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Toward a Theory of Nicknames: A Case for Socio-Onomastics

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Abstract

To develop a form of analysis for nicknames and nicknaming, we propose a theoretical construct, using our empirical knowledge of nicknames, and posit a uniquely sociological perspective that describes and explains nicknames as aspects of the process of social action. Our approach is couched in terms of a theory of naming potentially useful to all scholars of names, whether they study human nicknames, the names of post offices in Kentucky, pet names of body parts, or the religious toponyms of Guatemala.

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Names are not just arbitrary symbols; they signify status, achievement, privilege, and meaningful social organization. They may communicate ethnicity, social status, and social prestige all understood as meaningful within social contexts. Since names provide meanings, they also guide activity by providing plans which transmit cultural knowledge and help us to choose among projects of action. For instance, a student's use of the titular name *Professor* in a face-to-face encounter with a teacher communicates a different level of social relationship from one in which that student addresses the teacher as *Jim*. If the student were to use a term of familiarity which substitutes for a proper name, such as a nickname, then several meanings are possible. The student may have a close working relationship with that teacher, or the student may be engaging in a mocking ceremony. But the exact meaning could never be known simply by reading a transcript of the conversation. The meaning can only be teased out by understanding the context in which the conversation occurs.

The meanings of names are the result of complex social negotiations, learned, interpreted, and reified through socialization. We learn at a young age *how* we are to call others. Transgression of acceptable naming traditions established by a group may be met with negative sanction. To demonstrate the influence of taken-for-granted everyday life norms, one of us (Skipper) once asked his students to participate in a "little exer-

cise." During their Thanksgiving break, they were instructed to address their parents in an unconventional (for them) manner. For instance, if they usually referred to their fathers as *Dad*, they were asked to call them by their first name. Upon their return to class, the students reported that most parents were upset with the new nomenclature, felt ill at ease with the unknown status position which the new name implied, or simply forbade its use. One female student reported being slapped by her mother who did not appreciate her calling her father by his first name!

It is our contention that how individuals experience names cannot be fully understood without revelation of situational and contextual exigencies. For example, Joan Emerson of the All-American Girls' Professional Baseball League (1943–1954) was nicknamed *Venus* by her teammates, and this nickname stuck with her throughout her baseball career. There are many possible interpretations of the meaning(s) of this name, but without descriptions of its origin and eventual social use, all interpretations would be speculative only. Analyses based purely on speculation may be academically intriguing but may unwittingly veil the authentic characteristics of nicknames and the nicknaming process. Brenda Wilson and James Skipper[2] found that *Venus* was given to Emerson during a game because of a particular incident. She was playing shortstop and there were no outs and a runner on first base. The batter slammed a hard-hit ground ball directly at Emerson. She was unable to handle the ball's careen as it took a ferocious bounce and hit her squarely in the head without her ever being able to get a glove on it. However, the ball took a fortuitous glance off her skull directly toward second base. The second basewoman, who had correctly anticipated a double-play opportunity, was in place to snag the ball, toss it to first, and complete the task. Emerson was not severely injured and the official record book shows that a classic 6-4-3 double play was performed on this day, initiated by Emerson playing the shortstop position. For her part in this play, and because of the unique circumstances under which it occurred, her teammates dubbed her *Venus* after Venus de Milo, the famous statue that has no arms.

This example gives us a reference to understand the processes through which a nickname may be created, is sensical, and conveys meaning. The story reveals the rules of how nicknames become intelligible. That is, the subject matter of nicknames is rendered intelligible by revealing its internal rationality. This sociological approach would enable researchers to understand the larger scene of names in terms of their meaning for the inner lives and external careers of a variety of

individuals. While consciousness of social forces may not always be available to us, the sociological imagination exposes the social construction of names, thus unmasking the taken-for-granted ideas which often cloak our full understanding of the social naming process.

Compared to other studies of names, the systematic study of nicknames has attracted little attention. Regardless of academic discipline, only a small amount of empirical research exists, even though H. L. Mencken in 1919 argued that nicknames are an important and deeply embedded cultural element in American society. Edwin D. Lawson's bibliography in this issue certainly attests to this latter point. Scholars have speculated that nicknames express our sense of the significance of names and have a powerful influence on behavior.[3]

However, firm evidence supporting such contentions does not exist. The studies available suggest that: (1) nicknames are more common among men than women (Smith; Van Buren), (2) men are more likely to nickname other men than women in mixed gender situations (Busse), (3) when women do have nicknames, the names are less likely to refer to their occupational or achieved statuses and more likely to refer to physical or other ascribed attributes (Skipper and Leslie, "Women, Nicknames"), (4) when women have control over their social situations, they nickname other women and do so at the same frequency that men nickname other men (Wilson and Skipper), (5) when women nickname other women, they use similar frames of reference for nickname creation as men use for other men (e.g., physical attributes [Wilson and Skipper]), (6) racial features are not common sources of public nicknames (Skipper, "Famous Football Players"), (7) nicknames are more common among children and teens than adults (Smith), (8) nicknames are more commonly used in primary groups than secondary groups (Skipper and Leslie, "Nicknames and Blues Singers. Parts I and II"), and (9) the use of public nicknames has declined in the past one hundred years (Skipper, "Notorious Criminals and Deviants"). The last finding has been explained as being one consequence of the decline of the folk hero in popular American culture. There has been a change in cultural orientation during the past century from one where there was a sense of solidarity and common identity rooted in tradition and personal relationships to one in which anxious individualism, mobility, and impersonality characterize human interactions. Bureaucratization has fostered the idea that positions are more important than the people who occupy them (Skipper, "Famous Football Players").

Thus, the search for the meaning of a nickname is supplemented by other considerations such as its special significance or its place in wider patterns of activity. Meanings of nicknames are not to be found in dictionary definitions or even necessarily in their origins, but in their uses in everyday life. The difference between a person's nickname and a behavioral description of that person is that it is only the use of the name that guarantees the meaningful identification of the person.

Nicknames have become less appropriate and perhaps perceived as superfluous symbols of a bygone era not commensurate with the current social climate. The point about any type of naming is not that action can be identified only according to intention, and therefore by the action alone. Rather, intention of meaning and therefore the actors' views are relevant and must be taken into account. For instance, one of the authors of this paper (Skipper), has a very dear friend who, for decades, has consistently addressed him as *You Crazy Bastard.* At face value, this vocative use may seem unseemly and quite derogatory. But both men recognize and share its face-to-face use and meaning as within the framework of terms of endearment.

Sociologists interested in theories of action have often taken Max Weber's concept as their starting point: "In action is included all human behavior insofar as the actor attaches a subjective meaning to it" (88). This has led to the view of action as equivalent to behavior plus the attachment of meaning (Coulter 136). But the observable world of naming events and names usage contains both actions and behaviors where the distinguishing features of actions are not hidden away in actors' subjective recesses. We recognize the naming actions of others and know what we see to be actions and not behaviors in every calculable sense.

A better differentiation is to posit the action of nicknaming as rule-following conduct (Winch). In the same sense that we can think of the rules of games furnishing the sense of behavioral events that constitute them, we can speak of the contextual rules that govern the discernible properties of naming actions. Reflexively, the meaning transmitted by a nickname may specify the appropriate contextual properties for its use. A nickname may be meaningless to someone not familiar with the name and yet still be perceived as an action, albeit with an unidentified meaning. For instance, John Barney Miller, who played professional baseball from 1909 to 1921, was known by the nickname *Dots*. Players and fans alike recognized *Dots* as a nickname because of

its nickname properties, but were not necessarily conscious of the social process through which he achieved the nickname. One day at the beginning of his rookie year, Miller was working out at shortstop. Honus Wagner, his teammate, was asked by a sports journalist who the new "kid" was. Wagner, who possessed a thick Germanic accent, pointed to the rookie and said, "Dots Milla." The use of the name *Dots* by those who did not know its meaningful source suggests that nicknames are recognized by properties which make them intelligible as nicknames in the first place. Thus, the more we are able to understand the constraints and sense-making characteristics of these properties, the more we will learn about nicknames.

Whether apocryphal or scientifically factual, actors' understandings of nicknames are dependent on the contextual properties creating belief and recognition of meaning, even if it means nothing more than the simple identification of that person. Within that identification may be communicated a sense of relationship, purpose, or social characterization. As such, everyday requests for the exchange of meaning through names and especially nicknames may turn out to be problematic because the grounds for deciding on the adequacy of answers may also vary contextually. This does not mean that we should be disposed to think of nickname use as arbitrary, for common properties neither coerce nicknames from observers, nor do purely capricious idiosyncracies suffice as organizing principles. Rather, cultural conventions provide meaningful classifications and govern whether some phenomena in the social or physical world have been appropriately employed as a nickname, or as a nickname source. Likewise, the use of certain nicknames may become socially disfavored as they communicate uncommon, unrecognizable, or even discredited forms of classification. For instance, Skipper ("Famous Football Players") has shown that nicknames with ethnic sources have fallen into disuse in the past century. This decline is probably related to the development of more sensitivity toward ethnic variation.

Nicknames do not have an invariant and intrinsic identification beyond what is apposite to actors' contextual interests. There is a latitude of variability for the interpretation, definition, and even self-indication of nicknames. In fact, the proliferation of alternative means to organize common nicknames at the everyday level asserts a stubborn primacy over sociological attempts to provide models of invariant properties. Characteristic properties of an unfolding situation may in-

dicate to actors the appropriate use of name types and thus names themselves. For instance, Skipper once experienced being addressed by three different names by one individual in the course of a single faculty meeting. A colleague went into the meeting expecting Skipper to be supportive of a particular proposal. At the beginning of the meeting, the colleague addressed him as *Skip* (his public nickname), conveying to those who were present friendship, familiarity, and perhaps even expected support. But as the meeting developed, it became clear that Skipper was unwilling to support the position of his colleague. It was not long before the colleague was addressing him as *Jim*. By the end of the meeting the nickname and first name form of address had totally disappeared and his colleague now referred to him openly as *Professor Skipper*. We have here a clear indication of the social robustness of names and the naming process.

The type of name used is based on the social situation, as participants more or less share an understanding of contextual properties. But names also function reflexively by indicating to participants the meaningful nature of the situation itself. This can only be accomplished, though, when general contextual properties and specific naming properties are mutually indicative of similar meanings. It was clear to all at the above mentioned faculty meeting what meaningful transitions had occurred between Skipper and his colleague, as indicated by the context and supported by the change in name use. Thus, we cannot necessarily specify any uniform indicators for sociological variables such as nicknames without extrapolating from common usages.

Courses of social action like nickname use have family resemblances but do not have the closure of phenomena dealt with in such disciplines as the natural sciences. To understand the meanings nicknames have for actors requires us to do other than ask for them or make inferences, thus attempting to make them observable. Actors can keep from us the secrets of nickname meanings, or just lie if they wish. However, it is not impossible to discern these meanings. After all, we can commonly more or less agree and share any number of social meanings even at an everyday level. Artful fieldwork through the use of informants, eliciting techniques, and the creation of trust all help to ascertain actors' meanings and interpretations. The appropriate image of a common understanding is therefore an operation rather than just a common intersection of overlapping sets of meaning.

Shared agreement of the meaning of a nickname is achieved by

recognizing that it was bestowed according to a normative rule. In using nicknames we follow everyday rules that leave latitude for interpretation. Thus there are no final arbiters for the meanings of nicknames, only our faculties of observation. This indicates that we construct our sense of nicknames through a social negotiation rather than give rise to them as merely epiphenomena to living. If nicknames and nicknaming are bounded by normative rules, then analysis should focus on discovering and exposing the characteristics of these rules. We already know that nicknames convey meaning and indicate a wide range of possible interpretations understood within a set of contextual properties. It is our job now as serious scholars of names to bring to the level of consciousness the taken-for-granted rules of nicknames and reveal their characteristic properties.

The mechanism of achieved construction of nickname meaning indicates an establishment of consensus over normative expectations and constraints. Harold Garfinkel's notion of constitutive rules of interaction accounts for the regularity and stability of concerted nickname activity. Such rules are not determinative, but sense-bestowing. They are akin to the rules of a game. Game rules are necessary to determine exactly how one will play a particular game; they generate expectations and provide the meaning of individuals' actions playing the game. By making reference to the constitutive rules in a social situation, one is able to understand what is going on. For our purposes, this means that nicknames can be analyzed as actions in a sequence of rule-bound activities.

Garfinkel's other notion of preferential rules is equivalent to a manual of skills of preferred play. Use of nicknames and types of nicknames are guided as situations are defined. A past nickname may be recalled to indicate a lost identification, to reminisce, to create humor, or perhaps even to do all three at once. For example, we know of a person who received the nickname *Stinky* as a child because of his predisposition toward flatulence. As that child aged, he sought to drop the use of *Stinky* to avoid exposing its original meaning. But family members still remind him of the nickname in order to retrieve its associated meaning. Its use performs all three functions mentioned above. This account further indicates that use of certain nicknames are age specific and thus bounded by age-specific preferential rules.

Problems understanding nicknames in everyday life derive from an inability to read the specific game rules of a context. The interpretation of the rules may be taken for granted, but interpretation problems arise

as no rules exhaust all possible contingencies (cf. Wittgenstein). Nicknames or nickname meanings may emerge because we adduce rules ad hoc to interpret actions; members' methods of producing and reproducing appropriate nicknames are based on their continued understanding of the settings. This means that members' methods of solving the problems of practical nickname reasoning may themselves be research topics. In fact, accounts of members' use of nicknames may prove fruitful in helping us to overcome disciplinary nearsightedness. Establishing the constitutive, preferential, and ad hoc rules of naming conduct can only prove to be helpful in our understanding of the social construction of the naming process.

The enterprise of name analysis has taken some interesting forms, but we need to grapple with the recurring problems of delivering rigorous theoretical knowledge of actors' social structures, of which naming is an important part, as human constructions. Students of names need to reassess their rigid theoretical indifference; given that the topic is radically distinct, it might be time that we cease to argue about the relative merits of each individual discipline, and get on with the work of building name theory on firm methodological grounds. Toward this end, we recommend that researchers: (1) continue documenting nicknames and their origins within specific samples, (2) analyze their nickname data by positing potential classification categories for the names, and (3) analyze the conditions under which the names are used, all for the purpose of identifying the constitutive, preferential, and ad hoc rule-bounded properties of nicknames and nickname use.

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Notes

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2. See the article in this issue.

3. See, for example, Ashley, Dexter, Lawson, Skipper, Leslie, Wilson.

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Onomastic Hoax: Enough is Enough

In a letter to the *New York Times* (Sept. 29, 1990), Ives Goddard, Curator of Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution, draws attention to one of the displays at the Library of Congress's "World of Names" exhibition: Lake Webster, in Massachusetts, is also identified as *Chargoggaggoggmanchauggagoggchaubunagungamaugg,* which is supposed to mean "in native dialect," something like "You Fish on Your Side I Fish on My Side Nobody Fish in the Middle." The catalog of the exhibition gives special attention to this name by reprinting a local map (with a cartoon inset) with a statement in the caption that local residents prefer *Lake Chargoggaggoggmanchauggagoggchaubunagungamaugg* "over the often-used name Lake Webster"(page 13).

Most authorities, says Goddard, prefer *Chaubunagungamaug,* or a slight spelling variant, with the probable meaning "lake divided by islands." but the long form highlighted by the Library of Congress exhibition seems to be the brainchild of Larry Daly, editor of a Webster, Massachusetts, newspaper, who perpetrated this idea in a story written in the early 1920s, a hoax he later regretted. Goddard also expresses general concern over the misinformation about Indian languages and the often silly and derogatory "supposed literal translations" that the popular press gives to placenames of Indian origin. The contributions of American Indian culture to the rest of the world should not be trivialized by these "exotic snippets of simplified or incorrect information."