Proper names are a standard topic of anthropological research, focusing on the variety of naming systems across cultures and on the role of names in social relationships and verbal interactions (for a recent collection, see The Anthropology of names and naming, edited by Gabriele vom Bruck and Barbara Bodenhorn; Cambridge UP 2006). Proper names are also a standard topic in philosophy of language, where their contribution to the meaning of the utterances in which they occur raises a number of challenging issues. A major philosophical approach to proper names is that proposed by Saul Kripke in Naming and Necessity (1980) where he suggested that when a proper name, say "Plato", is effectively used, it succeeds in referring to the name-bearer via a causal chain that relates, through often countless acts of communication, the present use to the initial naming of Plato. With the role it gives to cultural transmission, this "causal theory of reference" (extended to natural kinds name by Hilary Putnam) can be seen as a properly anthropological theory. It has rarely however been fleshed out or discussed by anthropologists (Atran Cognitive Foundations of Natural History: Towards an Anthropology of Science,1990, pp 64-71, is one interesting exception), nor have philosophers paid much attention to the anthropology of proper names. As for the psychology of proper names, it has remained until recently an underdeveloped topic.

The last issue of Mind and language, Volume 24 Issue 4 (September 2009), with five papers on proper names, is particularly welcome in this context. It helps bridge the gap between philosophy and psychology. I hope it will inspire someone to work further on bridging the gap with anthropology. Read on for the abstracts.

"The Neuropsychology of Proper Names", by CARLO SEMENZA, (pp. 347 – 369)
ABSTRACT: The difference between common and proper names seems to derive from specific semantic characteristics of proper names. In particular, proper names refer to specific individual entities or events, and unlike common names, rarely map onto more general semantic characteristics (attributes, concepts, categories). This fact makes the link proper names have with their reference particularly fragile. Processing proper names seems, as a consequence, to require special cognitive and neural resources. Neuropsychological findings show that proper names and common names follow functionally distinct processing pathways. These pathways are neurally distinct and differently sensitive to focal or generalized brain damage, cognitive changes with age or lack of organic resources. Their precise location, depending on specific tasks, is still partly unknown.

"The Significance of Names" by ROBIN JESHION (pp. 370-403)
ABSTRACT: As a class of terms and mental representations, proper names and mental names possess an important function that outstrips their semantic and psycho-semantic functions as common, rigid devices of direct reference and singular mental representations of their referents, respectively. They also function as abstract linguistic markers that signal and underscore their referents' individuality. I promote this thesis to explain why we give proper names to certain particulars, but not others; to account for the transfer of singular thought via communication with proper names; and, more generally, to support a cognitivist, not acquaintance or instrumentalist, theory of singular thought.

"Proper Names in Early Word Learning: Rethinking a Theoretical Account of Lexical Development" by D. GEOFFREY HALL (pp. 404-432)

ABSTRACT: There is evidence that children learn both proper names and count nouns from the outset of lexical development. Furthermore, children's first proper names are typically words for people, whereas their first count nouns are commonly terms for other objects, including artifacts. I argue that these facts represent a challenge for two well-known theoretical accounts of object word learning. I defend an alternative account, which credits young children with conceptual resources to acquire words for both individual objects and object categories, and conceptual biases to construe some objects (notably people) as individuals in their own right and most other objects as instances of their category.

"A Strictly Millian Approach to the Definition of the Proper Name" by RICHARD COATES (pp. 433-444)
ABSTRACT: A strictly Millian approach to proper names is defended, i.e. one in which expressions when used properly ('onymically') refer directly, i.e. without the semantic intermediaryship of the words that appear to comprise them. The approach may appear self-evident for names which appear to have no component parts (in current English) but less so for others. Two modes of reference are distinguished for potentially ambiguous expressions such as The Long Island. A consequence of this distinction is to allow a speculative neurolinguistics of proper ('onymic') and semantic ('non-onymic') reference. A further consequence is that translation of onymically referring expressions is impossible (since they have no semantic content), and some apparently self-evident objections to this view are met by insisting on a distinction between a proper name as a referring expression and its etymology. The nature of the linguistic mechanism(s) by which an expression becomes proper (i.e. loses sense) shows that etymological opacity is a precondition for the survival of words in certain proper names, furnishing evidence for reference without sense. The process of becoming proper amounts to abrogation of sense for the purpose of reference, which is precisely the requirement for a systematic defence of Mill.

"Experimental Philosophy and the Theory of Reference" by MAX DEUTSCH (pp. 445-466)
ABSTRACT: It is argued on a variety of grounds that recent results in 'experimental philosophy of language', which appear to show that there are significant cross-cultural differences in intuitions about the reference of proper names, do not pose a threat to a more traditional mode of philosophizing about reference. Some of these same grounds justify a complaint about experimental philosophy as a whole.