Nicknaming in Egyptian Arabic

Harold B. Allen

NICKNAMES IN EGYPT are not so free a matter as they are in America. Unlike ours, they do not belong in the public domain. Here, even outside the family circle a man is Mike, Bob, Pete, Shorty, or Butch to his fellow-Kiwanians; and we may familiarly speak of our presidents as FDR and Ike. Not so in Egypt. Gamal Abdel Nasser is not publicly designated as Zhimi. Indeed, a westerner can live among Egyptians, even work closely with them for many years, and never hear a nickname.

Only sheer chance led to my overhearing an Egyptian mother call her little boy a name different from what I knew his given name to be. But when I began to inquire about nicknames I met a manifest reluctance to discuss the subject. Some Egyptians said flatly that they had no nicknames; some admitted their existence but declined to provide examples, either of their own or of others. At length, however, it was possible to collect enough nicknames to warrant a preliminary statement of the various methods of formation employed in Cairene Arabic.[1]

The nicknames I was able to obtain may be placed into two main groups upon the basis of their relationship to given names. By far the larger group consists of those which have a direct relationship with a given name. The second, much smaller, group consists of those lacking any such correlation.

The principal subclass in Group I, apparently including the great majority of Egyptian nicknames, is characterized by some method of phonetic alteration of the individuals' name (usually, but not necessarily, of the first of his three, four, or five names). This general process is familiar to us, of course, in such hypocoristic designations as Jenny for Genevieve, Jo for Joseph or Josephine, Peggy and Maggy for Margaret, Bill for William, Bert for Albert, and Jim for James. In Egypt such nicknames formed as phonetic reflexes fall into fairly regular patterns because of the nature of

the Arabic language. As a Semitic language, Arabic characteristically constructs its words upon triliteral consonantal roots by ringing the changes upon many possible vowel variations. This device produces both semantic and morphological variants in Arabic; it produces nicknames.

A boy's nickname Asmar, for example, is formed by vocalic modification upon the original s–m–r root appearing in his given name, Samir. Thus one finds Hamada for Hamdi, Selmi for Sallam, and Ekrema for Makram. It may be thought that there is free vowel substitution, though actually the substitution operates within limits of a complex phonemic pattern only now being analyzed by descriptive linguists.

Accompanying the vowel variation may be a shift in stress, as in Hamáda for Hámdi. One or two of the three consonants may be lost, as in Ada for Nadra. And one consonant may also undergo substitution, usually by a phonetic analog, as in Batta for Fatma. Sometimes, as with Batta, which also means "duck" and is a term of endearment, the phonetic alteration is influenced by paronomasia. Another example is the nickname Néima, which means "gift or blessing of Allah," for the name Naíma, which means "fortunate or prosperous one." And Ekrama, already mentioned, means "grape."

Some boys' nicknames follow:

Abuda	for Abdel[2]	Hamada	for Hamdi, Mohammed
Addúla[3]	,, Adel		
Asmár	,, Samira	Hamám	,, Mohammed
Barhoum	,, Ibrahim	Hamáma	,, Ahmed
Ekrama	,, Makram	Selmi	,, Sallam
		Zhimi [ʒimi]	,, Gamal

Feminine nicknames of this type include:

Ada	for Nadra	Maruma	for Mariam
Amúl	,, Amál	Milo	,, Amal
Bata	,, Fatma	Moli	,, Amal
Nafusa	,, Nafisa	Mula	,, Amal
Effa	,, Afifa	Munni	,, Amina
Enaba	,, Enayat	Na'ama	,, Ana'am
Fúza	,, Fawzía	Naga	,, Nagwa
Káram	,, Karíma	Néima	,, Naíma

Nasu	for Inás	Sa'ada	for So'ad
Pola	,, Ekbál, Nabilla	Samuha	,, Samíha
		Suna	,, Ehsan
Ragi	,, Ragaa	Tuha	,, Fathía
Ruzha	,, Ragaa	Zuba	,, Zeinab

Besides the phonetic modification of the original name as a whole, a second and common method of phonetic alteration is that of reduplication. Especially common within the family circle and among younger children is the nickname which consists of duplication of all or part of one of the syllables of the given name. Since the syllable base in Arabic is the consonant, this means that some such duplicated nicknames consist of only one consonant of the original, plus a different vowel. Sometimes, also, a closed syllable may lose its second consonant. All reduplicated nicknames in the collection have initial stress.

The frequent boy's name Nabil is, in the family group, commonly Bolbol (which happens also to mean "nightingale"). The girl's name Nabilla likewise becomes Bolbol. But Bolbol is equally good as a nickname for Ekbál. Bosbos, for Bothaina, exhibits the replacing of the Classical Arabic [θ] by Cairene Colloquial [s].

Simple open syllable reduplication apparently is very frequent. Since only one of the original consonants is necessary, one nickname may thus serve for many given names. Fifi, for instance, turned up as the nickname for Affaf, Afifa, Fakhria, Fatma, Ferial, Shafika, and Wafa', and doubtless represents a number of others I did not collect.

Masculine reduplicated nicknames:

Bolbol	for Nabil	Safsaf	for Mostafa, Safwat
Fufu	,, Farouk, Fouad		
Gigo	,, Wagịh	Semsem	,, Sami
Mimi	,, Mohammed	Susu	,, Hassan, Sulei-
Nunu	,, Nabil		man, Sayed,
Riri	for Rushdi		So'ad
		Tutu	,, Tawfik

Feminine reduplicated nicknames:

Bibi	for Ebtisam	Bosbos	for Bothaina
Bolbol	,, Nabilla, Ekbál	Dada	,, Widád

Didi	for	Átimad, Khalda, Magda, Nadia, Wadia, Widád	Nani	for	Nawal, Néimat, Nahed
			Nanno	,,	Nadia
			Nona	,,	Nadia, Tahani
Dudu	,,	Hoda, Widád	Riri	,,	Karimán, Reda, Ragaa, Souhir, Thoreya
Fafa	,,	Affaf			
Fafi	,,	Affaf			
Fifi	,,	Affaf, Afifa, Fakhria, Hanifa, Ferial, Fatma, Shafika, Wafa'	Safsaf	,,	Sofia
			Semsem	,,	Samiha, Samira
			Shushu	,,	Shafika
Fitfit	,,	Fatma	Sufsuf	,,	Insaf
Fufi	,,	Rafia	Susa	,,	Sana'
Fufu	,,	Affaf	Susu	,,	Ehsan, Mahassen, Samiha, Sawsan, So'ad, Sofi, Souhair, Thoreya, Yosreya
Gigi	,,	Wagiha, Ragaa, Khadiga			
Gulgul	,,	Galila			
Hudhud	,,	Hikmat			
Kuku	,,	Kawther			
Lali	,,	Laila	Suzi	,,	Soheir
Lili	,,	Laila, Rawhia	Tata	,,	Fathia, Fatma
Lola	,,	Alia, Laila,	Tati	,,	Fathia
(Lulu)		Ola, Salma, Walaa	Tumtum	,,	Fatma
			Tuta	,,	Fatma
Mimi	,,	Amal, Hakíma Hayam, Kamilia, Magda	Tutu	,,	Néimat, Taheyya
			Zizi	,,	Azhar, Fawzia
			Zuzu	,,	Azhar, Faiza, Isís, Nargiz, Zeinab
Mona	,,	Monira			

Two very small subclasses of directly correlated nicknames occur. One comprises those formed by the loss of a syllable, with or without phonetic change. Thus Samíha becomes Miha, Farida becomes Fari (which one girl wrote in English as Fairy), Nabilla becomes Boula, and the boy's name Hanieh is shortened to Hani. The other class is marked by the combination of two bound mor-

phemes, a feminine *-t-* and the genitive pronominal enclitic *-i.* Thus, corresponding to the boy's nickname Hani is the girl's nickname Haniti. It is as if a frequently used "My Carol" became a single free morpheme "Mycarol" in English. Another instance is Bolbolti.

It is not without interest that European or Western names, those which are non-Muslim, have been subjected to the same influences that have produced such nicknames as those considered above. Some names possessed by Egyptian Christians (the Copts) or by Greeks, Italians French, Cypriots, Austrians, and others in the non-Muslim population, may actually be homophonous with Arabic nicknames so that no change is required for them to serve in this way in colloquial Arabic.

Examples of all kinds follow:

Bella	for	Berlanta, Violette	Lula	for	Alicia
			Malleem	,,	Emily
Bolbol (nightingale)	,,	Violette	Marmar	,,	Mary
			Mimi	,,	Mary
Bonna	,,	Isabella	Misho	,,	Michel
Elena	,,	Hélène	Nana	,,	Nancy
Getta	,,	Georgette, Janette	Rita	,,	Margaret, Marguerite
Isa	,,	Isabella	Riri	,,	Mary
Kiki	,,	Christine, Claire	Sinsin	,,	Sofia
			Susu	,,	Marcelle
Lalus	,,	Lucy	Tolla	,,	Victoria
Leli	,,	Lilian	Viki	,,	Victoria
Lolda[4]	,,	Violette	Vivi	,,	Yvonne
Lona	,,	Madliene	Yva	,,	Yvonne

A final subclass of directly correlated nicknames is also small and quite different from the preceding groups. The basis of the correlation is not phonetic but rather is metalinguistic and is presumably to be found in historical association. Some of these nicknames actually are of historical personages, but others can now be classed simply as traditional since the original association is not now known. All these nicknames function very much as the word Washington would if in this country any boy named George would *ipso facto* receive Washington as a nickname, or as Lincoln would if any boy

named Robert would *ipso facto* receive Son of Lincoln as a nickname. Those which I collected were for boys and men, perhaps for the obvious reason that famous women are relatively rare in Muslim history. The one exception in the list is Zahra (which means "flower") used frequently as a nickname for a girl named Fatma, because of the association with the name of Mohammed's daughter, Fatma El Zahra.

Historical background exists for names like those of relatives of the prophet Mohammed or of early sheikhs or religious leaders. Thus a boy named Osman would be familiarly called Abu Haffan, for Uthman [Osman] Ibn Haffan, who was the third caliph following Mohammed.[5] One named Hassan could be called Abu 'Ali, for the historical Hassan was the son of 'Ali, who was both the cousin and the son-in-law of Mohammed. Hassan could also be Abu Elwa, a variant for Abu 'Ali. One named Sayed could be called Abu Arag, for Sayed Abu Arag was a great early sheikh. Suleiman could be Ibn Dawood, for the pre-Islamic leader Suleiman (Solomon). Yussef could be Abu Haggag, for Yussef Abu Haggag, a religious leader in Sa'udi Arabia in the eighth century. For similar reasons Mahmoud may be called either Abu Taha, or, more likely, Abu Hanafi; and Ibrahim may be known as Abu Khalil. Fahmy is frequently given the nickname Abu El Ahlan; I could not find out why.

The second type of nickname is that which has no direct correlation with a person's own name. It is not uncommon for a boy, for example, to be known informally by the name of a favorite uncle or a grandparent. One boy, I learned, is called Toson (a Turkish name, incidentally) after his father's brother. But sometimes it is a prominent person not in the family who provides the nickname. For a boy named Mohammed Reda Swilam there was reported the nickname Shabur (which in turn was often shortened to Bura). Behind this is the story that Mohammed Reda, the shah of Iran, visited Egypt and married Princess Fawzia about the time this boy was born. And Shabur is the family name of the shah. Likewise I was told of a girl named Mirvat Abu El Fotuh whose nickname is Beba, and Beba is a wellknown oriental dancer.

Then there are a few *ad hoc* nicknames associated with personal characteristics. Apparently Egyptians do not favor this type of nickname as much as Americans do, but some instances do occur.

Thus a village bully is always called Abu Ahmed, a term which generally is regarded as complimentary, I am told, though it is only pejorative in Alexandria. A neighborhood gang leader is called El Futowa. A boy who lisps may be called Fithfith, from the colloquial verb 'fathfith,' which means to be unable to pronounce [s]. A boy with quite dark skin or with curly hair may be called Filfil, the Arabic word for black pepper. A girl named Monira was nicknamed Belila, a name for a kind of wheaten food.

From this preliminary and tentative approach to a study of nicknaming in Egyptian Arabic it would appear that at least two intensive studies need to be made: one directed toward the complicated phonemic correlations with the given name, and another toward the socio-cultural correlations. The first study would have to rest upon current research in colloquial Egyptian phonemics;[6] the second would involve consideration of such matters as the status of women, the status of children in the family, social groupings of children at home and at school, and the position of the family within the social structure.

1. For help in collecting the names I am grateful to many Egyptian students and to their instructors: Miss Gloria Scott, former Fulbright lecturer at the Higher Institute of Education for Women, Cairo, and now instructor in English, Pueblo High School, Tucson, Arizona; M. M. Mahmoud, English senior master at 'Urman Preparatory School, Cairo; Ibrahim El Serafi, assistant English senior master at 'Urman Secondary School, Cairo; M. M. Haruni, English teacher, Saidiyah Secondary School, Cairo. Ahmed Shams El Din of the Faculty of Science of the University of Cairo, 1955–56 Fulbright scholar at the University of Minnesota, has also helped by removing several egregious errors from the manuscript.

2. *Abdel* is, of course actually two words "slave" and "the." As the definite article *El* belongs with the following name, *Latif*, but it is not uncommon to hear it pronounced with *Abd* as one word, that is, without juncture, and it is often transliterated in English as one word.

3. Stress will be shown here by′, and only when the English spelling might suggest the wrong stress pattern. It must be recognized that the spelling of Arabic names in this article only approximates the actual pronunciation. Incidentally, this particular nickname, Addula, is for a very young boy.

4. For the *d* in *Lolda*, as for *n* in *Sinsin*, I have no present explanation. Phonemic correlation of European names and Arabic nicknames demands much further study. It perhaps should be observed that my spelling of these names has been provided by Egyptians, often by the persons bearing the names.

5. While Ibn (son (of)) Hassan is the historical name, the nickname correlating with Osman is Abu (father) Haffan. My informants explain this as probably due

to an earlier Abuh Haffan, which would mean "his father (is) Haffan." Similarly, then, with Abu 'Ali.

6. Structural analysis of Cairene phonemics and morphemics is the object of the doctoral investigation of Charles Harrell at Harvard University under the direction of Professor Charles Ferguson, who himself made a preliminary analysis of colloquial Arabic while he was in the Middle East as foreign service officer of the Department of State. The 1954–55 Fulbright linguistic team in Egypt worked on a tentative formulation of Cairene phonemics which was finally prepared by Professor W. Freeman Twaddell of Brown University as a teachers' manual, now being used in Egytian schools.

★ ★ ★

The Texans show more chivalry than the U. S. Weather Bureau and other federal agencies. They do not name their sandstorms Diane or Dolores, but give them masculine designations like Adam, Benson, Gus, or even Farouk, Casanova, El Diablo, etc.

★ ★ ★

Lazy Dog is the name of a new air force weapon, while a new atomic artillery rocket bears the name Honest John. Weapons have borne individual names for centuries. *Die faule Grete* was the name of a cumbersome piece of artillery used in the fifteenth century by Friedrich of Brandenburg in reducing the castles of his rebellious nobility. When John Sevier in 1780 led his sharpshooters to victory at Kings Mountain their Lancaster rifles had individual names like Mister True, Fire-and-be-damned, Old-Fetch-'em-hither etc.