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Onomastics. It's a word a computer spellchecker won't recognize but one that speaks volumes to those who study names and naming practices. Dr. Donna L. Lillian, director of the women's studies program at Appalachian State University and an associate professor of English,

is an onomastician and has begun a two-year term as president of the American Name Society (ANS), the oldest scholarly society devoted to the study of names in the United States. She took office earlier this month during the society's annual meeting held in Boston in conjunction with the Linguistic Society of America.

"Names have a lot to do with identity," Lillian said. "So if we want to know who we are, then one way of exploring that is what we call ourselves, all the things we do and interact with."

Onomastics also encompasses a range of academic areas of interest, Lillian explained. For example, areas of interest to researchers include names in politics, religion and literature. Society members who are geographers study names of cities, towns, streets, mountains or rivers.

"If you look at the place names of North America, you can learn a lot about history, migration patterns and values," Lillian said. "Scholars of literature will often study names in favorite pieces of literature or those used by certain authors, such as Dickens who did interesting things with his characters' names," Lillian said.

Dickens' colorful and character-defining include Mr. Sloppy, Artful Dodger and of course, Scrooge. Others study trade names.

"Trends in name choices for children can say something about what we as a society are preoccupied with," Lillian said. "If a particular individual such as an athlete, actor or politician gains quite a bit of popularity, then a lot of people start naming their child after that person. Historically you can look back and see what were some of those preoccupations."

Each year during its annual meeting, the American Name Society votes on the preceding year's top personal name, place name, trade name and fictional name. Winners were Malala, Gangman, fiscal cliff and Downton Abbey, respectively. Malala was selected because the name has become associated with a cause – advocating for education of Pakistani girls, particularly in an area controlled by the Taliban.

The society's overall name of the year was Sandy for its association with Hurricane Sandy and Sandy Hook Elementary School, Lillian said.

Lillian's interest in names was fueled while teaching a language and gender course while a master's degree candidate at the University of Toronto. "I began thinking about women's marital name choices, our naming practices in general and how the family surname is virtually always the father's surname," she said. "For my master's thesis, I did an empirical study on patterns of women's naming choices and the courtesy title Ms."

She has continued her research on women's use of surnames when they marry and their use of the courtesy titles Miss, Ms. or Mrs. and how those trends have changed during the past 30 years.

"There have been some interesting shifts," Lillian said. "In the mid-80s, there was a growing trend toward women keeping their surname when they married. Professional women and younger women were more likely to keep their name. Women who had married before the

mid-70s changed their name."

That trend began changing in the mid-90s. "The trend is reversing itself now among younger women. Fewer women under 30 are keeping their name when they marry," Lillian said. Some of the women Lillian surveyed recounted the hassles their mother encountered by keeping her surname and didn't want a similar experience. "There was also a big connection with a return to conservative values including a family all having the same surname."

When it comes to the use of Ms., the trends are also interesting. Originally used to eliminate the distinction between Miss and Mrs., Lillian said that by the 1980s many people had a negative association with Ms., equating it with feminism or radical overtones, or a title used by divorced women.

"By 2006, people assumed it was a third title, not associated with feminism, and they are surprised to learn it was meant to replace Miss or Mrs. The women I surveyed thought it was a handy third term to indicate someone who is separated or divorced or to use as a placeholder if you don't know their marital status. It has undergone quite a shift."

Lillian recently has been researching the various names of the 750 college and university women's studies programs in the U.S., any changes that have occurred over the years and why. "Within my field now, that's a big topic of discussion," she said. Program names range from women's studies to gender studies or gender and sexuality studies.

In addition to her duties as president of the American Name Society, Lillian, with the help of Dr. Cheryl Claassen from Appalachian's Department of Anthropology, hopes to revive the Blue Ridge Names Society and hold a conference in the fall.