USMA Nicknames: Naming by the Rules[1]

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Nicknames are a central part of Grayhog life at the US Military Academy. Cadets rename others out of need and shared experience. These names can have favorable and unfavorable connotations, and follow predictable rules. West Point cadets follow core linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic rules, and bend other rules in the process.

To the best of my knowledge this is the first study of West Point nicknames to find its way into print. Nicknames are a central part of academy lore (Kingsbury and Kingsbury 1986) and college life (Gasque 1994). Those described here have recently been in use at the United States Military Academy (USMA). The synchronic and descriptive approach used here reflects the perspective of the cadet insider, an expert who eagerly shares knowledge and experience with nicknames. This analysis seeks to answer the question: as cadets create and use nicknames how do they obey and break rules? The notion of nickname here is broad and includes all ekenames or additional names, hypocoristic forms of personal names, as well as pet names and bynames.

Background on Nicknames

Personal names owe their existence to communicative needs in real contexts of language use. Nicknames arise perhaps to meet more prescient communicative needs. As indexicals nicknames uniquely identify individual members of a speech community whose members make use of nicknames across a continuum of relevant experiences (de Pina-Cabral 1984). While a nickname can be used as an address form, it is more commonly used as a term of reference. In either case the range of social meaning attributable to a nickname is broad. The communica-

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tive setting frames their appropriate use. Contextual cues give rise to use in light of prevailing social situations and rules. A shared knowledge of both cadet language and culture is basic to appropriate use. New names abound in a creative context where culturally based conventional meanings, especially those relevant to military and cadet life, are encoded in new names. A prevailing shared knowledge based on experience affords nicknames their communicative force when they are deliberately used in ways that are acceptable and timely. Nicknaming or renaming at West Point is ongoing and integral to daily life. It normally begins during the first (plebe) year when new cadets experience intense training and initial contact with their peers (classmates). Pursuant to contacts with tent mates or roommates cadets acquire nicknames that come to reflect familiarity and the bond of shared experiences. Well after four years of collegiate interaction, the cadet nickname use continues. To the delight of the original group and chagrin of the nicknamed, a famous or infamous nickname will resurface decades later. A brief description of the culture at West Point is necessary to understand the context.

The Military Academy was founded in 1802 at West Point, New York, a prominent point of land that juts into the Hudson River about 45 miles north of New York City. The history of the United States of America is in tandem with that of Academy graduates, both during times of war and peace. Of the approximate 4000 cadets, women make up about 16% of the corps. Today men and women practice leadership at all levels within the corps.

Cadets are subject to multiple layers of authority. Chain of command authority extends downward from the Chief Executive of the United States through the Secretaries of the Department of Defense and the Department of the Army, to the Superintendent, USMA, an army lieutenant general. The Academy is divided into academic and military spheres of endeavor. Academy officials manage academic, military, physical, moral and ethical areas of cadet development.

The USCC—also known as "Cadet Land" by cadets—is organized into 32 companies of approximately 100 cadets each. Cadets live as company unit members and are subject to many regulations. They adopt, inherit and can name a company mascot, and often stipulate a unit greeting that must be used to address other cadets. Members of the four classes bear special names: seniors are "firsties," juniors are "cows," sophomores are

"yearlings" and freshmen are "plebes." This hierarchy can be reinforced or decreased by a cadet rank system that echoes official US Army rank. Leadership authority is assigned to members of the three upper classes (cadet sergeants and officers), while maximum "followership" duties are assigned to the newest cadets, cadet privates.

While each of the 4000 cadets at West Point is thought to hail from one of the 50 United States, approximately 50 of these can come from other countries. These international cadets are enrolled across the four classes. By law each state is represented as reflected in the proportional number of appointments that members of Congress may make. Thus an intricate mix of regional, urban, and ethnic dialects of American English as well as other languages is reflected in the cadet speech community. A cadet's language or accent is of general interest and often serves to identify him or her from the outset. Language may persist as the salient aspect of a cadet's identity within his or her company, especially if that dialect is seen as stereotypical or stigmatized.

The present analysis derives from a series of 21 scripted interviews of cadets and a survey conducted by cadets. The study supports previous findings that nicknames fall into the two broad categories described by Morgan et al. (1979): internal forms involving linguistic alterations; and external forms involving personal qualities or physical appearance, historical incidents, verbal analogy, and cultural or ethnic stereotypes. Each interview consisted of 20 scripted questions and provides insights into the range of nickname forms and patterns of use in cadet contexts. While a total of more than 300 tokens, their probable derivations and relative social meanings were identified, only a representative sample will be discussed. The interviews reveal additional information about cadet language, perceptions, important roles and community identity. They help to make explicit the relationship between cadet culture and language, especially how culture accounts for language and how language creatively serves cultural needs.

Numerous rules may be considered when discussing the formation and use of nicknames. These include core linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic rules. Linguistic alterations involve the internal changes described by Morgan et al. (1979). Sociolinguistic rules are principally concerned with the appropriate use of forms according to variables of setting (formal or informal), identity (social class, sex, age, status), style,

etc. Pragmatic rules govern the use of politeness conventions and managing acts that affect face. It may not occur to readers that cadets may also have institutional rules that might come into play as they use nicknames. While well known rules govern room order, inspection standards and other daily activities, others comprise a code of conduct that has been described as honor and respect. A cadet may be removed from the Academy for lying, cheating, stealing or tolerating anyone who does. A cadet is also subject to sanction if one disrespects another.

The data reflect that linguistic rules are followed when cadets rename fellow cadets with hypocoristic forms of personal names. These include sound (phonetic), meaning (semantic) and morphosyntactic (clipping, affixation) changes. Virtually all changes to names or inventions involve a sound play component. Reductions of first names or family names are common. The resulting shortened forms often maintain or suggest a dominant syllable, or a reduction to a more familiar, conventional string of sounds or phonemes, perhaps adding a stereotypical suffix, i.e. Augusto > *Gus*, Captain McCullough > *Captain Mac*, Matei > *Mato*, Kasich > *Kaso*, Cassandra Facciponti > *Fatch*. When a sound change for play occurs it can result in a semantic shift that can be further played upon, as in Jason Toth > *Tooth* > *Molar*. In the case of Facciponti > *Fatch of My Little Pony*, the name undergoes minimal sound change, "of my Little" is inserted in the middle of the name (*Facciponti ~ Fatch Pony*) without disturbing its basic integrity. The resulting nickname associates the re-named woman with a cartoon and toy that is beloved by little girls, the antithesis of a West Point woman cadet.

Cadets simplify personal names and derive recognizable nicknames, e.g., Brockton Herschberger > *Brock*, Mark Williams > *Williams*, Brandy Record > *Brandy*, Dave Stewart > *Stew*. Cadet informants report a change in social meaning from distance to solidarity in each of these examples. The change in social meaning is more pronounced when diminutives are produced, e.g., Mark Schmidt > *Schmitty*, Captain Schultz > *Schultzy*. In another example an initially clipped form acquires a new suffix: *Casstelli* > *Telli* > *Telliban*. (I have been assured that the second alteration does not liken the cadet in question to the Taliban of Afghanistan, and that nothing more is intended than clever sound play.) In the following example a cadet receives a new first name, while the original first name is shortened and the last name is retained, i.e. Vince

Lindenmayer > *Osama Vin Lindenmayer*. The word play is entertaining and here the association with stereotypical Germanic severity is intentional.

Sociolinguistic rules govern speakers' appropriate use of language. The context for cadet nickname use is normally informal and almost always involves members of the same company. Though other contexts are possible, cadets consistently refer to conversations involving company insiders, either at distant locations or in private at West Point. Of course, nicknames are not exclusively a private matter. The intent seems to be avoiding the breaking of social rules that might occur in a more public space. Sometimes cadets are not aware of the rules or conscious of the need to respect them and do deploy nicknames in more public or formal contexts. Anecdotes recount that in this way company tactical officers or faculty members, for example, learn of the names they have been given. Alpha company tactical officer > *Alpha Company Daddy*, Systems Engineering professor > *Systems Daddy*, company TAC Captain Kevin K > *The Klop* or *Kevin* or *Cadet Captain*. Each of the first two nicknames suggests a family or trusted mentor relationship, but the nicknames for Captain K recall personal traits. Cadet informants report that this officer is not well liked, is clumsy in his dealings with cadets, and performs duties more like a cadet than an officer. Until such time as cadets and officers discover their own nicknames, we can say that sociolinguistic rules have been followed. Once discovered by the named the social rules have been broken.

Surname name use is common in cadet address as a basic indexical and starts during the plebe year. New cadet names are routinely reduced to surnames for both reference and address. This is an unofficial norm where social distance is maintained between members of the upper classes and the fourth class. Such use is viewed as fair because it is deemed equal treatment, impersonal and formal. Respect can be assured by adding "cadet" as a title, e.g., *Cadet Jones*. This contrasts with the trend in (civilian) society at large to privilege first names or nicknames over last names or titles plus last names (McClure 1981). Use of the surname alone is thought to create distance, signal control and establish a norm for formal contacts with upper class cadets and Academy officials. Surname for address and reference continues as an acceptable practice after the first year even though restrictions of the fourth class

system are gone. Presumably the surname has acquired and now retains a neutral social meaning. Of course, it is now a well known indexical among company members. We hypothesize that cadets who attract little attention, remain socially distant and do not participate in renaming rituals are also more likely than others to be addressed and referred to by surname only. Cadet tradition formerly mandated use of first names or more solidary nicknames once the plebe year was completed. This kind of renaming established an upper class identity and bond to new upper classmen. Formal recognition ceremonies that included handshaking and introductions with first or nickname marked the end of plebe year and advancement to yearling. This company tradition is no longer widely practiced.

The study also shows that a socially constructed perception about a cadet's identity usually dwarfs any reality that a nickname may suggest. Yet the success of a given nickname's acceptability (to the group) rests upon the recognizability of the feature that is singled out and used to identify the named. This makes identification easy to those who know the feature or are predisposed to buy into it. Thus nicknaming can highlight one feature, mask other more salient ones, and of course reinforce stereotyping. Some nicknames based upon physical features or appearance include those meaning "big" but not necessarily overweight cadets: *Fatboy*; *Fat'ems*; *Slim Good Body*; *O'Flubber*; *Butter Bean*; *Albatross*, a long armed cadet; *Bass*, a woman who "looks like a fish;" *Dan > Danderthal*, a cadet with a very large forehead and low grades; *Pan Face*, a male cadet with an unattractive face; *Train Wreck*, an unattractive female cadet, *The Kid with Two Helmets*, a cadet whose hairline comes down so far on his forehead that he appears to be wearing one helmet inside another during field training. Cadet informants assert that in each case these nicknames are never used in the presence of the cadet so nicknamed, but they cannot be sure that the nicknamed are unaware of their sobriquets. Ironically nicknames persist even when the physical appearance or condition that served as their basis has long since changed. Thus explaining the origin or etymology of a nickname is as difficult as explaining the origin of a newly coined word that has no etymon in its original language.

Not surprisingly cadets practice avoidance strategies when in contact with Academy officials. While they are obliged to obey cadet officers,

true decorum is reserved for Academy officials, especially military officers. Nicknames offer cadets a limited respite from the ever present control of officials and other cadets. It is very apparent that most cadets consistently observe the full range of linguistic politeness conventions (Brown and Levinson 1987). In fact they are models of polite behavior in all official contexts on and frequently off the grounds of the Academy. It is perhaps in the barracks that cadets most often resort to the power of nicknames to influence others. Overtly negative nicknames are created to manage personal animus that cannot otherwise be directed at authority figures or unpopular peers. Overtly negative nicknames are still avoided in address. At the same time cadets can break politeness rules if they are not in or can be construed to be not in the presence of a person so nicknamed. There are no examples in the data that cadets engage in face threatening acts by using an insulting or taboo nickname. Personal bonds and professional consequences explain this reluctance. Actual confrontations are few and none over names has been reported.

Cadets use categorical nicknames that carry a stigma and promote unfavorable stereotypes. It seems clear that these nicknames represent an effort to belittle others, especially those who have acquired real or imagined special status: *Tool* (*Bag*), *Chuckle Head*, *Bean Head*, *Slacker*, *Dirtbag*, *Trou* are stereotypical labels reserved to refer to but not address other cadets. *Trou*, a reference to the tailored uniform trousers that female cadets wear, has historically been used to label any female cadet who is known to date male cadets. When a male cadet refers to a female cadet using this nickname it insinuates that she has had sex with a male cadet. Of course, female cadets reject this label. It is reported that some fourth-year women (seniors) attempted to turn it into a badge of courage. In one company these women joined to make Christmas tree ornaments that featured pictures of women cadets with the inscription *trou*. This de facto effort to minimize the controlling power of the nickname was officially seen as a breach of decorum and the women were obliged to remove the ornaments. One informant reports that it is acceptable for one woman to address another as *trou*, "but [use by] a guy who is a woman-hater-kinda-person, that would be offensive." Use of *trou* as an address form recalls use of the so called "n" word in the African-American community. Again cadets do not normally report addressing peers with categorical nicknames. It is hypothesized that they are perpetuated as a result of use during the first year of indoctrination.

Cadet informants were asked if they thought the use of nicknames is politically correct. This loaded question subsumes what I have been calling sociolinguistic and pragmatic rules as well as cadet regulations. As I teased out responses to this question it became clear that cadets see nicknames as central to cadet culture, and that they are a necessary by-product of four years of socialization and bonding. This process obliges cadets to accept their nicknames, whatever they may be, without objections or reservations. While most male cadets claim that they value nicknames, it is clear that female cadets do so much less. Additional data from cadets who do not buy into the nicknaming ritual might offer a clearer picture of this difference.

Nicknaming may be important to a named cadet who benefits from a new identity where there was none or from a favorable identity that has been ratified, e.g., *Mary McGovney* > *Govey*, where *govey* can be seen as short for *governess*. (Mary serves as the cadet in charge of dancers in the bagpipe band.) While anonymous cadets may derive a feeling of recognition, prestige or acceptance from new names, the names are themselves routinely unfavorable when coined. Cadets report that those who accept their nicknames gain social acceptance and even in-group popularity. Clearly nicknaming constitutes one among other social rites of passage in the cadet military culture. Prominent nicknamers, however, do offer contradictory information.

Some nicknames are accepted and ultimately viewed as favorable. More transparent and approving names are given to cadets or to staff and faculty that suggest affection. While cadets can ultimately embrace their nicknames, most are powerless to object to any new name. As mentioned earlier new cadets are routinely addressed by last name by the company's training cadre. This practice continues throughout the first year by the training cadre members and is picked up by the plebes themselves. Plebes are not able to mingle at length during periods of training. They are also obliged to maintain a formal military demeanor whenever outside of their rooms. Thus lack of socialization as well as mandated initial use easily account for persistent last name use. In time cadets come to see last name use as the norm, and even favorable or distinctive in-group practice. Last name use in address comes to be an acceptable formalism in all West Point contexts especially where a plebe is involved, including the classroom where Academy officials, especially graduates, can be heard continuing the practice after the plebe year.

At the same time, a new cadet can be nicknamed based upon a physical characteristic, a memorable or infamous event, or other alteration to personal names. If a plebe's last name is not known, he or she will likely be addressed by one of the generic and demeaning names for plebes such as *Bean Head* or *Smack*. This practice is common when plebes are being "corrected" for an infraction of regulations. Interviews reveal that nicknaming is dynamic, ongoing and sticks. While upper class cadets may use plebe categoricals like *Smack* or *Bean Head* to demean, last name use allows the upper classman to claim an official posture. In this way they maintain distance through address without risking breaking rules of respect. Plebes can easily acquire face-lowering nicknames when upper class cadets exploit a physical feature, an embarrassing event, or other personal information. A squad leader sought to get cadets in the company to join the intramural running team with an e-mail stating: "Come run with us, we have Teddy 'Speedy' Shonsheck." Only members of the company know that this nickname is sarcastic, since Speedy once bragged that he has more experience in running competitions than anyone else in the company.

This brief survey of cadet nicknames offers important insights into cadet language and culture. Cadets follow formal linguistic rules when altering or coining new nicknames, and they usually follow social rules of appropriateness consistent with in-group (company) expectations. Most avoid nickname use outside of cadet contexts because their social meaning will not be understood. Cadets are not likely to break politeness rules by offering offensive nicknames in address or in reference within earshot of the named. Thus they avoid face threatening acts especially out of cadet contexts. They know that ethnic or sexist nicknames are disrespectful and that official sanctions for use are possible. Absent specific regulations covering renaming or nicknames, cadets do not believe they commit a breach of regulations even if names they use are seen as demeaning or disrespectful.

Cadets use nicknames in their social groups in order to balance social distance and solidarity. Nicknames offer cadets a sociolinguistic means to identify, to influence, to categorize and to stereotype. They successfully manage identity and interpersonal relations within defined in-groups through explicit use of or avoidance of nicknames in address. Their effective use reflects creativity that can be deployed to deflect

criticism, maintain and develop friendships and social relations, avoid sanctions for disrespect, and obtain momentary respite from the pressures of a demanding military culture.

Note

1. The study of names and nicknames has a long history. Chief among American name scholars is Edwin Lawson, a steadfast supporter and mentor. I am one of the countless who has been encouraged by Ed to contribute to the field. For this report special thanks go to another Ed, Ed "E-snake" Edgreen, USMA 2004 whose prowess as nicknamer is unequalled. I would also like to acknowledge the following USMA graduates: Woody Held, Ken Burkman, Fatch Facciponti, Nick Trerotola, Pee Jay Peselj, Huntski Hunt, and Chief Laumer.

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