

Nicknames: Offline and Online Secondary Nicknaming Contexts

Anna Tsepkova

Russia

Abstract

The paper is focused on analysing English and Russian nicknames of persons functioning in everyday communication and mass media.

Nicknaming context is viewed in this research as: 1) a verbal environment of a nickname; 2) non-verbal (extra-linguistic) circumstances in which a nickname occurs. Thus it includes motivation, evaluative and functional information, the facts concerning the sphere and the circumstances of nickname generating and use, characteristics and attitudes of the people involved in nicknaming practices. In reality this information is presented partially, implicitly as nicknames emerge and function in oral colloquial discourse characterised by fluency, spontaneity and irreversibility. As a result nicknaming environment can be analysed on the basis of secondary contexts created as a reaction to a request to motivate a nickname.

Secondary nicknaming contexts available for a researcher can be taken from:

- 1) offline resources (questionnaires, print media);
- 2) online resources, e.g. internet discussion sites as well as news sites reporting about celebrities.

Further on, the paper deals with the structure of nicknaming contexts extracted from the aforementioned resources with a special focus on the commentaries concerning pragmatic, cultural and psychological peculiarities of nicknaming such as social behavior patterns, attitudes and opinions, culturally predetermined motivations.

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Introduction

The present paper is aimed at exploring contexts in which people's nicknames appear and function in real and virtual communication. The object of study is nicknames of persons accompanied by the contexts in which they are used. The objectives of describing and analyzing these contexts are the following:

- 1) extracting, revealing, interpreting extra-linguistic information, concerning cultural and pragmatic factors behind nicknaming practices;
- 2) constructing a learner's culture-oriented dictionary of nicknames based on the interpretational linguo-cultural analysis of nicknaming contexts.

This research is based on the following investigations dealing with discourse and its social, communicative and cultural specificity Dijk (1989), Wodak (1997), Hall (1981), Crystal (2001), Karasik (2004).

Data, Resources, Methods of Research

The present sample of data consists of over 4,000 English (British and American) and over 2,000 Russian nicknames and nicknaming contexts, taken from internet forums and blogs as well as questionnaires and interviews with native speakers. Occasionally I resort to examples from contemporary fiction for illustrative purposes.

Thus the methods employed in the course of study include:

- 1) those aimed at collecting the data (continuous sampling from the above-mentioned resources, interviewing, questionnaire filling);
- 2) those connected with discourse analysis (contextual analysis, interpretational analysis).

Discussion

Challenges of Research

Investigating nicknames results in a number of challenges, connected with:

- 1) collecting nicknaming contexts in which nicknames naturally come up and are used, as the act of nomination is hidden from the researcher. It must be underlined that collecting nicknames of any culture is not as challenging as catching and accurately recording the precise contexts in which nicknames are born. The same problem occurs with most of the follow-up nicknaming contexts.

Another challenge for a researcher is connected with getting trustworthy, accurate, unbiased information about nicknaming practices. Intimate or pejorative nature of nicknames can result in subjective and incomplete information about their motivation which can require expertise to avoid misinterpretation of culturally-specific nicknaming practices. This effect can be due to the influence of political correctness (political correctness effect).

Besides, collecting nicknaming contexts is challenging due to an unrecordable number of nicknames, many of which represent occasional cases of nomination;

- 2) sorting out and retrieving culturally-specific information and its appropriate decoding for the purposes of teaching a language and culture;
- 3) creating a complete learner's culture-oriented dictionary of nicknames which can address the needs of modern competence-based approach in teaching a foreign language and culture.

These challenges create the need to find a discourse in which the personality of an interviewer is not intruding into the nicknaming practice or becomes less obvious for the interviewee, and establishing the conditions for anonymous expression of opinions and attitudes.

In this respect the space of internet discourse can be to some extent regarded as a source of nicknaming contexts from real-life communication.

Nicknaming Context: Definition

Nicknaming context is viewed in this research as a verbal environment of a nickname. In a wider sense a nicknaming context also includes non-verbal (extra-linguistic) circumstances in which a nickname occurs. These circumstances determine the structure of a nicknaming context (see below).

Classification of Nicknaming Contexts

The classification of nicknaming contexts presented below is aimed at analysing their potential to reveal culturally-specific information.

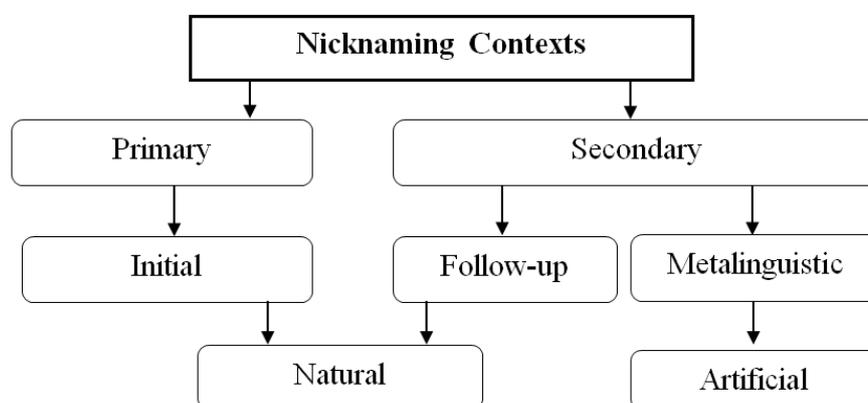


Fig. 22. Classification of nicknaming contexts

Primary or coinage contexts are initial contexts, representing unique circumstances in which nicknames emerge or are coined. Such contexts are highly subjective and involve the following components: the nominator/name giver, the nominee/name bearer and the witnesses of the nickname giving act.

Secondary contexts are those in which a newly-coined nickname starts to circulate. We distinguish between two types of secondary contexts: follow-up contexts and metalinguistic contexts.

Follow-up contexts represent further uses of a nickname in the natural environment functioning as a means of addressing or specifying a person.

Illustrative examples below, though taken from fiction, demonstrate possible algorithm of coining a nickname and its coming into use.

Stage 1. Appellative (based on comparison):

(1) It was quite a shock to see Doreen Slater for the first time. <...> She is as thin as *a stick insect* (Townsend 2002: 105).

Stage 2. Metaphorical appellative:

(2) Went to school today, couldn't concentrate, kept thinking about *the stick insect* (Townsend 2002: 106).

Stage 3. Metaphorical nickname. Further on the nomination *stick insect* is used as a metaphorical nickname both in Adrian Mole's inner monologues (example (3)) and dialogues with other characters (example (4)). Functioning as a nickname it is used without articles and becomes capitalized:

(3) My father, *Stick Insect* and Maxwell House saw me off at the station (Townsend 2002: 146).

(4) I said, 'What's brought him here.'
'His mother. I don't know her name,' she said.
'*Stick Insect*,' I said. 'Otherwise known as Doreen Slater.' (Townsend 2010: 57).

Metalinguistic contexts (reflective or reaction contexts) are contexts representing a reflection on a nickname as a linguistic sign, interpretation of its motivation, connotation, pragmatic aspect. This context can be produced by any person who knows about a nickname in question. In example (5) metalinguistic contexts are given in italics.

(5) Mr Turner – 'Trog' – *because he looked like a cartoon character with that name.* He was also known as 'The rubber-necked man from Mars' *because of his long neck* (Interview 2009, BrE).¹

Primary and secondary follow-up contexts can be called natural contexts as opposed to secondary meta-contexts as artificial contexts. Natural contexts are those of nomination and address (direct or indirect).

Examples (3) and (4) above illustrate the 'behind-the-back' or indirect address contexts of a nickname.

Nicknames in the function of direct address are any examples of the vocative use of nicknames:

(6) Nigel said, 'The rolling stone gathers no moss, eh, *Moley?*' (Townsend 1999: 321).

Artificial contexts are secondary nicknaming meta-contexts created as a reaction to a request to motivate a nickname, e.g. provoked by a researcher or anyone interested in the motivation of a 'cloudy' nickname. Example (7) is an extract from the internet forum under the heading

¹ The label 'BrE' stands for the British nicknaming contexts. The label 'NAme' stands for the US nicknaming contexts.

‘Everyone has co-workers or friends with nicknames, share a few’, asking its users to share nicknames they know:

(7) Obviously some need no explanation, such as the ubiquitous ‘knuckles’ or ‘scrap iron’ that are flexible and can be applied to whomever messed up last. Over the years there have been some pretty colorful ones.

Start with your own if you have one and it wont get you in trouble (Everyone has co-workers or friends with nicknames, share a few).²

Further on, this thread starter is followed by nicknaming contexts in which the users reflect on their personal experiences with nicknames:

(8) Funny, yes, I was thinkning the very samething myself earlier. Mine, Rango of course, from an old Tim Conway tv western in the ‘70’s, he was constantly falling off his horse, my Dad was given the nick after a horse mishap that landed him in the ER, I was LIttle Rango until he died, then the little was dropped (Everyone has co-workers or friends with nicknames, share a few).

Another example of artificial nicknaming contexts is a questionnaire, designed to focus on particular aspects of the phenomenon under investigation:

(9) Did you have a nickname as a child? *Yes.*

If so, what was it? *Chubs.*

How did you come to have that nickname? *As a child, I was a little heavy.*

Who called you by that nickname? *Brothers.*

Do they still call you that name today? *Yes.*

How did/do you feel when called by that name? *Indifferent.*³

Natural contexts represent a nickname in an authentic environment. However, as a rule such contexts lack linguistic and extra-linguistic information about the nickname itself. On the other hand, secondary artificial contexts represent the information behind nicknames explicitly. They are more likely to express opinions, attitudes, values, thus serving as sources of culturally-specific information.

Nicknaming contexts of the aforementioned types find their representation in oral and written discourse.

In-group or micro-group nicknames mostly function in oral discourse, in which nicknaming contexts are scattered in time and space. As a result the researcher has to deal with written discourse represented by:

² Please note that we preserved the original spelling and punctuation hereafter.

³ Part of nickname questionnaire, 2007 (NAme). The answers are given in italics.

- 1) offline resources (the data received from the respondents' interviews as well as printed media, reference books and dictionaries);
- 2) online resources, such as internet discussion sites (message boards, blogs) as well as news sites reporting about celebrities.

Discussing language and internet, Crystal (2001) states:

The web is truly part of a new linguistic medium – more dynamic than traditional writing, and more permanent than traditional speech.

The intermediate status of online discourse gives it an advantage of interactivity. As a result, online messages of any format, style, genre and topic can get responses in the form of follow-up or meta-contexts, expressing valuable information about people's opinions and attitudes which are in most cases culturally charged.

Written nicknaming contexts, found in offline and online mass media, are often targeted at celebrities. An extract below is taken from the *Huffington Post UK*'s blog under the title 'Britain's Best and Worst Political Nicknames' to illustrate a mixture of follow-up (example (10a)) and meta-contexts (example (10b)) embedded in the introductory part of the blog about politicians' nicknames, *Lord Baldemort* (Liam Byrne) and *Teflon Tony* (Tony Blair):

(10a) Muggles beware – *Lord Baldemort* is back!

Prime Minister David Cameron used this name during Prime Minister's Questions on Wednesday to refer to Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, Liam Byrne.

(10b) It is not the first time he has been blessed with this nickname, *a play on the Harry Potter villain Lord Voldemort*.

Nicknames are often used by politicians in order to belittle their rivals, but often they can have the reverse effect – elevating an otherwise unknown figure, giving them a narrative that they can use to define their career. For example, some would suggest that 'Baldemort' *might give the impression that, like his fictional counterpart, Liam Byrne could be a figure of immense power*.

Here are Huffington Post UK's favourite British political nicknames.

Teflon Tony

Former Prime Minister Tony Blair was known as 'Teflon' *because for a very long time, criticism never seemed to stick to him* (Huxley 2012).

Online resources provide more opportunities for interactivity and involvement of the target group of readers in further discussion and extension of natural contexts into meta-contexts. Meta-contexts are of special interest in our research as they explicate opinions, attitudes,

public sentiment, evaluating the figures in focus. Such meta-contexts are found in the ‘Comments’ section of a blog:

(11) Comments:

jankul456

Dr. Tony Blair, the greatest UK Prime Minister ever! The best friend of common working man. British people need leaders right him right now.

6 FEB 2012 00:19

Hugh_Albert

It's a joke, right? You forgot to put in a smiley face and/ or lol.

28 APR 2012 20:05

jankul456

This world we live in now couldn't handle a real leader like Tony Blair. They just don't make them like him anymore unfortunately!

28 APR 2012 22:16

Belthazor_A

Bliar known as teflon, not just because as in your article ‘criticism’ never seemed to stick, but an awful lot of murky stuff as well never seemed to fix to his coating either.

3 FEB 2012 21:22 (Huxley 2012).

Besides websites discussing celebrity nicknames there are online forums and blogs devoted to discussions of in-group or micro-social nicknames.

Analysing online nicknaming contexts from the cultural perspective we must take into consideration the following criteria:

- a) degree of interactivity;
- b) degree of formality;
- c) mono-cultural vs poly-cultural character;
- d) occasional / individual / subcultural, culturally-specific contexts vs universal contexts;
- e) high vs low nicknaming contexts, by analogy with high and low context cultures distinguished by Edward T. Hall (1981). High nicknaming contexts as opposed to low contexts are holders of implicit information, concerning the motives of nomination:

(12) Copper Knob.....<<< *for obvious reasons* (What was your childhood nickname?).

(13) One girl is known as ‘Dr Teeth’ – *you can guess why* (Do you make up nicknames for people at work?).

(14) Butter bean: *not the boxxer but similar in shape and is known to consume a large pizza in one sitting* (Nicknames for co-workers).

(15) Punkinhead and Big Foot *need no explanation* (Everyone has co-workers or friends with nicknames, share a few).

(16) *Grendel* – girl across the hall in our dorms freshman year...*self-explanatory* (Nicknames for co-workers).

Such commentaries as ‘for obvious reason’, ‘you can guess why’, ‘need no explanation’ appeal to the users’ background knowledge. Whereas the representatives of a foreign culture are likely to experience the informational gap about *Copper Top* being a nickname for red-haired people, and *Dr Teeth*, which can be a false friend leading to a generalized interpretation of a nickname and failing to explicate the image of the ‘Muppet Show’ character, with a broad smile and a golden tooth.

However, in cases when culturally-specific phenomena undergo the process of globalization, motivation of nicknames alluding to such phenomena needs no further explication. Thus, the ‘Smurf’ nicknames, based on associations with blue colour (example (17a)) and mushrooms (example (17b)), are easily decoded by a Russian speaker:

(17a) *Smurf Nutt*

A few ppl at school call me Smurf Nutt cause freshman year *I had blue streaks in my hair* (Nicknames your friends give u).

(17b) My nickname in high school was ‘Smurf’. I was a good art student so some of the potheads in my art class asked me *to draw pictures of mushrooms for them* (Huff).

Analysing nicknaming contexts according to the enumerated criteria we can judge about their relevance to the core aim of our research, connected with selecting between culturally marked and unmarked nicknames and nicknaming contexts.

Structure and Analysis of Nicknaming Contexts

Further on the paper deals with the structure of nicknaming contexts extracted from the resources mentioned above with a special focus on the commentaries concerning pragmatic, cultural and psychological peculiarities of nicknaming such as social behavior patterns, attitudes and evaluation, culturally charged motivations.

The structure of a nicknaming context is predetermined by the type of discourse. Any nicknaming context can include:

- a) motivation;
- b) evaluative information;
- c) functional information;

- d) the facts concerning the sphere and the circumstances of bestowing a name and its further use;
- e) characteristics of the people involved in nicknaming practice (nickname giver, nickname user, nickname bearer) and relations between them;
- f) reference to culturally significant concepts, values, attitudes.

Let us analyse the nicknaming context given below (examples (18)-(18b)).

(18) RateMyTeachers. Teachers Nicknames

by arkangel on Tue Nov 20, 2007 4:46 pm

Anyone know nicknames of ur teachers??

(18a) by Dodger on Fri Dec 28, 2007 3:23 am

Location: Arkansas

The principal at my school is obsessed with the dress code. I mean, we don't have uniforms, but obviously there's still rules. And she will STUDY you as you walk down the hall, just to be absolutely certain you are within the dress code. It's scary. She stares at people. So we call her the '*Clothes Nazi*'.

(18b) by jcb on Thu Jan 03, 2008 8:41 pm

Location: near Boston, MA (USA)

Gender: Male

I think it would be more amusing if you called her the *clothes horse* (RateMyTeachers).

The first stage of our analysis concerns the surface structure of the extract as part of internet discourse.

1. General characteristics, the type of internet discourse. The context under analysis is part of the thematic online forum characterized by cultural heterogeneity (users from the USA, UK, Canada). Gender, age and other characteristics are mostly not specified. Anyway due to the anonymity these characteristics are not to be trusted. The discussion was launched in November 2007.
2. The heading, stating the topic or the thread of the forum: *RateMyTeachers. Teachers Nicknames*.
3. Information about the author of the suggested topic (no information given).
4. A message topic, clarifying the problem, inviting a discussion: *Anyone know nicknames of ur teachers??*

Message topics are very informative for a researcher as they also testify to some current issues and prove the significance of the problem in society: 'Did you have a nickname growing up or in school?', 'Evil nicknames acquired in high school', 'Nicknames of school teachers?', 'Do Tell: Nicknames Between You and Your Friends', 'Do you make up nicknames for people at work?', 'Funniest Nicknames', 'What funny/cute nicknames do you

have for your baby or child?', 'Why do we have such naff nicknames?', 'Jazz Nicknames', 'Mafia nicknames: Are you calling me "baby shacks"?', 'Player Nicknames'.

Message topics can be extended into introductory paragraphs (thread starters) where authors share personal experience, explaining the reasons for the topic, giving examples, etc. (examples (10a), (10b) of the present paper).

1. Multiple replies, representing exchange of other members' experiences (example (18a)).
2. Feedback commentaries of other members (example (18b)).

The second stage of our analysis is aimed at interpreting the contents of the given extract as a nicknaming context.

The kernel element of the nicknaming context is the nickname itself (the '*Clothes Nazi*').

The inner peripheral zone includes interpretation of motivation and connotation concerning the name-bearer, which is in this case explicit: strict and demanding head teacher, obsessed with school dress-code. Negative, pejorative character of the nickname is expressed explicitly through a number of devices:

- emotionally charged lexical and graphic expressive means (*obsessed with the dress code; It's scary. She stares at people, she will STUDY you*);
- allusion to a universal concept of Nazi as the embodiment of violence and brutality.

Evaluative component is extended in another user's remark, expressing advice to rename the head teacher into the *clothes horse*, which would express mockery through emphasizing her obsession with clothes.

The outer peripheral zone includes the following extralinguistic information about the nickname:

- 1) sphere of function (school);
- 2) temporal characteristics, frequency of the event described (regular);
- 3) demographic characteristics of the name-bearer(s): age (unknown), sex (female), social status (head teacher), citizenship, nationality (the USA, Arkansas), personal traits (authoritarian, demanding);
- 4) demographic characteristics of those using the nickname (school students, the USA, Arkansas);
- 5) characteristics of the author, who posted this information (coincides with point 4);
- 6) relations between the participants of the described situation, their patterns of behavior, social roles (hierarchy due to age and status differences between the head teacher and students; restraint, expressed in the head teacher's strict attitude to her students, who feel disdain and fear to her);

- 7) rules of social behaviour, norms and values of a culture (ambiguous attitude to the rules of dress code at school; ironical attitude towards the concept of ‘clothes horsing’, as a kind of shopaholism);
- 8) predominant functions of this particular nicknaming context, usually expressed indirectly through explicit information. The nickname under analysis is used in ‘behind-the-back’ contexts and the main function of this nickname is integrating students in order to overcome negative emotions through collective mocking at the source of these emotions, a person who supervises and frightens them.

Conclusion

In conclusion it is necessary to emphasize the types of nicknaming contexts which can be treated as relevant for further culture-oriented analysis:

- 1) secondary contexts as opposed to primary ones;
- 2) artificial meta-contexts as opposed to natural ones;
- 3) online or offline interactive contexts as opposed to offline non-interactive ones;
- 4) mono-cultural contexts as opposed to poly-cultural ones;
- 5) culturally-marked low or high contexts as opposed to universal ones.

Nicknames and nicknaming contexts selected and interpreted according to these criteria can be integrated into an entry of a dictionary on nicknames and culture.

Anna Tsepkova
Novosibirsk State Pedagogical University
Russia
a_tsepkova@mail.ru

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