henry Dundas' achievements (Devine 2020; McCarthy 2022). Then, two years after the decision to rename Dundas Street, three former Toronto mayors wrote to City Council asking them to reconsider due to the high cost of such a large-scale change, which was unwarranted according to their more positive interpretation of Dundas' work toward abolition (Omstead 2023). Four months later, City Council decided to stop work on the renaming of Dundas Street but renaming is going ahead for a public library, the two subway stations, and an important public space known as Yonge-Dundas Square was renamed Sankofa Square in 2024.⁸

5.3 Competing Ideologies

The *Ryerson* and *Dundas* examples demonstrate similar onomastic ideologies at work. They are both commemorative names for public assets. Commemorative naming of a school or street rests on the belief that it keeps the person's legacy alive as the name is remembered and used (Azaryahu 2021). Ryerson was responsible for establishing standardized public education in British Canada and Dundas was a prominent government officer who served the interests of Britain. As individuals, both Ryerson and Dundas contributed to British colonialism which promoted the supremacy of white Englishmen. Crucially,

⁷<https://www.change.org/p/mayor-s-office-city-of-toronto-keep-the-name-dundas-street>

⁸<https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/get-involved/community/recognition-review/re-naming-dundas-street/>

however, there are differences in the use and impact of each name. The widespread toponymic use of *Dundas* in Ontario cities and the passage of generations have reduced to a minimum the related associations between the name, the man, and the values his work represents. Maoz Azaryahu (1996) explains:

Naming a street after a historical figure or event triggers a fundamental semantic displacement as a result of the change of referential framework that occurs when a historical name becomes a spatial designation. Gradually, as a result of the implication of the name in different discourses and experiences and its use in different circumstances and contexts, the name becomes more and more detached from the historical referent and is overlaid with other symbolic meanings. The semantic displacements effect the continuous erosion of the historical meaning of the name (which in itself is open to different interpretations). Occasionally, however, the historical referent is restored ('unmasked' or 're-discovered', depending on the perspective).

Until the recent controversy in Toronto, *Dundas* was less likely to evoke a historical figure, and more likely to simply be “a spatial designation,” indicating the places that bear the name. Critical approaches to toponyms have explored how selecting certain individuals to commemorate through public naming helps “inscribe official versions of history onto the cityscape” but the “myriad networks of social communication that involve ordinary urban experiences... seem to be separated from the realm of political ideology” (Azaryahu 2009 p. 54). *Dundas* was considered “just a name” for most Ontarians. Seventy-six percent (19/25) of our survey respondents indicated that they knew nothing about Henry Dundas and only understood *Dundas* as a place name. In contrast, there has been a sustained protest against commemorating Egerton Ryerson for over fifteen years. Thus, we find conflicting onomastic ideologies in which names are conceived as spatial designations (e.g. *Dundas*) or as commemorative references to persons (e.g. *Ryerson*).

Commemorative naming stems from the belief that public names, like those of schools and streets, are semi-durable. They can be changed, but not frequently, and renaming is an involved and contentious process (Alderman 2002; Azaryahu 2011; Light & Young 2017; Ochman 2023; Rose-Redwood et al. 2024). Commemorative naming creates potential conflict because it involves consideration of intersecting aspects of identity represented by the namesake as well as diverging evaluations of their character and significant achievements in different time periods. Societal conflict arises when people dispute interpretations of the person’s legacy. For some, the ideological conflict is between what the old name now represents and the image or values the place name is intended to convey. For others, the ideological conflict is inherent in the act of naming, such that place names should not or cannot be

changed, but they should endure as artefacts of history or as reference points imbued with new meanings that have supplanted the original. As Rose-Redwood and colleagues observe, “the act of place renaming is therefore a key strategy or reckoning with the historical legacies of racial, gender, and class inequalities as well as the genocidal policies of settler colonialism, all of which continue to shape contemporary life in the twenty-first century” (Rose-Redwood et al. 2024 p. 277).

Ryerson and *Dundas* are both commemorative names that fit this scenario, however the public assets named after them contrast in significant ways that reveal differences in the ideological assemblages. Street names are treated as more durable than school names for two reasons. First, a school name refers to a single place: a building or set of buildings occupying a given location that is understood as a single unit. In contrast a major road like Toronto’s Dundas Street is experienced as a series of places connected by their contiguous locations. Changing a street name involves many instances of replacing one name tag with another, of substituting names of a whole series of places that share the same signifier. The multiple disruptions to toponymic attachments (Kostanski 2018) involved in such a complex change produces a kind of onomastic inertia, whereas school names can be replaced more readily. One survey respondent articulated a tension between the practical and the moral that led to a divided opinion to keep Dundas Street but rename all the other public assets:

I disagree with changing the name of Dundas Street as it is a very well-known street and will cause confusion if the name is changed. However, I feel that changing the names of other locations and buildings that have the name Dundas, Ryerson, or Macdonald within them is agreeable since they were historical figures who caused harm to a great many people and do not deserve to be honoured.

The second reason street names may be understood as more durable is related to individual interactions. Most members of a school community (i.e. students) have limited involvement with a school name, since their interactions with the school usually occur during just a few years. If a school changes its name, most of its students (as alumni) will not be affected significantly since they no longer attend the school. They may continue to identify as members of the student body under the old name while the new name is treated effectively as representing a new school body. On the other hand, residents of a city may interact with street names more frequently over much longer periods

of time, creating more enduring toponymic attachments. Thus, onomastic ideologies hold different expectations for the durability of particular kinds of names.

As the name of one of Toronto's oldest main roads, *Dundas* helps identify many locations, creating what Kostanski (2018) calls "toponymic dependence." For one survey respondent in Toronto, wayfinding knowledge sums up the name's meaning: "I know where to go if I'm going to Dundas Street that's about it." For others, the "toponymic identity" (Kostanski 2018) of *Dundas* forms when the name evokes memories and emotional associations linked to socially significant places, such as a neighbourhood (e.g. Dundas Street West), or an event space (Dundas Square). On the other hand, Egerton Ryerson was recognized as a historical figure, even if people did not know why he was honoured. A statue of Ryerson stood in Toronto from 1889 until it was toppled by activists in 2021 (CBC News 2021). Since Ryerson's contribution to the residential school system was acknowledged as part of the TRC in 2008, Indigenous activists have been criticizing the university's commemoration of Ryerson (Starr et al. 2021). Therefore, *Ryerson* still retained the commemorative semantic value of being associated with an individual for some Toronto residents, rather than deriving all meaning as merely the name of an educational institution. Furthermore, Ryerson school communities are relatively small. Ryerson University's community of students, faculty and staff is around 55,000⁹, and elementary school communities typically have less than one thousand members. Meanwhile, Dundas Street is used by millions of people and is a name Torontonians may encounter daily for many years. In sum, renaming Dundas Street affects many more people in more enduring ways than renaming Ryerson University or any of the elementary schools. The differences in these ideological assemblages help explain why there was a greater toponymic attachment to *Dundas* and why renaming Dundas Street was more strongly contested than renaming Ryerson University.

5.4 Economic and Political Factors

Economic and political factors can further explain why there was general acceptance of the decision to rename Ryerson University, while there was a large contingent in support of keeping Dundas Street.

First, the financial implications of the name changes differed in magnitude. The cost to change the name of Dundas Street and all related public assets and

⁹<https://www.torontomu.ca/university-planning/data-statistics/key-statistics/>

private business names would be substantially higher by millions of dollars than the cost of changing Ryerson University's name.¹⁰ Crucially, the cost for renaming Dundas Street would be covered by Toronto taxpayers, and by individual business owners and residents. Seeing a direct connection between their money and this large expense prompted some people to oppose the allocation of funds for this symbolic act. Online comments posted to news stories include frequent suggestions that the City's money would be better spent on social programs or solving other pressing problems, such as hunger or homelessness. These comments echo those reported by Ochman (2023) from people opposing changes to street names in Poland that served only a referential function for them. As Ochman observed, this kind of renaming was seen as a costly and unnecessary disruption. In contrast, Ryerson University paid for its name change from its own budget, of which about 40 percent comes from funds contributed by taxpayers through federal and provincial government transfers (Ryerson University 2021 p. 28). Furthermore, public input is not expected for the university's budget the way it is for the City's. Therefore, the costs to rename Ryerson were lower and were seen as less directly affecting individual taxpayers compared to renaming Dundas Street.

Politically, the trauma of residential schools is currently more salient in Canadian news reports than the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Egerton Ryerson's life and the impacts of his actions are also more recent in time, making this case of de-commemoration more politically compelling. That is, virtually no one in Canada publicly disputes the negative impacts of residential schools today, and Ryerson's contribution to related policies is clear. In contrast, counter-petitions and debates among historians are evidence that there is disagreement today about how to interpret Henry Dundas' political intentions and individual role in the continuation or abolition of slavery. Given the cost and complexity of renaming Dundas Street, there was too much ambiguity to garner more public support. One survey respondent who opposed renaming Dundas Street but supported renaming Ryerson University explained that Ryerson's "role in creating/perpetuating the harm towards Indigenous peoples is more overt and traceable." Another reasoned that renaming was not justified because "Dundas still believed in the abolition of slavery albeit he chose to do it slowly. Dundas' actions moved towards fixing a problem and towards justice." Some of those who took seriously the need for de-commemoration opposed renaming because it was inadequate to address the problem. They called for reparations or other more material remedies rather than symbolic acts of reconciliation. One

¹⁰<https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2023/ia/bgrd/backgroundfile-241565.pdf>

survey respondent put it this way: “it’s way more important to make reparations than it is to change the name of a street or a school. Make things better, feed people, house people.” Another wrote, “Leave the names. Changing names can’t change the past. Provide a sincere apology and reparations! Don’t waste money on things done already. Instead invest in fixing the future.” Finally, while enslavement is universally condemned, there is a widespread misconception that it did not occur in Canada (Henry-Dixon 2022; Nelson 2020). This may diminish the importance or relevance of the Dundas de-commemoration issue for contemporary Canadians. I contend that the distance in time and conceptualization between Canadians today and Henry Dundas’ actions contributed to apathy or opposition to the Dundas Street name change.

5.5 Scaling Up and Down

Societal name conflicts always involve scaling up. Taking a stance on the name of a public asset simultaneously conveys one’s position on a broader societal question. The upscaling of conflict surrounding naming of public spaces like streets and schools has led other scholars to describe them as “social arenas” (Maly & Blommaert 2019), “cultural arenas” for debating student and community identity (Alderman 2002), and “memorial arenas...for actively interpreting the legacies of historical figures and debating the meaning and relative importance of memorializing these figures” (Alderman 2009 p. 179). My data reveal that conflicts about renaming Ryerson University and Dundas Street involved debates about governance, collective history, racism, identity, and social values.

In the *Dundas* case, critiques of governance and budget decisions were levelled as people argued that changing names of major streets should be decided by a majority of city residents in a referendum, rather than by a Council vote influenced by an online petition signed by only 14,000 people who may not reside in Toronto. They complained about the process and who makes the decisions. People redirected attention to other problems they believe to be more urgent. For example, one survey respondent commented: “The expense of the name change is also a consideration. If funds could be applied towards homelessness, etc. in Toronto, I think it would be a more worthwhile change.”

Another debate centered on the nature of the relationship between history and the present. Some people claimed that it is wrong to attempt to erase history or the past and futile to judge historical figures by contemporary standards. Instead, they argued that we should keep reminders of the bad things that hap-

pened in the past so that we learn the full history and do better now. One survey respondent explained, “When you remove statues and change names you’re hiding the history. I think the good and the bad must be known.” Another wrote, “History should not be changed. They did the best for the country.” Some pointed out that changing the name will not achieve social justice because it does not undo or compensate for past bad actions. Similar debates arise in relation to commemorative statues and history curricula in schools, illustrating how public name controversies are one manifestation of deeper social conflicts about collective identity.

Societal conflicts over names can reproduce struggles for political power. Names of streets and schools are what Azaryahu (2009) describes as “low voltage” symbols, which ordinarily do not call attention to the ideological messages they convey. Renaming them signals overtly an “ideological reorientation”, potentially provoking controversy as people respond to different aspects of a particular ideological assemblage. In the cases I have discussed, decisions to change names of streets and schools emerged “from below”, resulting from grassroots activists and low-level organizations pushing for social justice, rather than “from above” as part of establishing a political regime change (cf. Ochman 2023; Rusu 2019). The momentum gained by anti-racist and equity-seeking movements in the past few years has driven school boards across the province of Ontario to review all the names of their schools, and many cities are reviewing their public assets named after people as well. These de-commemoration campaigns are part of what Korycki (2023 p. 124) calls the recent “mnemonic heating up” involving intense public debates about Canada’s colonial past and contemporary representations of its history. Gensburger & Wüstenberg question whether the global surge of de-commemoration projects is evidence of a shift toward “the creation of a landscape of memorials that, instead of glorifying exclusivist and violent pasts, celebrate anti-racism, inclusivity, and democracy” (2023 p. 1). The twenty-seven chapters in their book demonstrate that, despite the current media attention, de-commemoration is not new. They point out that the kind of societal conflict surrounding names of public assets that results in removing or renaming them can be motivated by various kinds of ideologies and interests, including transformation of society, establishing new political regimes, and creating collective memories and identities. Each of these projects is multi-faceted, reaching far beyond the associations attached to a particular name. Thus, conflicts surrounding public place names scale up to societal conflicts, and even global-scale changes in ideological regimes.

Societal name conflicts surrounding *Dundas* and *Ryerson* scale down to the personal level for Black and Indigenous people who want public acknowledgement of the negative impact of slavery and racism on their lives in the present. As one survey respondent reasoned, “I think if these names resonate with the communities that were affected and with communities who support social justice, and it causes pain to feel like these names are being commemorated than they should be changed.” Individuals who know the historical background of the namesakes have emotional reactions when they encounter these names in the namescape and are obligated to use them. This kind of symbolic violence is exacerbated by the erasure, ignorance or dismissal of these historical wrongs with the ongoing commemoration of men who played such a significant role in perpetrating harm. In fact, these renaming campaigns stem from such a personal conflict that is repeatedly experienced by many individuals over time.

6. Conclusion

I have presented a model for analyzing conflicts about names, demonstrating how they stem from onomastic ideologies. The model considers political and socioeconomic inequalities as fundamental pieces of onomastic ideological assemblages. Attention to these factors reveals how ideologies are manifest in competing discourses and divergent decisions about names. I analyzed contrasting examples across all scales: personal, interpersonal, institutional and societal. In each pair of cases, I showed how naming conflicts at different scales are interconnected, and how that contributes to variations in conflict resolution. This approach can be applied broadly in onomastics research to gain a deeper understanding of struggles over names, and to explain why some names become involved in conflicts while others do not.

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