Nickname + *-ing*: A Perlocutionary Evaluation

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A character in a short story titled "The Referees," by Joseph O'Neill, proposes the form of a term for any unwanted hypocoristic nicknaming, such as *Mike* for *Michael*, simply the nickname in question verbed and suffixed with *-ing*, so, in this example, *Miking*. The unwanted nickname reflects a speaker's verdictive illocutionary meaning, but, as a perlocutionary response to the presumptuous nicknaming act, Nickname + *-ing* resists that meaning or its legitimacy. At least, it identifies the act, for which previously there was no handy term.

In an article about the pragmatics of nicknames (Adams, 2009a), I suggested that some people presume to assign unwelcome nicknames to people they meet (*Mike* for *Michael*, in my case), that such nicknaming is an assertion of social power through the verdictive illocutionary force (as a judgment or evaluation) implicated in the naming speech act, and that the named person may then redistribute power in a dyadic relationship or in a social group by choosing from among possible illocutionary meanings in creative perlocutionary ways. "Though one may not mean to be aggressive or presumptuous in calling another by an unwanted nickname," I argued, "the naming is nonetheless subtly political and not quite an innocent mistake […] the namer has assumed unwarranted authority (and thinks it appropriate that he do so) over the named and has shifted the burden of addressing the nickname onto the named. So the act is not innocent in the sense that it is apolitical, but in the sense that it is thoughtless" (Adams, 2009a: 90n4).

Though the circumstance is familiar, no bit of onomastic or pragmatic jargon has developed to express awareness of it, let alone to capture the named person's perlocutionary response to the nicknaming insult. However, a recent work of fiction by Joseph O'Neill, titled "The Referees," describes the problem aptly and provides us with a term for calling it out:

> I'm having lunch with a friend from college days, Michael, with the secret purpose of asking him a favor. It's not the only reason I'm meeting him. I like Michael, as one does. He's entertaining. He decides to tell me about his neighbor, Gus —

"Gus?" I say. "Are we talking Augustus?"
"Gustavus," Michael says.
— who has, apparently, been ill-tempered and hostile for years —
"Back up," I say. "Gustavus? As in Gustavus Adolphus?"
"What? He's Gustavus Goldman. Gus Goldman."

— this guy, this Gus, who lives in the apartment next door to Michael's and has a history of irascibility and unhelpfulness connected, it would seem, to his alcoholism, this guy has turned over a new leaf and is now a sober, much happier, down-right pleasant individual, and for some months has been trying to befriend my friend Michael, and has been Miking him —

"Did you say 'Miking' you?"
Michael says, "You know, 'Mike' this, 'Mike' that."

"Oh yeah, right." — Miking him with a view to Michael becoming his pal. But Michael doesn't want to be pals with Gus. (O'Neill, 2014: 65/a)

The narrator's concern to establish the origin of this particular *Gus* proves his onomastic sensibility, such that he notices immediately when Michael describes unwanted nicknaming in a novel and interesting way. That the character Michael and I share a name is pure coincidence and certainly the pragmatics of such contexts is not limited to *Michael* and *Miking* — *Steve-ing* (from *Steven*) and *Jen-ing* (or, in conventional English spelling, *Jenning*, from *Jennifer*) are just as likely.

Production of such forms may seem trivial, but they are a bit more than that — though admittedly, not much more. Nouns regularly undergo conversion into verbs (Clark and Clark, 1979), and Anderson (2007: 197) notes that names convert to verbs on occasion, too, sometimes having converted into nouns before the verbing occurs, though the conversions Anderson uses to illustrate the formative principal are eponymies. *Miking* or *Jenning* are not metaphorical generalizations, however; they do not attribute qualities associated with names other than *Mike* and *Jen* to Michael and Jennifer. Rather, the name at issue in the social context remains that name in the new form, without intermediate conversion to common noun or eponym. In morphological terms, NICKNAME + *-ing* is actually the unusual verbing of an unconverted name by means of a suffix.

Pragmatically, NICKNAME + *-ing* is somewhat more interesting, because it always refers to the event of someone using a nickname to assert political power within a relationship, the right to call someone by an unwanted name and the status to get away with it. If a person says to a third party, "I thought I'd take him down a peg, so I Miked him," he is actually registering a perlocutionary response to his own illocutionary act, for instance, the one implicated in *Hey, how's it goin', Mike?* That is, he interprets the illocutionary act as verdictive. And the interlocutor, the named, in describing the action of Miking or Jenning — *He was Miking me, and I didn't like it, so I told him to stop* — evaluates the implications of the illocutionary act and determines that they amount to a face-threatening act. The item that results from verbing the name — *Miking* or *Jenning* — is pragmatically significant, but the very word-formative act is also a pragmatic act.

Nicknames are not just shortenings, and you can cast a negative verdict on someone with a longer rather than a shorter name, given the social setting. For instance, Charlie Brown is put in his place socially, not by being nicknamed but by being full named — with few exceptions, everyone calls him *Charlie Brown* rather than *Charlie*, and thus his full name takes on the pragmatic force of a nickname, which could, as a matter of perlocutionary response, depending on speakers and situations, be as unwanted as any glibly presumptuous hypocoristic form (Adams, 2009a: 88). So, as my mother rang the dinner bell to call me in from play, she would eventually resort to calling me out: "Michael Paul," she would cry in frustration, and I rebelled against her *Michael Pauling*. The strategy of NICKNAME + -*ing* is not reserved for hypocoristics.

Yet even if NICKNAME + -*ing* is possible for all perlocutionary responses to all unwanted nicknaming, it is not always plausible or preferred. Clearly, it works best with hypocoristic forms, such as *Mike < Miking*, and in longer forms where the suffix is applied to a stressed syllable, such that *Michaeling* would be less preferred than *Michael Pauling*, though *Michaeling* might be reduced to two syllables under pressure of prosody: /maɪ/ + /klɪŋ/. Nicknames ending in vowels are less likely to take -*ing* for phonotactic reasons. So, had Monty Python's Graham Chapman disliked John Cleese's nickname for him — *Gra*, as in "Gra and I always loved writing sketches where some flawed logic prevailed" (Cleese, 2014: 285) — he would have found it phonetically unpleasant to complain about Cleese's *Gra-ing*, just as their colleague Marty Feldman would have struggled with *Marty-ing*, not only for phonotactic reasons, but also for those of prosody. Longer and metaphorical nicknames bump up against acceptability constraints, so had Clay Johnson resented George W. Bush's nickname for him — *The Refrigerator* — he was unlikely to do so with the form *The Refrigeratoring* (Adams, 2008: 208, and *passim* for many other examples of nicknames unlikely to be -*ing*ed). Of course, to say that something is unlikely is not the same as saying it is impossible, and, if it is possible, no matter how far it stretches phonotactic preferences and acceptability constraints, it happens (for example, see Adams, 2009b: 167–169).

In any event, whatever the constraints, in NICKNAME + -*ing*, O'Neill has proposed a useful pattern for constructing a tailor-made, personalized term for and perlocutionary response to unwanted nicknaming.

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