Names, Vol. 38, No. 4 (December 1990)

The Nicknames of Steam-Era Railroaders: A Code-Mediated Adaptation

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Abstract

Nicknames, especially those related to performance and competence, constituted one colorful aspect of life among steam-era railroaders in Altoona, Pennsylvania. The frequency of such performance/competence nicknames correlates positively with those tasks which involve risk and in which the consequences of inappropriate behavior are greatest. Against a backdrop of common assumptions in a railroad town, such nicknames act as "restricted codes," conveying information which facilitates railroaders' accomodation to particular stresses in their industrial, hence "code-mediated" adaptation.

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As a former Director and Curator of a railroad history museum in Altoona, Pennsylvania, I have had considerable contact with older railroaders in my area. I first became interested in their use of nicknames through the stories I heard them tell of their days working for "the Company" (the Pennsylvania Railroad). In this paper, I will briefly explore some of the qualities of those nicknames and the way in which they aid in adaptation, that is, the manner by which such nicknames can help railroaders accommodate to stresses or conditions in the work environment. Specifically, I will focus on those nicknames in use during the final decades of steam-locomotive railroading in Altoona (ca. 1930–1950).

A few remarks regarding Altoona's history will establish the context so crucial to understanding the significance of nicknaming among railroaders. Altoona, founded as a railroad town in 1849, was a base of operations from which the Pennsylvania Railroad (chartered in 1846) constructed a railroad over the Allegheny Mountains, which divide the eastern and western portions of the state. Such an efficient system of statewide transportation was necessary for Pennsylvania to compete economically with surrounding states. The first railroad shops were constructed in 1850. By 1868 the population had grown to 8,000, and by 1890 the shops could manufacture a complete steam locomotive in a single day. The population in 1925 exceeded

68,000, with railroad employment peaking a few years later at nearly 16,000. The Altoona works had become the largest railroad-owned construction shops in the country, and, as the Pennsylvania Railroad's principal facility, built or repaired over the years some 7,500 locomotives and nearly a quarter-million freight cars.

Before we examine specific railroaders' nicknames, a brief survey of certain sociological theories, specifically those of British sociologist Basil Bernstein,[2] will help us understand how the nature and function of those names is dependent upon their context. Bernstein postulates that different social relationships generate different speech systems and establish different principles by which speakers utilize the options and alternatives that a given language offers to them. These are called *codes*. Speech thus arises as a function of the social structure; we shall concentrate on what Bernstein designated the "restricted code" (60), of which I consider railroaders' nicknames to be an excellent example.

Restricted codes are functions of a particular form of social relationship, as Bernstein states, in which "the speech is played out against a backdrop of assumptions common to the speaker, against a system of closely shared interests and identifications, against a system of shared expectations; in short, it presupposes a local cultural identity which reduces the need for the speakers to elaborate their intent verbally and to make it explicit" (60). A common cultural background thus reduces the need for verbal elaboration in communicating, and, as Bernstein says, the greater "the extent to which the intent of the other person may be taken for granted, the more likely that the structure of the speech will be simplified and the vocabulary drawn from a narrow range" (60).

Of particular relevance, then, is the dictum that a restricted code will usually arise out of a particular social matrix, specifically one which focuses heavily on shared assumptions and common intent – in short, an idioculture exceedingly well characterized by the monocultural one-industry-town steam-era railroad environment from which these nicknames were derived. It is precisely that backdrop of shared assumptions which allows railroaders' nicknames to convey the types of information which this paper will demonstrate; for, within that matrix of widely shared knowledge common to a one-company town, they convey their messages with remarkable efficiency. Given such a context, their terminology is highly appropriate and meaningful.

A few additional comments might be put forward. The use of nicknames for both reference and address limits the range and types of

available speech options. Such usage dictates, for example, that descriptive nicknames must be short and easily recognized. Common vernacular terminology and simplicity of structure—hallmarks of restricted coding—answer such a requirement. Thus, while serving as terms of address and reference, railroaders' nicknames can also convey such information as performance and appropriate behavior.

With that preface, we can begin our study of railroaders' nicknames by examining the categories into which they fall (see Figure 1). This typology is based on some 200 nicknames and associated contextual data which I collected in interviews with local railroaders. These I believe to be broadly illustrative of the final decades of steam-locomotive operation in Altoona.

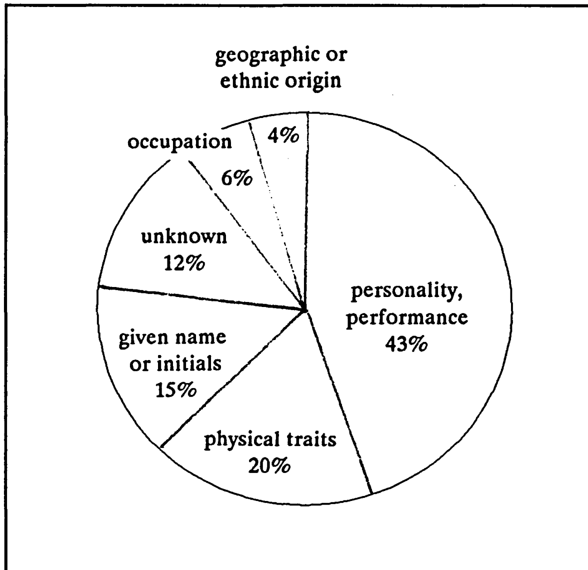

Figure 1. The origin of steam-railroader nicknames.

Steam-era railroaders' nicknames can be divided into a number of types, these divisions being based upon those railroaders' own opinions as to how the nicknames I recorded should be categorized:

1. Some 43 percent of nicknames focus on personality characteristics (such as *Wino* for one who liked to drink on the job, *Blastie* for one who talked too much, *Gumshoe* for an employee

who constantly ran to the boss to inform him of the activities of his fellow workers), or on job performance or other job-related incidents (such as *Burrhead* for an engineer who frequently damaged couplers on his train, or *Flat Wheel* for an engineer who wore flat spots on his engine's wheels via improper brake application). This category should be viewed as a continuum ranging from those nicknames based strictly upon a job-related event to those based more strongly upon an individual's overall personality, with most of them exhibiting some combination of both of those qualities.

2. Nicknames based on perception of physical traits account for 20 percent of the total, such as *Stump* for a short person, *Cesspool* for one with a large belly, *Brassface* for one who had "a bunch of gold teeth," or *Sight & Sound* for a worker who was deaf.

3. Fifteen percent are based on the individual's given name, such as *Tom* for *Thomas*; or, in a manner unique to railroaders who were listed by their initials plus last name on duty rosters or crew boards, a fireman with the initials P. M. got the nickname *Afternoon*; A. M. A– got *Morning*; and C. F. A. L–, who had so many initials, was simply called *Alphabet*.

4. Six percent focus on occupation (both railroad and non-railroad), such as *Shit-House Joe* for a caboose car toilet repairman, *Tight-Lock Coupler* for a specialist on the installation of such couplers, or *Cow Shit* for a worker who was formerly a farmer.

5. Some four percent focus on regional or ethnic origin, such as *Swede* for a worker of Swedish origin, or *Sprucey* for a worker who lived in a town called Spruce Creek.

6. Remaining nicknames (about twelve percent) are assigned to an "unknown" category, as I was unable to definitively establish their origin. Presumably, many of these would belong to Category 1: Personality/Performance.

To summarize, if we exclude those nicknames based strictly on the given name or of unknown origin, most names focus either on some aspect of interpersonal relationship (perception of physical or personality traits), or

on the relationship between man and his machine (such as between engineer and locomotive, as in *Flat Wheel*).

From the data I have collected I have concluded that the strongest characteristic of nicknames in this subculture is their regulatory function. Some 80 percent of the names I recorded focus on physical qualities, personality characteristics, or behaviors related to a particular task or event. These nicknames generally highlight deviations from normality, and "serve to publish what is acceptable among those who promote such names" (Morgan et al. 69). Most railroaders' nicknames reflect the subculture's preferences for appearance, personality, and performance. By publishing those standards, the group collectively exerts a normative influence. That nicknames can serve to identify particular individuals hardly needs to be stated; they can also serve to classify individuals into particular occupations or ethnic groups (e.g., *Swede*). But it is those names which provide a critique of performance as calibrated against expected competence which interest me the most. *Flat Wheel,* for example, negatively criticizes that engineer's performance, as does *Deadeye* for a locomotive fireman who let the fire in the firebox go out or *Stackblaster,* who was "a hard running engineer, he was hard with an engine." The *Book of Knowledge* was a know-it-all; *Sleepy* liked to sleep on the job; *Hog Snout* was always butting into conversations; *Blastie* and *Loudmouth* talked too much. All of these names provide a negative critique of interpersonal relationship. They drive home the message that there is indeed a proper way to act or perform one's task while on the job.

Such, then, are some of the functions of railroaders' nicknames. But if we want to understand the special significance of these nicknames—their relationship to their particular society and how that ecology endows them with peculiar power—we must look for broader patterns. For human ecology deals not just with the actions of individuals but with analysis at the aggregate level.

Among the most illuminating of those more strategic patterns is the difference in attitudes toward interpersonal relationships and relationships between man and machine (see Figure 2). Of those nicknames focusing on interpersonal relationships, only 25 percent provide a critique of performance. Most of the remainder are neutral toward job-related behavior, often marking merely the presence of a physical trait. On the other hand, nearly 100 percent of nicknames focusing on man-machine relationships provide a (usually negative!) critique of per-

		Function of Relationship		
		From Given Name	Interpersonal	Man-Machine
Performance vs. Competence	neutral	99%	75%	5%
	negative		20%	80%
	positive	1%	5%	15%

Figure 2. Paradigmatic arrangement of railroaders' nicknames showing approximate percentages having performance-competence connotations by category of "function of relationship."

formance. The relatively large proportion of performance-related nicknames for man-machine relations signals that the consequences of violating appropriate norms in this category are much more serious than violating the norms of interpersonal relationships.

Nicknaming is thus a method of socialization that highlights deviations from the accepted mode of behavior so as to limit those deviations—especially those which would be most costly or disastrous, such as those involving steam locomotives. We can generalize that in this industrial environment the greatest frequency of performance/competence related nicknames will be associated with those tasks for which the consequences of inappropriate behavior are greatest. This is a pattern of cognitive significance, the language itself (nicknames) reflecting one way by which railroaders perceive and differentiate their world—via the perception of risks and consequences.

We thus arrive at this conclusion: railroaders' nicknames occur as instances of restricted linguistic coding. They define the norms of behavior, and are especially prevalent where the consequences of violating those norms are greatest; and—occurring as they do within the social milieu of a one-industry town—function against a backdrop of widely shared assumptions and expectations regarding appropriate performance. As that background reduces the need for verbal elaboration of

intent, such nicknames are uniquely able to convey a considerable quantity of information. The social structure thus greatly facilitates the utility of nicknames to convey information, information of adaptive significance in this case because it allows workers to appropriately mold their behaviors in light of the hazards and constraints imposed by their industrial world. Such a process is what I designate "code-mediated adaptation."

Those nicknames which serve to constrain the behaviors of locomotive engineers and firemen offer perhaps the finest examples of nicknames functioning as restricted codes. Take, as an example, *Cold-Water Mike,* a locomotive fireman who could not maintain a proper fire in the engine's firebox; therefore, adequate steam pressure in the boiler would not be maintained. As that steam pressure operated the engine's other appliances, apparatus such as the air pumps would shut down, and then the air brakes would come on. At the very least, considerable delays in operating the train would result. Another nickname, *Low Water*, exposes behavior which could be outright catastrophic, in that operating a steam locomotive with insufficient water in the boiler could cause an explosion.

To those who share the backdrop of common assumptions and knowledge, intent, and context which such a social structure as the railroad subculture affords, these names convey a considerable amount of information. They convey an awareness of what the appropriate behavior is (competence), as well as a critique of the actual behavior of the individuals to which they are appended (performance). Along with this is an implicit recognition of the consequences of such inappropriate behavior. Also implicit is a sense of legitimacy on the part of those individuals who utilize such nicknames in address of reference toward others, and who are, in a sense, implying that they, of course, know better than to act of perform in such a manner! And all of this information is conveyed by a speech act (the nickname itself) which evidences such simplicity that it easily functions as a means of address or reference to begin with. Such is the elegance of code-mediated adaptation: nicknames function as behavioral responses to external conditions or changes in the environment. Such accommodation is mediated through language, and the language (the nickname) is especially capable of facilitating such accommodation because it utilizes restricted coding within a social context which greatly supports such coding. The nickname is therefore endowed with an unusual potential to convey the information necessary for adaptation.

Finally, a few remarks regarding the demographic and structural

implications of nicknaming in this railroad town seem appropriate. Stanley Brandes, in an excellent and often quoted paper on nicknaming in a Spanish village, states that there must be "an upper limit to the community size within which linguistic devices like nicknames may so operate" (145). As mechanisms for social control, they operate within the context of one's own community, wherein individuals are sensitive to the opinions of others. Brandes states: "In the relatively impersonal milieu of the large city, nicknames can have no significant social impact; the anonymity of urban life prevents nicknames from operating as a check on behavior" (146). This is because the "moral unity" which provides the agreement upon which nicknames are based is lacking. He puts the upper demographic limit at 2,000 to "perhaps . . . several thousand persons higher," and reiterates that "whenever towns lose their sense of moral unity, or become too large or impersonal to allow informal social control techniques to predominate, nicknames will likely fall by the wayside and disappear. Perhaps this is why we have no record of prominent nicknaming for small communities of the more industrially developed portions of Europe, as well as the United States" (Brandes 146).

Research to date supports that demographic threshold (Barrett, Glazier, etc.), but I would like to suggest that the nicknaming phenomenon in a company town provides an important extension to the mechanics that Brandes outlines. In the restricted code-oriented social structure of steam-era Altoona, the widely held and commonly shared assumptions of the railroad industry itself provided the basis of shared knowledge and "moral unity" which allowed nicknaming to operate—considerably expanding the universe within which such adaptive nicknaming can occur. Thus, the process of code-mediated adaptation which I have briefly outlined can presumably allow socially significant nicknaming to occur among a substantially larger population than research had heretofore allowed. It does so by allowing a more widely shared basis of commonly agreed upon knowledge on which the interpretability and utility of nicknames depend. It would be difficult to estimate the upper demographic threshold within which the above-outlined mechanics could allow socially significant nicknaming to occur, as indeed nicknaming in larger industrial environments has barely been studied.[3] Suffice it to state that the significance of such nicknames cannot be fully understood without examining the nature of their relationship to the context in which they occur.

"The Pennsylvania Railroad," states Robert Bellah, "with its tentacular reach, its supervised, graded, and uniformed army of workers, its mechanical precision of operation . . . became the model of a new institution destined eventually to affect the lives of almost all Americans" (42). Steam-era Altoona was the image of the corporate-industrial future, and I hope I have illustrated that by studying nicknaming among its workers (and in particular how that context endowed such names with adaptive capabilities) we can learn not only about the social fabric of a railroad company town but something also of the mechanics of human adaptation to the stresses of the urban-industrial environment in general. Nicknaming can be one part of that adaptive mechanism.

Altoona, Pennsylvania

Notes

1. This is a revised version of a paper read at the Connecticut Onomastic Symposium, Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantic, Connecticut, in 1987.
2. For an excellent introduction to Bernstein's complex sociology, see Atkinson's book. See Bernstein's article for a concise though somewhat more difficult overview of his work on linguistic codes.
3. For a review of English-language literature on nicknaming, see my "Nicknaming Practices." See also "The Many Faces of Nicknames" in this issue of *Names*.

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Editor's Note: As this issue was going to press, we discovered that an earlier version of this paper had been published, without Mr. Holland's knowledge, in the *Connecticut Onomastic Symposium Review*, 1990.

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Some Other Words for *Nickname*

Here, from a few other languages, is a tentative selection of words which have approximately the same meaning as English *nickname*. There is no distinction in this list between terms of endearment, terms of derision, and neutral terms. Words from languages written in non-Roman systems have been conventionally transliterated. Special thanks to Ahmad Abdul Halim, Norhaily Abdul Halim, Bob Bunge, Brent Froberg, István Gombocz, Grete Heikes, Xiaofei Huang, Ed Lawson, Takayuki Tsuchiya, and a pile of dictionaries.

Arabic	*sho'hrah*
Chinese (Mandarin)	*hùn míng, chuó hào, wài hào*
Czech	*přezdívka*
Danish	*tilnavn*
Dutch	*spotnaam, scheldnaam*
French	*sobriquet*
German	*Spitzname, Kosenname*
Greek (Modern)	*chaïdeutikó onoma, paratsoukli*
Hawaiian	*inoa ka'paka'pa*
Hebrew	*kinnui*
Hungarian	*becenév, csúfnév, gúnynév*
Italian	*nomignolo, soprannome*
Japanese	*adana*
Lakota Sioux	*chazhé*
Malay	*nama panggilan*
Norwegian	*kjælenavn, klengenavn*
Polish	*przezwisko, przydomek*
Portuguese	*alcunha, apelido, apôdo*
Russian	*prozvise, klichka, laskat'elnoe imya*
Serbo-Croatian	*nàdimak*
Spanish	*apodo, nombre de pila*
Swedish	*öknamn*
Thai	*cheu len*
Vietnamese	*tên nhao báng*
Welsh	*llysenw*
Yiddish	*spitzigg*