Birth-Order Name Series across languages and cultures

Keywords: Anthropolinguistics, Morpholexical typology, Onomastics, Cross-linguistic semantics, Kinship lexicon

Workshop proposal for the 60th Annual Meeting of the *Societas Linguistica Europæa* (SLE 2027), Košice, 25-28 August 2027

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While the assignment of personal names to newborn children is often treated as a matter of idiosyncratic cultural preference, a significant number of languages across the globe exhibit a remarkable phenomenon commonly known as **birth-order names** or **BONs** (see, for instance BRADLEY, 2007 or SARVASY, 2013) or **kin numeratives** (following BENEDICT, 1945)[1]: that is, *a closed, paradigmatic set of names or labels assigned to a child according to his birth order.*

Despite their presence in across diverse linguistic macro-areas (including North America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Mainland Southeast Asia, New Guinea, and Australia) birth-order name series remain under-researched in mainstream typological and morphosyntactic literature. Existing studies tend to treat them either as localised anthropological curiosities, or as marginal features of specific language descriptions. This workshop aims at providing the first attempt of a cross-linguistic typology of birth-order name series, based upon the description of this phenomenon in different languages and different regions.

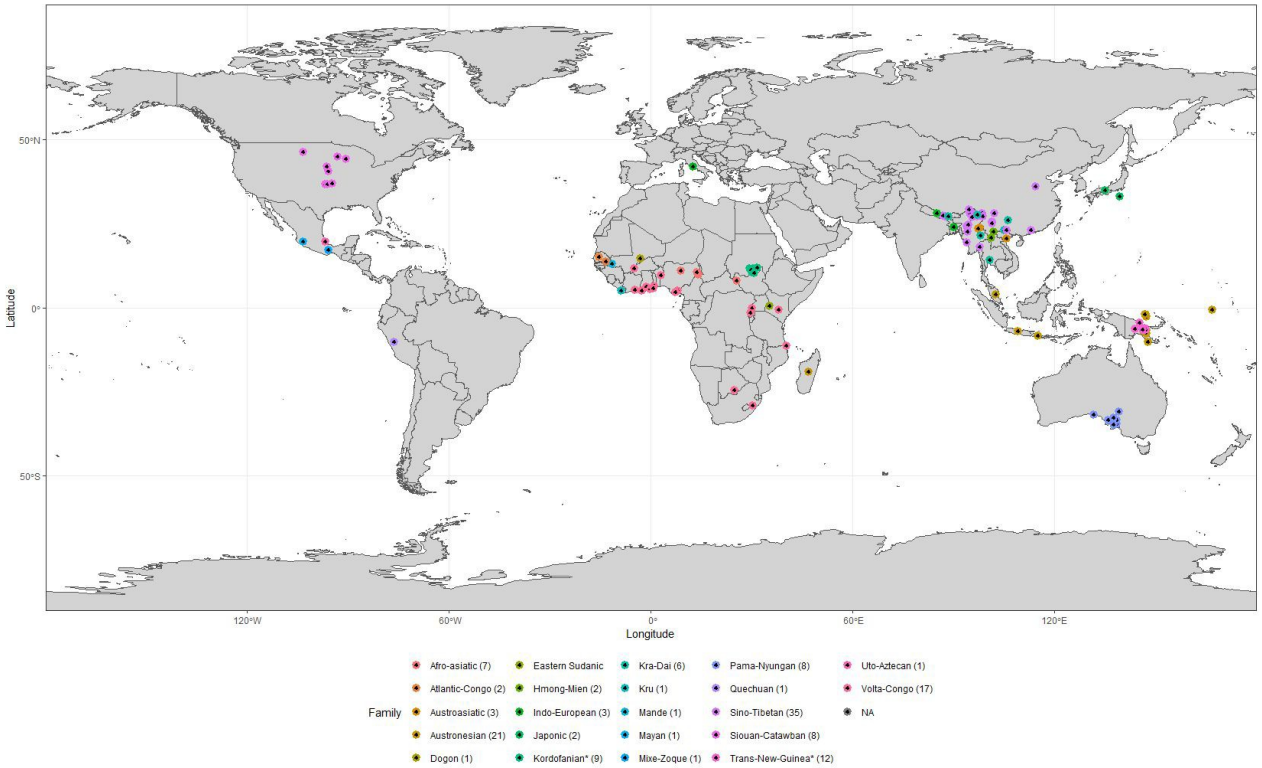


Figure 1 – Map of Birth-Order Names in 145 Languages, coloured by Language Family (drawn with R)

1 Additional names for this phenomenon in the specialised literature include ‘cardinal birth names’, ‘numeral names’, ‘number-names’, ‘ordinal names’, ‘positional names’ and ‘serial names’, among other.

Key research questions and goals:

This workshop aims at moving beyond simple onomastics to examine these systems through a morpholexical and functional lens. Thus, we welcome submissions that address – but are not limited to – the four following core research questions:

1. **Morphological Strategies, i.e.** how are BON series constructed morphologically?

In this perspective, we will distinguish between:
- **Ordinal**-derived systems (transparently linked to cardinal/ordinal numerals),
- **Comparative** systems (transparently linked to adjectives or age-relative kinship terms)
- **Suppletive and lexically obscure** systems (based on unsegmentable paradigmatic roots)

2. **Gender-division, i.e.:** How do languages structure gender distinction within BON paradigms?

In that regard, we will compare:
- **Single gender-neutral** series
- **Parallel binary** series (distinct male vs. female series)
- **Gender-asymmetric systems** (e.g., gendered markers affixed to gender-neutral birth-order roots).

3. **Series' size and composition, i.e.:** What are the cognitive and structural limits of BON series?

We will notably explore:
- **Threshold sizes** (e.g., capping at a given number of children)
- **Strategies for overflow children** (e.g., recursive cycles, generic primary or terminal markers, resumption of default nominals, etc.)
- **Areal interactions**, including language contact and borrowing of BON series.
- etc.

4. **Anthropological dimension, i.e.:** How do BONs function within local kinship and address systems?

Finally, our workshop will also tackle the complex question of the use of birth-order names within the different linguistic communities[2], and of their link with the local kinship system, especially its possible correlation with social primogeniture, age hierarchies or lineage structures.

Geographical & Typological Scope:

In order to establish a comprehensive typological spectrum, this workshop hopes to bring together specialists working on diverse language families across several major linguistic areas, including:
- **North America** (Mississippi Valley region – Siouan Languages)
- **West Africa** (from coastal regions up to the Mali plateau – Atlantic, Mande and Gur languages)
- **East Africa** (Nuba Mountain region of Sudan – 'Kordofanian' languages)
- **East and South East Asia** (especially in the Mainland Southeast Asia linguistic area: Transhimalayan, Austroasiatic, Hmong-Mien, Kra-Dai and Austronesian languages)
- **Eastern New Guinea** (especially the Finisterre Range – TNG and Austronesian languages)
- **Southern Australia** (Spencer Gulf and Gulf Saint-Vincent regions – Thura-Yura Pama-Nyungan)

By integrating empirical data from these regions into a cohesive typological framework, we aim at establishing birth-order names as a distinct category in nominal typology and inspire systematic future research bridging onomastics, linguistic anthropology and cross-linguistic semantics.

2 Namely, whether they are used as nicknames or appellatives, as additional names or affixes alongside a more 'official' or legal name name, or as the sole commonly used autonym.

Please note that the working language of this workshop is solely **English**. We invite contributions dealing with the above questions either in individual languages, specific areas or families, or through a more theoretical perspective. However, priority will be given to contributions addressing that topic within a broader perspective.

Please send your preliminary abstract of no more than 100-words to the workshop convenors (etienne.baudel@gmail.com, enock_tieku@eva.mpg.de, woutervanbeek@hetnet.nl) by **November 10th 2026**. Please include four to five keywords as well as your affiliation and email address. Your short abstract will be included in the workshop proposal and if the proposal is accepted, contributors will be asked to submit a 500-word abstract by January 15th 2027.

Provisional references:

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