

# Do Objects in Real-World Images Have a Canonical Name?

Anonymous EMNLP-IJCNLP submission

## Abstract

Research in language & vision commonly acknowledges the fact that speakers can interpret and describe visual scenes in many different ways, cf. work on image captioning. Individual visual objects and their names, however, are usually modeled in simple annotation tasks where objects are labeled with a single canonical name. This typically rests on the assumption that linguistic variants of these canonical names that would occur in natural naming situations (e.g. when referring to an object) can be retrieved from a taxonomy like WordNet. We put these assumptions to an empirical test and elicit (from 36 subjects) a dataset of non-canonicalized object names on top of 25k objects of the VisualGenome dataset. Our results reveal a XXX (*//cs: ?some/slight? opposite of decent – whatever decent means//*) variation in how speakers name an individual object, and even a high variation in names for objects of the same category. *//cs: Is with category ANIMAL meant, or more dog –; many images of dog, high variation?// //cs: Should it made explicit that most instances have more than one name?// //cs: What does "decent" mean?//* We furthermore observe that most of the alternatives for the original name in VisualGenome cannot be retrieved via hierarchical relations encoded in WordNet. Instead, a major portion of the variation is accounted for by more complex relations like cross-classification of objects, metonymy or variation due to visual uncertainty. We investigate whether a state-of-the-art model of object labeling implicitly encodes similar variation in object naming and discuss implications for research in language & vision.

## 1 Introduction

Expressions describing or referring to objects in visual scenes typically include object names: e.g., *cheesecake* or *dessert* in Figure ?? . Determining

these object names is a core aspect of virtually every language & vision task, ranging from e.g. referring expression generation to visual dialogue (?). We investigate the extent to which there is variation in the names chosen by different people for the same object, and its implications for research in language & vision.

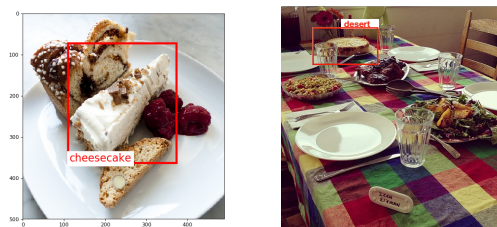


Figure 1: Two objects of the same type of cake, with different names in VisualGenome

Our paper puts together two strands of research that have mostly been pursued independently to date. On the one hand, state-of-the-art computer vision systems are able to accurately classify images into thousands of different categories (e.g. ?), where the task is often to predict the name for a given object. *//g: Is this true? Imagenet task asks for synsets, which can be taken to be categories...To refine//* However, they mostly adopt very simple assumptions with respect to the underlying lexicon, which is implemented as a simple, flat labeling scheme: A standard object recognition system would be trained to classify the left object in Figure 1 as *cheesecake*, the right one as *dessert*, and using *dessert* for the left picture would be considered incorrect. On the other hand, research on object naming in Cognitive Science has shown that people choose different names depending on the circumstances, with factors such as context or the prototypicality of the object with respect to the category playing a role (?). *//g: This research also argues that there is high agreement*

*in how people name objects; to do: make coherent.*// However, this research typically uses stylized drawings are used, and is focused on taxonomic relations (*sparrow-bird*). *//sz: It is thus unclear how findings from these stylized settings generalize to tasks in language & vision like referring expression generation, where naming is a core aspect. Therefore, in contrast to traditional naming norm studies in Cognitive Science we study object naming in realistic scenes where objects are situated in a natural context! (This comes with additional challenges, like potential object occlusion, background/foreground confusion etc.)*//

In our study, we collect large-scale object naming data via crowdsourcing. Like object naming studies in Cognitive Science, we collect multiple names per object (concretely, 36); like most work on language & vision, we use natural images *//sz: (showing objects in complex visual contexts, surrounded by other objects, not ImageNet-like images)*// on a large scale, annotating objects in 25K images from the Visual Genome dataset. We analyze the agreement in object naming across subjects, and the sources of variation. We find that: *//g: To be put in paragraph form*//

- there is quite a high level of agreement in the task, with the relative frequency of the most common name being 70% on average. This is in accordance with previous results in Cognitive Science (?);
- the level of agreement in object naming is much higher in certain domains than in others; as it happens, the domains that have been traditionally used in object naming research (e.g. animals) seem to display the highest amount of agreement in our data set;
- most of the variation in our dataset comes from alternative names that do not stand in a taxonomic relation, suggesting that the previous work in Cognitive Science is missing much of the empirical ground.

our datasets contains a lot of variability for names coming from different parts of the taxonomy (*dessert* vs. *cake*, *bottle* vs. *wine*)

Moreover, we analyze whether current models implicitly encode the variation in naming, by doing XXX. We find YYY.

## 2 Data collection

## 3 Analysis: Agreement

In this Section, we investigate to what extent names annotated in VisualGenome and elicited in ManyNames can be considered canonical, i.e. to what extent speakers agree in their naming choices. Whereas traditional picture naming studies typically use a prototypical image per category and, hence, are mostly interested in the agreement on concept or category-level, we carry out an analysis on two different levels: First, we will look at instances and see to what extent names overlap for the same object. Second, we will use the existing annotation of names in VG to analyze agreement on the level of categories.

### 3.1 Measures

We compute the following agreement measures:

- **% top**: the average relative frequency of the most frequent response (shown in percent)
- **H**: the *H* agreement measure used previously in the psycholinguistic literature
- **N**: the average number of types in the response set of MN
- **N<sub>>1</sub>**: the average number of types, excluding types that have been annotated only once
- **top=VG**: the proportion of items where the top response in MN corresponds to the VG name
- **% VG**: the average relative frequency of the VG name in the response set

For measuring **instance-level agreement**, we consider all names annotated for an object as a response set and then average over these response sets. Furthermore, we compute **category-level agreement** by merging the response sets for all objects that have the same VG name and compute the measures over these aggregated response sets.

### 3.2 Results

Table 1 shows the analysis of the instance-level and category-level agreement. On the instance-level, our annotators achieve a fair amount of overlap in their object naming choices. Thus, for roughly 70% of our objects, the most frequent response in MN corresponds to the original VG

name and, similarly, the average frequency of the top response is also 70%. Generally, this seems to suggest that indeed many objects in our data set have a canonical name. At the same time, the average number of name types per object (5.7 and 2.9, when excluding low-frequency types in each response set) suggests that there is a stable amount of naming variants that can be elicited for instances. Furthermore, the agreement varies quite considerably among domains: in the animal domain, which is often discussed in the object naming literature, annotators achieve a very stable and robust agreement over 90% and an  $H$  agreement which comes close to 0 (where 0 is perfect agreement). The people domain, on the other hand, is subject to much more variation and agreement is dramatically lower here, and comes close to 50% for % top.

Finally, the category-level agreement figures tell yet another story: when aggregating the responses for all objects with the same VG name, we obtain on average 28 types (with  $n > 1$ ), i.e. 27 variants of the original VG name. Surprisingly, here, only 29.4% of the aggregated response sets still have the VG name as the most frequent response, which means that for 70% of the VG names, annotators in MN, on average, prefer a different name. Likewise, the relative frequency of the top response drops considerably and  $H$  increases from 1.3 for instance-level agreement to 2.4 on object-level agreement. What does this discrepancy between the instance-level and category-level agreement in VG and MN naming choices mean? First of all, it suggests that the same original VG name can trigger very different variants depending on the visual instance, leading to a drastic increase of variants elicited for categories as compared to instances. Second, this clearly shows that annotators in VG do not generally annotate the most canonical name and that many names annotated for objects in VG do not correspond to the overall most preferred variant. *//sz: think more ...//*

### 3.3 Qualitative Analysis

*//sz: put qualitative discussion here//* Table 2 shows examples for canonical and non-canonical VG names in our data set, where canonical means that the name was the top response in the aggregated response set in MN.

## 4 Analysis: Taxonomy

Previous work on large-scale collections of labels or names of objects has (explicitly or implicitly) assumed that once naming data is canonical, linguistic alternatives of the canonical name can simply be retrieved from existing taxonomies like e.g. WordNet. If this was indeed the case, it would be feasible (and probably even desirable) to canonicalize object names during dataset collection, without losing too much information about linguistic variations in natural object naming scenarios (like e.g. referring expression generation). Hence, in this Section, we investigate to what extent the variation in object naming that we find in our MN data set (see previous Section) is covered by WordNet.

### 4.1 Lexical relations

In this section, we take a closer look at the lexical variation we observe in our data set. We analyze the data points where participants attributed different names to the same object and extract a set of pairwise **naming variants**. These naming variants correspond to pairs of words that can be used interchangeably to name certain objects. For each object, we extract the set of naming variants  $s = \{(w_{top}, w_2), (w_{top}, w_3), (w_{top}, w_4), \dots\}$  where  $w_{top}$  is the most frequent name annotated for the object and  $w_2 \dots w_n$  constitute the less frequent alternatives of  $w_{top}$ . The **type frequency** of a naming variant  $(w_{top}, w_x)$  corresponds to the number of objects where this variant occurs. The **token frequency** of  $(w_{top}, w_x)$  corresponds to the count of all annotations where  $w_x$  has been used instead of  $w_{top}$ . In Table ??, we show the naming variants with the highest raw token frequency for each domain.

The naming variants can be grouped according to their lexical relation, as follows:

- **synonymy**: e.g. aircraft vs. airplane
- **hyponymy**: e.g. man vs. person
- **co-hyponymy**: e.g. swan vs. goose
- **no relation**: e.g. desk vs. apple

Research on object naming following the idea of entry-level categories has, essentially, exclusively looked at names that stand in a hierarchical relation (i.e. hyponymy/hypernymy).

domain	% top	$H$	Instance-level agreement					# Obj	Category-level agreement						# Cat
			N	$N_{>1}$	top=VG	% VG	% top		$H$	N	$N_{>1}$	top=VG	% VG		
people	51.9	2.1	8.6	4.3	49.8	32.3	4533	43.8	2.9	88.5	45.1	20.0	10.9	55	
clothing	63.9	1.6	6.4	3.2	70.2	52.6	2192	50.6	2.5	68.3	32.5	38.5	24.6	39	
home	66.4	1.5	6.3	3.1	78.5	58.8	6292	50.7	2.7	90.6	42.6	39.3	24.9	89	
buildings	66.9	1.5	6.9	3.0	72.6	55.5	967	47.8	2.9	59.9	27.2	27.8	19.2	36	
food	71.3	1.3	5.5	2.9	62.9	52.1	1975	47.0	2.5	31.5	15.0	29.3	19.3	92	
vehicles	72.0	1.1	4.7	2.4	71.1	60.2	4552	56.5	2.0	63.3	30.0	18.4	17.9	49	
animals,plants	91.3	0.4	2.7	1.5	93.8	88.0	4804	67.6	1.5	26.5	12.3	28.1	25.7	89	
all	69.7	1.3	5.7	2.9	72.8	58.7	25315	52.8	2.4	58.2	27.8	29.4	20.9	449	

Table 1: Agreement in naming measured on the level of instances and on the level of VG categories (i.e. after grouping objects by their VG name)

VG name	top5 MN names	n <sub>obj</sub>
<i>Canonical VG names with max agreement in MN</i>		
giraffe	giraffe (96.8), animal (1.2), zebra (0.4), camel (0.3), pole (0.1)	915
zebra	zebra (96.3), animal (1.0), giraffe (0.9), horse (0.2), microwave (0.2)	461
cat	cat (94.8), animal (0.9), kitten (0.8), dog (0.4), laptop (0.2)	754
<i>Canonical VG names with min agreement in MN</i>		
booth	booth (19.3), table (12.3), phone booth (9.8), bench (6.7), building (4.4)	11
cabbage	cabbage (21.4), lettuce (17.0), hotdog (11.9), food (10.7), salad (10.4)	9
robe	robe (22.1), shirt (16.8), jacket (13.3), dress (5.7), clothing (3.2)	19
<i>Non-canon. VG names with max agreement in MN</i>		
sedan	car (88.4), wheel (3.1), vehicle (2.3), automobile (1.3), dog (0.8)	11
pony	horse (83.9), pony (9.1), animal (2.9), donkey (1.1), cow (1.1)	8
necktie	tie (81.4), necktie (10.2), shirt (4.6), ties (1.5), jacket (0.5)	11
<i>Non-canon. VG names with min agreement in MN</i>		
shelter	umbrella (9.7), shelter (8.8), roof (8.0), tent (7.1), building (6.8)	10
bath	shower (13.3), elephant (9.9), bird-bath (8.1), water (7.2), trough (7.2)	10
vegetable	food (15.7), broccoli (13.1), sandwich (10.6), salad (9.3), pizza (7.8)	25

Table 2: Qualitative examples for VG names and their most frequent corresponding responses in the MN data set (percentages shown in brackets), canonical means that the VG name is the top name in MN, and non-canonical vice versa

relation	all MN variants		MN <i>n</i> > 10	
	%token	%types	%token	%types
<i>easy to recover</i>				
meronymy	0.3	0.9	0.8	1.0
synonymy	1.8	6.4	2.5	7.2
hypernymy	8.8	28.2	11.0	31.3
<i>difficult to recover</i>				
holonymy.1	0.2	0.8	0.3	0.9
co-hyponymy	4.8	6.2	6.0	6.4
hyponymy	4.9	6.6	5.5	6.9
<i>not recoverable</i>				
name not covered	7.8	2.8	5.8	2.1
rel not covered	71.3	48.1	68.0	44.2

Table 3: Lexical relations between naming variants in WN and the VG name according to WordNet

We use WordNet to extract lexical relations between the naming variants in our data set. Unfortunately, this means that we have to exclude a certain portion of the data as either (i) one of the name is not covered in WordNet, (ii) we cannot find a lexical relation between the two names (see below). Also, we had to be relatively permissive with respect to the definition of hyponymy/co-hyponymy. For instance, to analyze *giraffe* as a hyponym of *animal* we have to look at the closure of the hyponyms of *animal* with a depth of 8 (in WordNet). *//sz: should we call this co-hyponymy or co-hierarchical relation?//*

*//sz: include Table that reports counts of the naming variants, coverage in WordNet etc.// //g: I think it'd be best to put the out-of-wordnet info in the Lexical relations table – this way we have everything in one place.//*

Table 3 shows the distribution of lexical relations for those naming variants that we were able to analyze with WordNet. Both in terms of their types and token frequency, the naming variants that instantiate a (loose) co-hyponymy relation are by far the most frequent. *//sz: discuss in more*



*detail, discuss: to what extent is this an artefact of WordNet?* This is really interesting: most research on object naming, to date, has focussed on hyponymy/hypernymy, i.e. variation that relates to hierarchical relations between object names. Our data suggests that co-hierarchical variation is really important too.

## 4.2 The “no relation” case

We manually annotated the 100 most frequent name pairs in the “no relation” case. Table ?? shows that, in this category, one third of the pairs do refer to the same object, but the relationship is not captured in WordNet. Most of these cases are arguably coverage issues of WordNet, which doesn’t capture the co-hyponymy of *horse-donkey* or the fact that *vehicle* is hypernym of *train*. *I find this really weird... also some other cases I annotated. It sounds like I should have listened more carefully to Carina when she suggested going down and up in the wordnet hierarchy (cf. the example of food-fruit). :/ Maybe we’d capture quite a bit of them if we did a more sophisticated querying of WordNet. To discuss.* However, a substantial group is constituted by names whose denotations overlap even if they don’t belong to the same category. These are typically alternative conceptualizations of objects: as a cat or a toy, as a kind of building or its function (*building-home*), or as a portion or a kind of food (*pizza-slice*).

Still, 69% of the annotated pairs arguably do not denote the same object. Here we find problems HUMANS MAKE SAME “ERRORS” AS MACHINES – REFERENTIAL UNCERTAINTY IN THE ABSENCE OF CONTEXT (discuss as planned with Carina).

Interesting name pairs:

- storefront - store: strictly speaking it’s part-whole, but how can one distinguish between the two?
- field - grass: same (reverse); how to distinguish?
- dog - pet (different conceptualizations; classified as “hypernym.2”)
- airplane - flight, plane - flight (classified as “other”).

Most of the cases are co-hyponyms with categories that are easily confused, such as *horse-donkey*, *truck-jeep*. In some cases, the visual cues

are not enough to distinguish between the categories, but the frequency of this phenomenon suggests that co-hyponyms can be used interchangeably.

## 5 Conclusions