

# PULL A [PROPER NAME]

MAUREEN KOSSE

*University of Colorado Boulder*

This paper considers the PULL A PROPER NAME (PAPN) construction in English. The bulk of onomastic research in linguistics present proper names as a word class with ‘unique reference’, often comparing them to deictic expressions (cf. Searle 1969). Unlike deictics, however, names are interpretable beyond the immediate linguistic context. Accounts from sociocultural and cognitive linguistics dispute the notion of unique reference, instead arguing that proper names vary in everyday use. Proper names typically invoke specific persons; however, the data provided here indicates that names are frequently used as metonymic framing devices for specific events, generic scenarios, and hypothetical figures of personhood (Agha 2007, Dancygier 2011, Ainiala and Östman 2017). Using examples from Twitter, this preliminary analysis compares tokens of *pull a Britney [Spears]* and *pull a Karen* along their constructional and conceptual qualities. While tokens of *pull a Britney* evoke a specific person and event in time (Spears’ well-known mental breakdown in 2007), tokens of *pull a Karen* are generic in nature and index a broad array of attitudes, personality traits and behaviors. The findings of this paper support Dancygier’s (2011) claim that onomastic study should center the constructional qualities of proper names as used in real-life examples from discourse.

*Keywords:* naming, onomastics, constructional compositionality, proper names

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The data for this project was collected from the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) and supplemented by tokens from the Twitter Search API. The *pull a [proper name]* (PAPN) construction generally means “to behave in a similar manner to PN.” The construction is used to draw similarities between the speaking context and the qualities or events associated with the proper name. The pattern is idiomatic for two reasons: (1) its meaning cannot be identified by the composite meanings of its parts and (2) the required proper noun adds to the idiomaticity of this construction. In the examples below, understanding the utterance requires prerequisite knowledge of the entity named by a proper noun. Some examples have additional context cues indicating what sort of behavior is associated with a given name, while others do not. In context, (1) belongs to a discussion about the behavior of late Republican politician John McCain. During the 2008 US Presidential election against Barack Obama, critics lambasted McCain for failing to reach out effectively to his base. Without understanding John McCain’s political history, it would not be possible to understand *don’t pull a John McCain* as ‘do not become complacent.’

TABLE 1

1	Don't <b>pull a John McCain</b> .
2	<b>Pull a John Galt</b> , ditch, and this will speed up the decline.
3	Did <b>he pull a John Wayne</b> , or a <b>Dirty Harry</b> when he came out with guns ablaze?
4	He has made a commitment to me that he will not <b>pull a Michael Ross</b> .
5	Are you trying to <b>pull a Michael Mann</b> ?
6	You need to pull a <b>Michael Jordan</b> and come back for a third time.
7	[Americans] are not leaving unless the Iraqis basically <b>pull a Iran</b> on Washington

I found PAPN in the Oxford English Dictionary online, under the entry *pull*, v. Below, I include the senses of *pull* that I believe to be most relevant. The action of *pulling* refers to drawing something closer to oneself by one's own strength (in earliest known usage *pull* was used for feathers, hair, fruits and vegetables).

TABLE 2

*pull*, v.

7a.	To say or do (something) with intent to deceive, or to impress or shock, etc.; Also with <i>on</i> .	1894 'Pull the sick list' ...to get on the sick list when not ill. 1915 Don't pull any of that dope on me. 1937 Not that I think anyone would pull the same trick twice.
7b.	to behave in a manner characteristic of or associated with (the person specified).	1911 Strunk pulled a Ty Cobb on Henry in the seventh, scoring from second. 1931 To 'pull a Lindbergh' means to do something heroic, but to 'go Lindbergh' means to get the flying fever in a rather callow manner. 2004 Worried that he'd pull a Hendrix and choke on his own vomit, Fitch rolled him onto his side.
7c.	To make (a foolish mistake), to perpetrate (a blunder).	1913 [He] got his signals mixed and pulled a boner.

The definition provided by 7b. describes most instances of PAPN, but I believe that all three of the senses I present here are relevant to our understanding of this construction as a negative stancetaking device (Du Bois 2007; Jaffe 2009). While these definitions are helpful in assessing

the overall meaning of PAPN, we must also examine the construction in use. Here are a few more examples from my data:

TABLE 3

8	Bento should have probably <b>pulled a Spain</b> and played without a striker.
9	<b>pull a kim k n</b> force them 😊😊
10	<b>pull a vp</b> and fade into obscurity
11	They need to <b>pull a WWE</b> and just make this shit \$10 a month
12	I thought Buttigieg <b>was gonna pull a Beto</b> . Why is he still here?
13	He is backpedaling so hard he is going to <b>pull a Superman 2</b> and turn the planet backwards

In function, PAPN is used to indirectly compare two scenarios: that of the subject referent and the qualities/events/personality of the proper name referent. (12) compares the Pete Buttigieg presidential campaign to that of Beto O’Rourke. In this example, *pull a Beto* means ‘to withdraw from candidacy.’ In many cases, PAPN is followed by an elaborating clause introduced by *and*.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMING

For the purpose of brevity, I frame this paper using three sources which best represent my analytical approach to PAPN. There is already a large existing body of onomastic work that crosses into pragmatics and language philosophy that links names to deixis and to definiteness (cf. Searle 1969; Kripke 1980). In *The Grammar of Names* (2007) Anderson challenges this conceptualization:

Unlike deictics, names are not dependent on the immediate non-linguistic context. But, of course, again unlike deictics, the use of a name like *Basil* for identification presupposes that the speaker and addressee have participated, together or separately, in a naming to them, as *Basil*, of the same entity, and that, if separate namings are involved, they have ascertained that their namings correspond (217).

In other words, the acts of identifying and naming a referent are socially informed and collaborative. Using similar argumentation, Ainiala and Östman (2017) advocate for what they call the “socio-onomastic” approach to naming. They note that “traditional” onomastics most often analyze from either a diachronic or a typological perspective. In both of these analyses, scholars

attempt to track the structure and trajectory of a name across space, time, and language groups. Ainiala and Östman focus instead on the everyday use and variation of names in discourse, with the intent to bring onomastics into conversation with contemporary sociolinguistics. The authors point out that, like other words and word-like objects, proper names are variable and have different associations according to place, time, and community (Ainiala and Östman 2017).

Most crucially, I rely on Dancygier (2011). Dancygier argues that contrary to prior analysis interprets proper names (PNs) as having “unique reference,” meaning that proper names have traditionally been defined as “specialized pointers to objects, locations, or people in the actual world” (2011:208). According to Dancygier, traditional grammars note that proper nouns do not typically take articles or modifiers which is taken to indicate their ‘unique reference’. Noting that traditional grammars tend to lack real-life examples from discourse, Dancygier challenges the distinctness of proper names from common nouns by examining their constructional properties. Inspired by Turner and Fauconnier’s blending theory of constructions, Dancygier argues for a construction-specific mechanism called *constructional compositionality* (Dancygier and Sweetster 2005). As work in blending theory has suggested, constructional forms may appear in non-prototypical contexts, and as such contribute to the meaning of the utterance in ways relying on selective projection, rather than only appearing in fully-profiled constructions (Dancygier 2011:209).

### 3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: *BRITNEY* AND *KAREN*

In this section, I show that *pull a [proper name]* has two distinct construals: one more specific, and one more generic. Anderson (2007) argues that proper names can land on a *cline of genericness for utterances* that ranges in specificity (228). Anderson notes that the cline is quite fuzzy<sup>1</sup> and that an utterance may be understood as more specific/generic in relation to speaking context. Here, I provide examples scaling from most specific (a) to most generic (d):

TABLE 4

a	Merkel is a stinky, misbehaved cat.	Definite, most specific
b	[pointing at a cat] That cat is chunky.	Definite, specific
c	A long time ago, there were saber-toothed cats	Indefinite, non-specific but tensed ( <i>were</i> ) which adds specificity
d	A cat is an intelligent animal.	Indefinite, most generic

While analyzing data for PAPN, I noticed a great deal of variation when it came to referent specificity. I made note of PNs that appear most frequently in my data: *Britney [Spears]*, *[Donald] Trump*, *[Bill] Clinton*, and *Karen*. To preserve my own sanity, I chose *Britney* and *Karen* as my case studies.

To *pull a Britney [Spears]* means something akin to ‘have a meltdown’ or, more specifically, ‘have a meltdown and shave one’s head’. Spears’ surname rarely appears in the data; I believe it speaks to the iconicity of Britney Spears as a performer and the massive impact her 2007 public breakdown/liberatory head shaving had on pop culture. In a sense, the indefinite article is misleading; after all, we know this isn’t ‘a’ Britney, it’s ‘the’ Britney. This leads me to think that *pull a Britney* isn’t about Britney Spears alone; instead, I will pull a Dancygier (2011) and argue that, in these examples, the PN *Britney* metonymically represents the entire *2007 Britney Spears Mental Health Crisis* event.

FIGURE 1. THE ONE AND ONLY BRITNEY SPEARS



TABLE 5

*pull a Britney*

14	Please don't <b>pull a Britney</b> though!
15	She didn't <b>pull a Britney</b> and shave her head in front of the paparazzi.
16	Don't make me <b>pull a Britney 2007</b>
17	How does it feel knowing somewhere out there one of your fans would probably <b>pull a Britney Spears 2007</b> just to make you laugh?

In these examples, *Britney* has a specific definite referent (Britney Spears). Britney Spears hit superstar status in the pop music industry in the 90s, and by 2007 Spears’ public persona suffered under the misogynistic panopticon of US popular culture, faced with constant paparazzi harassment as well as abuse from family members, partners, and the music industry at large. While the causes of this event are too manifold to outline for the purpose of this analysis, this ultimately culminated in an infamous public breakdown during February 2007, wherein Spears shaved her head. In all of the examples (and in all of the instances of *Britney* in my dataset), *pull a Britney* is used to refer to a public meltdown. It interests me that the OED sense of PAPN does not seem to adequately cover the use of *pull a Britney*. Yes, these examples could be understood to mean “to behave in a manner similar to Britney Spears,” yet all of the instances refer to one specific event. This reading is further emphasized by (16) and (17), which both use *2007* to further specify *Britney*. All instances of *pull a Britney* actually refer to this one event, metonymically represented by the name *Britney*. As mentioned in the introduction, speakers use PAPN to compare scenarios between the subject referent and the PN referent.

TABLE 6

18	I’m about to <b>pull a Britney</b> and shave my head. I’m on that level today.
19	waiting for a final grade to be put into blackboard while you have an 88.5 in a class? same. I’m about to <b>pull a Britney Spears</b> I’m so stressed
20	Don Lemon is having such a meltdown <b>I’m just waiting for him to pull a Britney Spears.</b>

In (18) and (19), both speakers compare their own emotional state to that of Britney Spears; in (20), the speaker overtly links Don Lemon’s alleged meltdown to this same event. I argue that the definite and specific qualities of the PN *Britney* and the notoriety of her mental health struggles facilitate a construal that focuses on events. In contrast, I believe that more generic PNs facilitate a construal focused on the stereotypical personality traits and behaviors, as in *pull a Karen*.

In online use, the PN *Karen* does not have a particular referent; rather, *Karen* refers to a stereotypical *figure of personhood*, “socially recognizable personae that can be performed through semiotic enactment” (Agha 2007). *Karen* is not the only generic PN used this way in the data; PNs like *Becky* appear frequently as well (though *Becky* denotes a different kind of persona). The meme below, called the “Karen Starter Pack,” we can see some of the semiotic resources associated with the *Karen* persona:



While *pull a Karen* functions similarly to *pull a Britney*, the *Karen* examples do not refer to an event but rather how a “Karen”-type person might approach the scenario at hand. There is no specific referent called *Karen*; in these examples, *Karen* is an abstract social figure based on stereotypes of middle-aged WASPs/soccer moms/suburbanites. This brings me to the important part of the analysis: how important is genericness to PAPN?

PAPN functions similarly across both the *Britney* and the *Karen* sets, but I argue that PAPN can access different scales of comparison relative to the specificity of the PN. In the case of *pull a Britney*, the name *Britney* profiles the larger frame event (the *2007 Britney Mental Health Crisis*). Dancygier (2011) argues that proper names should be understood in terms of their “specific and rich” framing (209). Contrary to analyses of proper names which merely writes them off as ‘nouns with unique reference’, Dancygier states that rich, complex frames guide discourse such that only one referent can fit the frame evoked. Drawing from the idea of constructions as blends (Fauconnier and Turner 2002), Dancygier and Sweetser (2005) propose a mechanism called *constructional compositionality*:

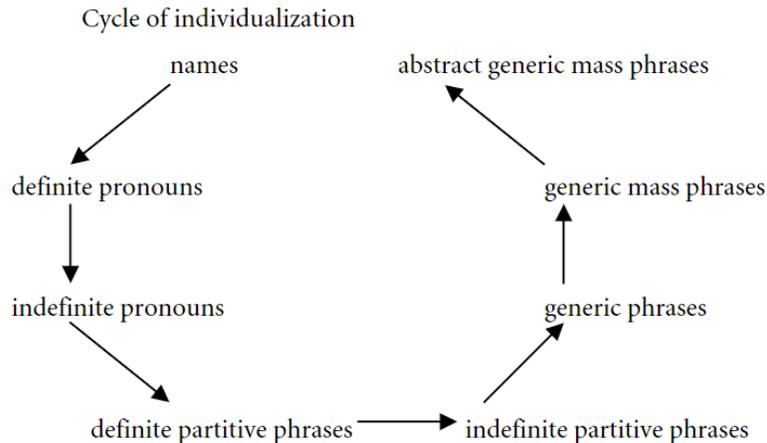
The concept reflects various observations suggesting that construction specific forms (such verb forms) may appear in contexts other than fully-profiled constructions and contribute to the overall meaning in ways relying on selective projection (as described in blending theory), rather than on the additive mechanisms of compositional semantics (Dancygier 2011:209).

Constructional compositionality relies on *frame metonymy*. Frame metonymy describes a usage in which one aspect of a frame is used to evoke the entire frame. A proper name may evoke certain frames which influence its construal in discourse (Dancygier 2011:212). For example, when a diner at Table 3 is ready to pay, a server may say to another, “Table 3 wants her check.” Customers and table numbers are closely related within the ‘restaurant’ frame that a table number can metonymically represent the customer. An utterance like *Table 3 wants her check* makes sense between two servers in a restaurant but not between two mathematicians for whom *Table 3* might evoke a different frame entirely.

*Pull a Britney* is a quintessential representation of frame metonymy. Every single instance of *pull a Britney* was, in fact, a reference to an event that built up over the course of years, finally culminating in a drastic public spectacle that defines her career even a decade later. Britney herself

is not only the center of the event, but an event so iconic that her name evokes a hyperspecified frame. On the other hand, we have the *Karen* data, where *Karen* is a hypothetical figure of personhood linked to a generic scenario (unnecessarily invoking conflicts and/or authority figures). It is remarkable to me that *pull a Karen* is used so similarly by unrelated speakers. In my opinion, this suggests that *Karen* might be undergoing some level of grammaticalization. Both of these examples show the exact same construction (PAPN). In theory, Dancygier’s analysis should account for both *pull a Britney* and *pull a Karen*, but I am not convinced that it does. *Pull a Britney* evokes an obvious, singular reading because the 2007 Britney Spears Meltdown is deeply woven into American pop culture. But there is no one Karen, and instead the name *Karen* metonymically evokes a frame concerning the behaviors and traits of middle-class white women (ie. a *figure of personhood*). The contrasts explored in this section reflect what Anderson (2007) calls the *cycle of individualization* (236):

FIGURE 3. CYCLE OF INDIVIDUALIZATION (ANDERSON 2007)



In future work, I would like to revisit how genericness and individualization of proper names affect construal in the PAPN construction.

#### 4. IDIOMATIC PROPERTIES

In this section, I analyze PAPN constructionally, drawing from the paradigm set by Croft and Cruse (2004). While normally I am far more interested in verbs, I believe that the PN in this construction is the source of its rich idiomaticity.

TABLE 8

conventionality	Interpretation of PAPN requires additional, complex knowledge concerning the PN referent.
inflexibility	PAPN can take various tense and aspect markers, but the PN referent does not seem to take modification other than an indefinite article. *A Britney was pulled by my sister ?Tomorrow I'll pull a big Karen
figuration	PAPN is a metonymic device in which proper names profile larger frames of reference (Dancygier 2011). The PN serves as an emblem or metonymic standin for the event or traits associated with the PN referent.
proverbiality	Anderson (2007:222) writes, "rather obviously, use of a name for identification presupposes prior nomination." PAPN requires the hearer to have some knowledge concerning the PN referent.
informality	Informal <sup>3</sup>
affect	PAPN is most frequently used to draw a negative comparison between two similar scenarios. The data also indicates that PAPN stacks with the malefactive <i>on</i> construction, e.g. <i>Don't pull a Trump on the American people</i> . Knowledge of the PN referent is also an example of <i>indexical competency</i> or 'know how' (Silverstein 2003).

5. CONCLUSION: FUTURE DIRECTIONS

While gathering Twitter data for this project, I noticed three other *pull* constructions that, while not strictly PAPN, have a similar structure and meaning. I am especially interested in the third construction, *pull a "quote."* In examples 31-34, the quoted text metonymically evokes the context in which one might habitually hear such an utterance. I wonder if the quotation in this construction is analogous to the proper name in PAPN? It is a highly idiomatic way to reference a situation, and is worth further examination.

TABLE 9

X needs to pull a page out of Y's book	28	<b>Kirby needs to pull a page from Dabos book.</b> Those boys get away with everything. Including but not limited to [various malefactive activities]
pull a [political] card	29	Yeah <b>plz make sure they don't pull a liberal card</b> on this one
	30	You soft ass bammmas are all the same. Get in your feelings and you <b>pull a race card...</b> 🤡
pull a "quote"	31	Lmao in-laws are good pretenders shame. They will like you until you get comfortable, <b>just when you're comfortable they will pull a "Don't think you know somebody"</b> 🤡🤡 lmao.
	32	when shells n david <b>pull a „we got scammed and don't have tix“</b> to get in somehow
	33	If he literally drops [a song] on Christmas Day, <b>I'm gonna pull a "fuck it" and cover it for his birthday</b>
	34	I live within 30 miles of a nuclear reactor as well <b>so don't try to pull a "but my community" argument.</b>

There other elements that I treat as uncontroversial in this paper, but interest me on a broader level. For instance, I return to example (13) from earlier:

13	He is backpedaling so hard he is going to <b>pull a Superman 2</b> and turn the planet backwards
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The PAPN construction is far more complex than I initially assumed. PAPN relies on metonymy as its primary mechanism. Speakers need to have a great degree of shared knowledge in order to correctly identify a proper noun referent (and thus the evoked frame). There were many instances of the PAPN construction that made absolutely no sense to me because I do not listen to Korean pop music or watch televised sports. Are there any meaningful differences between human proper names and other types of proper nouns like titles? What about corporate entities, as in *will Disney pull a Netflix?* I think that this avenue of inquiry has a lot of potential, especially to see how well metaphors gain their specific construal via different constructions. PAPN is also used to dramatic social effect. It demonstrates a negative evaluative stance on the part of the speaker as they draw an unfavorable comparison between the syntactic subject and the PN referent in the predicate. This study also raises questions on reference, iconicity, and proper names from a diachronic perspective; how, over time, do proper names come to be associated with specific social

dimensions? This would be an excellent opportunity for cognitive and sociocultural linguistics to come into this conversation, as it is increasingly clear how each enriches the other.

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ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> While Anderson frames this as a potential problem with the model, I think its indistinct boundaries better reflect the variation we observe in casual speech.

<sup>2</sup> Note the modal *finna*, used in African American English; Karen crosses dialects!

<sup>3</sup> Small caveat: since Twitter is arguably an informal speech area, this is an informed guess.