

A Psycholinguistic Approach to Nicknaming (With Reference to Nicknames Given by Students to Teachers)

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Abstract

The present paper aims to study the *psychological processes* (and, implicitly, the *linguistic products*) by means of which students nickname teachers and to analyse the *discursive functions* that the corresponding onomastic variants develop in actual communication situations.

A *multi-disciplinary* approach is proposed, as the intention is to deal with language facts from an *onomastic, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic* perspective. While describing the link between the structure of nicknames and mental processes that underlie their production, these language units are interpreted against the backgrounds in which they occur (in schools and universities). Moreover, the paper assesses the extent to which name givers' temperamental traits affect *unconventional onymic creation*. The products of unofficial name giving can be stored for a short or long period of time, in a micro-community (the classroom or school) or a macro-community (nicknames that frequently occur beyond the confines of the institutional framework in which they were created). Some nicknames can even be studied *diachronically* (i.e. nicknames passed down to successive generations of users).

Methodologically, this research is based on three methods (survey, observation, and experiment), which my students have helped to apply in schools and universities in north-western Romania, a multi-ethnic area.

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Theoretical Premises

In onomastics, nicknaming is the most frequently used means of naming, as it is available to everyone, regardless of status, age, ethnicity, religion, or education. The choice of an official name (a first name) implies an intimate relationship with the baptised person: one has to be a child's parent, godparent, close relative (grandparent, uncle, aunt, sibling), or even the priest that performs the ritual act, according to the customs from a certain community. In order to name a business or a commercial product, one has to be its owner, an employee, or a specialised consultant – therefore, a person that is professionally related to the business or product in question. Nevertheless, there are no restrictions to nicknaming someone, which is

why any individual may be involved in the attribution of such names, as nickname giver or recipient.

In comparison with ritual name giving (baptism), ‘nicknaming is a kind of deviation from the standard act of giving a name to a person and it is explained through the need of the rural micro-community to replace the name. This need appears because the official, institutional name is considered either inadequate or not adapted enough to the (phonetic and) lexical fund of that specific local dialect’ (Felecan 2009: 65). Thus, ‘nicknames are used in social groups (clubs, associations, village communities, schools etc.). They refer to a person’s physical or moral particularities and they may have critical or humoristic functions’ (Spillner 2012: 217). By extending the sphere of the use of nicknames, one can see that they occur in every part of social life, the only difference being in the intensity with which they are employed. Critical eye and irony are part of human nature, and nicknaming, which does not imply recording a name in official documents, is the product of a fuzzy, imprecise, unidentifiable naming entity (*vox populi*), able to capture a nicknamed person’s vulnerable point (especially a physical or mental flaw).

As Van Langendonck notices, ‘concerning modern bynames, i.e. unofficial individual or collective personal names replacing or complementing official names, we have to distinguish between names given by adults and those given by young people, since quite different systems are used’ (2011a: 487). We have different ways of relating to people; therefore, nicknames convey our (subjective) perception of others. On the one hand, ‘adults especially focus on the familial or geographic origin, and the professions of their acquaintances, whilst young people concentrate on external, especially physical characteristics, or on conspicuous behaviour, or special personality features’ (Van Langendonck 2011b: 283). On the other hand, children’s imagination is much more developed, and the nicknames they invent are a striking example of their playful ability to mock everything that is not in agreement with their hierarchy of values or scale of aesthetic evaluation.

Research Area and Methodology

The subjects investigated mainly consisted of students I teach, who were asked to mention ten nicknames of their middle-school, high-school, and university teachers. Most students revealed nicknames of teachers they had in high school and middle school, which turn out to be the most prolific periods from this viewpoint.

The area investigated is north-western Romania, from which almost all the one hundred surveyed subjects come – thus, the study concerns some tens of schools from urban and rural environments. Some students used to be classmates or schoolmates, and this facilitated the validation of the authenticity of the nicknames and the confirmation of the stories behind the names, thereby reinforcing their faithfulness. I appreciated the honesty of the answers, even when they were related to current university professors, who are my colleagues.

Classification of Nicknames

Regional, Archaic Nicknames / Neological Nicknames

Being highly complex, nicknames given by children to adults may be divided according to several criteria, as ‘the way in which young people give by- or nicknames, is rather different than the way in which adults bestow bynames on other adults. As a rule, characterization is omnipresent in the system of motivations in juvenile nicknames, whereas relational naming is almost absent. Clearly, young people are more interested in characterizing their comrades or teachers than finding out where they come from’ (Van Langendonck 2011b: 283). For instance, of the several hundred nicknames analysed, I came across only one example that referred to the place of origin; however, it did not do so directly, but by means of the collective nickname of the inhabitants from the neighbouring village, which was that teacher’s locality of origin. This settlement is called *Lipideu* (‘bed linen’), a regional term, as the villagers are nicknamed *Lipideauă*. In fact, in this case, students took over a nickname they had heard used by their parents and grandparents, and employed it to label the teacher (the nickname can be explained in association with the place of birth).

While nicknames in rural areas contain many regional, old, or dialectal words, nicknames given by students are usually innovative, as they consist of neologisms. Among the name forms derived from regional / archaic words, one can find *Boconc* (‘boot’; the teacher did not let students enter the gym unless they wore proper shoes, and when this did not happen, the teacher would say ‘Mary, this is no place to enter with boots!’), *Claie* (‘mop’; the teacher’s hair was short, thin, and curly), *Dețu*¹ (sometimes, the teacher would go to class drunk), and *Farmazoana* (the explanation for this nickname consists in the teacher’s particular beauty, although the dialectal term refers to a sneaky, cunning person). Nevertheless, neologisms are plentiful, regardless of school or grade: *Blonda Cool* (‘cool blonde’; she was obese and wore unsuitable make-up and clothes, while giving advice on what one should wear), *Savarina* (‘rum baba’; the teacher’s hairstyle resembled the delicious cake). It is natural for regional words to occur less frequently than neologisms, as schools promote literary, standard language, and students are tempted to use terms they hear or learn in an academic environment.

The same explanation can be provided for borrowings from foreign languages, of which the most predominant are Anglicisms: *Big ass* (< a stout woman, with an extremely large posterior), *Big-ul* (< the teacher was short), *Cocky* (< the teacher of English had an upright strut, just like a rooster’s), *Cowboy* (< due to the clothes and boots he used to wear daily), *Crispy* (< the teacher was excessively tanned, despite the season, and dressed so that her tan would show), *Gipsy* (< the teacher used to wear a stained shirt and had a dark complexion), *OK* (< the teacher used this Anglicism all the time), *Peace and Love* (< the teacher smiles all the time, talks kindly, is patient, calm, and friendly), *Whatever* (< the teacher of English said the word *whatever* very often). The fact that Anglicisms are the most used loans by students should not come as a surprise, as on the one hand, English is the

¹ From *deț* ‘a unit for the measurement of liquids, the equivalent of 25 or 50 grams. Usually: a glass of *pălincă* brandy’ – see *DEX Online*, s.v. *deț*.

most studied language in Romanian schools and, on the other, it is the language of globalisation.

In comparison with nicknames of English origin, those borrowed from other languages are numerically insignificant. Thus, I came across nicknames of various origins: French (*Très Bien* < this was what the teacher of French would reply to every answer provided by the students), Italian (*Donna Alba* < the teacher's temperament, her appearance, grace, stylishness, and elegance), German (*Micu Klein* < the teacher's surname was *Micu* and he was short + the analogy with a historical figure from Romanian culture), Latin (*Lupus Malus* < the Latin teacher), and Spanish (*Corazón* < the teacher was absent from school for nearly a year, due to heart surgery; *Jorje* < the teacher's first name is *George* and he is in love with Spanish music and culture).

Nicknames Originating in Phonetic Devices

Starting from the last example, it should be stated that I found several nicknames derived from the teachers' own names, in view of obtaining laughter (= language-based humour) or of characterising. This phenomenon does not occur in Romania alone, but in Western space as well. Van Langendonck estimates that 'especially in the naming practices of young people at school, bynames for teachers or for other pupils derive not only from appellatives or even appellative-like structures, but from all possible linguistic sources, including first and family names, or even a combination of figures' (2011a: 488). The devices are manifold and among them there are:

- Syncope: *Miță* (< *Mihăiță*, formed with a diminutive suffix from the first name *Mihai*); *Vera vuvuzela* (< the teacher's first name was *Veronica* and she would shout extremely loudly when she was angry).
- Apheresis: *Lică* (< the diminutive *Vasilică*, because the teacher used this name to address every student, as he did not know their names), *Toni Burtică* ('Toni belly' < the teacher's forename was *Anton* + he had a big belly).
- Apocope, sometimes with the attachment of the fashionable suffix *-i* to family names (*Dichi* < *Dicu*, *Doamna Tot* 'Mrs Tot' < *Toth*, *Feri* < *Fereștean*, *Suio* < *Suiogan*, *Șovi* < *Șovago*) and first names (*Beni* < *Beniamin*, *Codru* < *Codruța*, *Oli* < *Oliviu*).
- Anagram: *Bliț* ('blitz' < the teacher's surname is *Bilț* and she is photogenic), *Scafandra* ('woman diver' < the teacher's first name is *Cassandra*).
- Reduplication: *Lulu* (< the first name *Iulian*).
- Derivation with diminutive suffixes: *Condorel* (< to distinguish him from his wife, a teacher at the same high school, their family name being *Condor*), *Micuțu* (< the teacher's surname is *Mic*, lit. 'little, short', and he is short), *Muscuța* ('the little fly' < the teacher's family name is *Muscală* and she is very short), *Trifoiăș* ('little clover' < the teacher's surname is *Trifoi*, lit. 'clover'); gender suffixes: *Mâța* ('kitten', definite feminine form < the teacher's family name is *Mâț*, lit. 'kitten', and her husband, also a teacher, was nicknamed *Motanul* 'the tomcat'), *Puica* ('the

- chick' < the teacher's family name is *Puiu*); other suffixes: *Ghețar* ('iceberg' < the family name is *Gheață* 'ice').
- Back-formation: *Ciumă* ('plague' < the teacher's family name is *Ciumău* and she has got a hysteric nature).
 - Blending the family name with the first name, so as to create a new word, which is evocative enough to amuse students: *Papurel* ('little bulrush' < *Pop Aurel*), *Porodica* ('the tomato' < *Pop Rodica*). Another type of blending was found, between the verb *a zâmbi* ('to smile') and the family name (*Lici*), resulting in *Zâmbilici* (< the teacher was always smiling).
 - Deformations of the family name or first name with the help of paronyms: *Bală* ('drool' < the family name is *Balla*), *Cărăbuș* ('May beetle' < the family name is *Dărăbuș*), *Maraton* ('marathon' < the history teacher's family name is *Marton* and he dictates a lot during his classes), *Margarina* ('the margarine' < the teacher's first name is *Margareta*), *Știrbu* ('toothless', definite masculine form < Professor Știru had several missing teeth), *Vișină* ('sour cherry' < the family name is *Vișeu*).

Depending on the closeness established between teachers and students, several nicknames derived from diminutives or hypocoristics were encountered: *Gobi* (< the first name *Gavril*), *Gobitzi* (< *Gobi*), *Poli* (< the first name *Paul*).

Nicknames Obtained by Means of Analogy with Illustrious Figures or Fictional Characters

Another source of nicknames consists of names of well-known real-life individuals or characters from the fictional world of mythology, literature, films, cartoons, and others. This fact can be accounted for by young people's imitation of their role models, their wish to resemble certain idols or to compare, by means of metaphor and metonymy, persons from their entourage with favourite characters. In this context, in agreement with D. Felecan:

nicknaming implies the following sequential acts: *choice, designation, spreading, use*, as well as the following instances:

- *the patient (the nicknamed)* must be known, as he is the one whose traits, which are either judged, or appreciated, sustain the forming of an *initial point of view* underlying the semantics of the nickname;
- *the agent (the nicknamer)* is the one that chooses the nickname (either independently or in collaboration) and then designates it;
- *the newsmonger* is the one who spreads the nickname;
- *the users* are those that repeatedly make use of the nickname, whether they are aware or not of its meaning (2009: 70-71).

Nicknames whose sources are real-life characters are inspired by:

- figures in the world of politics: *Bin Laden* (< he looked like the famous terrorist and was very tough), *Boc* (< he was short and resembled the former prime minister of

Romania, Emil Boc), *Udrea* (< the teacher was blonde and also held a position in the management, precisely like the former minister Elena Udrea from Emil Boc's government);

- figures in the world of art and science: *Aristotel* ('Aristotle' < teacher of philosophy), *Cicero* (< Latin teacher; he would always say a Latin proverb), *Da Vinci* (< the teacher was passionate about art, painting in particular), *Einstein* (< because of the hair), *Mozart* (< music teacher);
- figures in the universe of religion: *Gură de Aur* ('golden-mouthed', 'Chrysostom' < the teacher wore golden braces), *Iuda* ('Judas' < a teacher of religious education, who was very tall, wore a beard, and was also very strict, as he used to give many poor marks), *Moș Nicolae* ('Saint Nicholas' < he was old, had a white beard, and his first name was *Nicolae*), *Sfânta* ('holy', definite feminine form < an extremely conservative teacher of religious education);
- figures that receive great attention from the Romanian mass media: *Bote* (< the teacher tried to imitate a famous Romanian fashion designer, Cătălin Botezatu), *Elodia* (< the teacher looked like Elodia Ghinescu, the lawyer who, as a result of her disappearance, kept making the headlines of Romanian newspapers for many years);
- actors, singers, sportspersons: *Bruce Lee* (< physically, the teacher was the actor's opposite), *Fuego* (< the teacher bears a striking resemblance to this Romanian singer), *Shakira* (< the teacher's hairstyle is similar to the one of the Columbian singer), *Tatae* (< he looks very much like the Romanian gangsta-rap singer who uses this stage name);
- historical figures: *Ceaușescu* (< a very strict, authoritarian teacher), *Hitler* (< the teacher fancies politics and history, and she sometimes quotes the Nazi dictator), *Tutankhamon* ('Tutankhamun' < an old history teacher²).

In comparison with the aforementioned nicknames, the ones inspired by fictional characters are more numerous, a fact that is indicative of young people's preferences. Divided into categories, in the order of their occurrence, these nicknames refer to:

- cartoon characters: *Captain K'nuckles* (< *The Marvellous Misadventures of Flapjack*), *Cruella* (< the teacher's hairstyle and make-up are similar to the ones of the character in *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*), *Dexter* (< the teacher was red-haired and freckled, and wore spectacles, just like the homonymous character), *Fred Flinstone* (< *The Flintstones*), *Louie* (< he looked like the main character in *Life with Louie*), *Pepe Le Pew* (< French cartoon character; the teacher's clothes always smelled of mothballs), *Pink Panther* (< in winter, the teacher used to wear a long pink coat), *Pumbaa* (< plump, honest, and earnest, just like the character in the cartoon series *Timon & Pumbaa*), *Samurai Jack* (< he had long hair, which he wore in a ponytail), *Shaggy* (< he looked like the character in the *Scooby Doo* cartoons), *Shaolin* (< the teacher resembled the character in this animated series), *Tweety* (< the

² For this nickname, only the teacher's age mattered, in comparison with the students' age. Thus, it did not refer to the age of the pharaoh who lived 3300 years ago and died when only 18.

- teacher looked like the character in the cartoon series *The Sylvester & Tweety Mysteries*);
- feature film or soap opera characters: *Betty* (< *Yo soy Betty, la fea*), *Coana Mare* ('Big Momma' < the teacher moved about like the character in *Big Momma's House*), *Elf* (< he looked like an elf in *The Lord of the Rings*), *Frankenstein* (< a very stern teacher, who always frowned), *Lassie* (< the teacher resembled the famous dog), *Mister Bean* (< a very jocular nature, whose gestures were similar to the ones made by the comedy actor), *Morticia* (< she looked like the character Morticia Adams: pale complexion, always gloomy, dressed in black), *Nostradamus* (< the teacher gave tests without notice), *Piedone* (< due to the teacher's resemblance to the actor Bud Spencer), *Stan și Bran* ('Stan and Bran' < two teachers from the same school looked like the beloved characters played by Stanley Laurel and Oliver Hardy), *Xena* (< due to the resemblance to the main character in *Xena: Warrior Princess*);
 - literature characters: *Don Juan* (< he was a ladies' man and a charmer, despite his old age), *Lungilă* ('lanky' < he was extremely tall, just like the character in *Povestea lui Harap-Alb* 'The Story of Harap-Alb'), *Păcală* ('trickster' < he used to play tricks on certain students), *Utnapishtim* (< as she was a teacher of world literature, she was very particular about this character in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*);
 - mythological characters: *Afrodita* ('Aphrodite' < although the teacher was no longer young, this nickname stuck to her throughout the years), *Dionysos* (< he often smelled of alcohol);
 - computer-game characters: *Mario* (< the teacher had a prominent moustache and looked like the eponymous character in the game *Mario Forever*).

From the previous examples, one can conclude that Romanian students are more familiar with politicians, autochthonous highlife representatives, and significant international figures (in the world of art and science). Western films and cartoons are closer to them, a proof in this respect being the choice of nicknames from among names of characters pertaining to those cinematic or animated productions. Entertainment shows are not ignored; on the contrary, they are appreciated by many young people, who choose for some of their teachers nicknames that are identical to the names of the television shows in question. For instance, the nickname *The X Factor* was given to a music teacher who, when students sang, suggested that they should participate in this television music competition.

Analytic, Synthetic, Anecdote Nicknames, and Metanicknames

According to D. Felecan's classification, 'Semantically speaking, nicknames can be analytical, synthetical, anecdote nicknames or metanicknames' (2009: 70-81).

Analytic nicknames illustrate a neutral attitude, socially speaking, towards nicknamed individuals' particular features:

- physical appearance: *Broscoiu* ('the toad' < he was overweight and had big eyes), *Ciuperca* ('the mushroom' < her hairstyle resembled porcini mushrooms),

Mecanicul ('the mechanic' < the teacher came to class wearing a blue smock, similar to the one worn by mechanics), *Panda* (< the teacher had a round face);

- skin, hair, or clothing colour: *Albaneza* ('the Albanian woman' < the teacher had white hair), *Cartoful* ('the potato' < the teacher always wore brown clothes), *Creola* ('the Creole woman' < she was ugly and dark-skinned), *Doamna Mov* ('Mrs Purple' < she used to wear something purple at all times), *Madame Blue* (< she was always dressed in blue and even painted the classroom walls in this colour).

Synthetic nicknames 'translate general traits' of the nicknamed person (Felecan, D. 2009: 78). In this category, one can include nicknames derived from:

- qualifying adjectives or nouns: *Atotștiutorul* ('all-knowing', definite masculine form < the teacher believed he knew everything and did not allow others to contradict him), *Bărbosul* ('bearded', definite masculine form < he had a big beard), *Bătrânelul* ('the little old man' < he was the oldest teacher in the school), *Cerbu* ('the stag' < he had a bald spot atop of his head), *Diva* ('the diva' < she wore modern clothes), *Mătreasă* ('dandruff' < the teacher had long dark hair, but plenty of dandruff, as well), *Sconcsul* ('the skunk' < the teacher smelled, because he did not use deodorant), *Spiriduș* ('sprite' < the teacher was thin and short; he had big ears and a big nose), *Stafida* ('the raisin' < an old teacher), *Zâna* ('the fairy' < she believed herself to be gorgeous);
- active metaphors: *Adormita* ('sleepyhead', definite feminine form < she was very sleepy and passed this state on to her students), *Cavalerul* ('the knight' < he was extremely polite and well bred), *Ecologista* ('the ecologist', definite feminine form < the biology teacher was very keen on ecology), *Vulpița* ('the little fox' < the collar of her fur coat had a fox's tail).

Anecdote nicknames 'describe noteworthy accounts in the nicknamed's life' (Felecan, D. 2009: 79): *Baciul* ('the shepherd' < he 'lectured' students about life and always concluded by saying 'you will learn to know that what the Shepherd said is true'), *Broschi* ('little frog' < the students put a frog under the teacher's desk, which scared the teacher greatly and determined her to punish the wrongdoers), *Doamna Vest* ('Mrs West' < she often mistook the West for the East), *Familista* ('the family woman' < she always talked about family and its importance), *Ghiozdănel* ('little backpack' < the teacher wore a backpack all the time), *Gorila fără coadă* ('the tailless gorilla' < ever since the school principal told the students 'you are tailless monkeys!', he received the nickname 'the tailless gorilla'), *Jandarmul* ('the policeman' < a very authoritarian teacher, who showed students videos about training policemen), *Miss Univers* ('Miss Universe' < as a student, she had won a beauty pageant), *Potim* ('pwease' < the teacher could not utter the letter *f* and, instead of *poftim* 'please', one only heard *potim* 'pwease', a word that, in time, became a nickname), *Prăjitura* ('the cake' < the teacher frequently talked about cake recipes during classes), *Securista* ('the Securitate officer', feminine form < the teacher put down in writing everything naughty students would say and then gave these notes to the principal), *Tiristul* ('the lorry driver', masculine form < the teacher of religious education once told the students how he had driven a lorry), *Zâna*

Surprizelor ('the fairy of surprises' < she was in the habit of catching students by surprise by giving them unscheduled tests).

Metanicknames include nicknames based on ethnic names (*Bozgoroaica* 'the Hungarian woman', offensive form < the teacher was of Hungarian origin; *Chinezoaica* 'the Chinese woman' < the shape of the teacher's eyes resembled that of people from the Far East; *Mercedesa* 'Mercedes' < the nickname given to the teacher of English, for racial reasons, as she was of Gypsy origin; *Unguroaica* 'the Hungarian woman' < she spoke Romanian poorly, much to the students' amusement) or social status (*Burlacul* 'the bachelor' < the teacher was not married; *Domnișoara* 'miss' < the teacher was old and unmarried). Albeit scarce, these nicknames reveal certain ethnic sensibilities displayed by students in north-western Transylvania, on the one hand, and their concern for teachers' marital status, on the other.

Nicknames Derived from Physical Appearance

Through the nature of their profession, teachers are more exposed to other people's sense of observation, as opposed to other social classes, and 'whenever deviations occur, regardless of their nature, the person in question will be sanctioned by means of a nickname, which may be known or unknown, accepted or tolerated' (Felecan 2010: 103). Despite the diversity of the nicknames, most of them refer to physical appearance, which is normal if we consider that the first contact between individuals is established visually, and one's outward aspect is a kind of visiting card. The prominent physical traits that students notice are related to height, weight, complexion, or a flaw that can be noted about one's eyes, nose, ears, mouth, teeth, and so on. The following nicknames are proofs of students' critical eye: *Așchie* ('splinter' < she was very thin), *Barbie* (< she was blue-eyed and blonde-haired), *Broscoiu* ('the toad' < he was fat and had big eyes), *Bubulina* ('the little bubble', feminine form < she was plump), *Căstorel* ('little beaver' < his front teeth were prominent), *Chițailă* ('squeaky' < the teacher looked like a little mouse), *Cioara* ('the crow' < she was ugly and dark-skinned), *Frumușelul* ('cutiesy', definite masculine form < he was young and very handsome), *Ghiobu* ('hunchback', definite masculine form < his back was hunched), *Lungu* ('lanky', definite masculine form < he was very tall), *Ochiuț* ('little eye' < he had a glass eye), *Panda* (< the teacher had a round face), *Pinguinul* ('the penguin', definite masculine form < the teacher walked with great difficulty, because of a condition of one of his legs), *Ponei* ('pony' < she was really short), *Porky* (< she was overweight and gluttonous), *Prince Charming* (< the students find him good-looking), *Sprâncenatu* ('big brows', definite masculine form < the teacher had large eyebrows), *Stafia* ('the ghost' < she was short, thin, and long-haired), *Țuți* ('titties' < she had big breasts).

Specific Nicknames / Universal Nicknames

'The number and variety of nicknames is extremely vast, which means that they are an inventory open to every kind of innovation. Many are "universals", occurring everywhere' (Felecan 2010: 109) – nicknames like *Baba* ('the old woman'), *Mr. Bean*, or *Scorpia* ('the shrew'; lit. 'the scorpion', feminine form) –, while others differ from one classroom or school to another, thus showing that children's fantasy knows no bounds. The same nickname found

in two schools refers to distinct aspects. Two eloquent examples are *Ceas*₁ ('watch' < the teacher never let students go before break time), *Ceasul*₂ ('the watch' < the teacher always looked at his watch), and *Einstein*₁ (< his hairstyle resembled that of the famous scientist), *Einstein*₂ (< he claimed to know everything and always gave low marks). Just as 'many aspects of the language faculty are universal' (Costa *et al.* 2011: 531), many nicknames display general features, with respect to their dissemination and the stories behind them.

There is no hierarchy as regards student nickname givers. Every grade / group has got the right / freedom to ironise a teacher by means of a nickname that, depending on how successful it is, stands a chance of becoming widespread in the entire school / university and of perpetuating for generations to come. Some students confessed that several nicknames for their elderly teachers were identical to the ones remembered by their parents, who went to the same schools; thus, these nicknames were about 25-35 years old. Psycholinguistically, this means, on the one hand, that they are the best such names to capture teachers' physical or behavioural characteristics and, on the other, that teachers are conservative and refuse to make any efforts to change in time.

With reference to teachers' behaviour, present-day youth are particularly inventive and willing to penalise any deviation from what they think is normal. This marks yet another difference in the means of nicknaming across generations: 'Whilst in adult byname-giving, familial or geographical origin as well as characterization figure, young people limit themselves to the category of characterization, i.e. occupations or other activities, or physical, psychological, or social properties' (Van Langendonck 2011a: 487-488).

Nicknames Derived from Language Peculiarities

Among the most frequent nicknames bestowed on teachers by young people, there are those related to language peculiarities, or as Van Langendonck calls them, 'delocutives, i.e. nicknames referring to habitual sayings of the name-bearer' (2011b: 282). I will mention here several situational contexts (a catchphrase or an event in an individual's life) or speech acts that are related to verbal tics, the distortion or incorrect pronunciation of certain words, the way in which teachers address students, 'or a particular line or event. [...] Actually, these are anecdote nicknames, given by an individual to another person and communicated to the community, who, attracted by the singularity of the situation, easily takes on these nicknames' (Felecan 2010: 113): *Amin* ('amen' < the teacher had a verbal tic that consisted of saying this word), *Atenție* ('attention' < the teacher used this word very often), *Circuit* ('circuit' < when the teacher said the word *circuit*, the students knew that they were going to have to step out to the blackboard and answer the teacher's questions, or they would be given a pop quiz), *Corigența* ('the failed class' < the nickname originates in a combination of the teacher's demanding attitude and her first name, *Corina*), *Doierul* ('playing card number 2' < the nickname of a mathematics teacher, who was in the habit of threatening students with giving them the mark 2, which is the next-to-last poorest mark in the Romanian system of assessing school work), *Domnul meu* ('my lord' < the teacher always addressed students using this phrase), *Felie* ('piece' < he would often tell students 'Move it, or I'll let you have a piece!'); *Iepuraș* ('little bunny' < when a student was asked to come to the blackboard, the teacher would tell him / her 'Little bunny, start running!'), *Lapsus* ('lapse' < the chemistry

teacher used to answer every question by saying she was having a lapse), *Mamă dragă* ('mother dearest', cognate of English *sweetheart* < the teacher addressed students that were called on to answer a question 'What did you learn for today, *sweetheart*?'), *Neșcu* (< this professor of English pronounced his family name, *Nașcu*, according to the rules of English pronunciation), *OK* (< the teacher used this phrase very often), *Porumbelul* ('the dove' < the teacher used to tell students who gave a wrong answer 'The bird has flown'), *Profa Daaa?* ('teacher yees?' < she always said this at the end of students' sentences), *Prospects* (< the teacher would frequently refer to a workbook bearing this name), *Ș-anume* ('which is' < the teacher used this phrase in every sentence).

With other kinds of nicknames, young people's ludic intention, inexhaustible fantasy, and skilfulness in nicknaming individuals that stand in front of them during classes are salient. However, in the previous examples one can see that students only took advantage of what they were provided through teachers' repetitive, poor, or faulty expression. For instance, one of my students noted that she counted 36 occurrences of the adjective *teribil* ('terrible, awful') during a lecture and a seminar held by a literature professor. On the other hand, just as after important examinations – such as the baccalaureate – the mass media quote, to everyone's amusement, numerous 'pearls' coined by students, nicknames of this kind may be interpreted as a retort given by students who, although hierarchically inferior, can still 'penalise' their teachers' linguistic imperfections.

I also came across some nicknames related not to teachers' expression, but the subjects taught or their hobbies: *Drosophila Melanogaster* (< the biology teacher used to say the following about students that were not prepared for her class: 'Look at this *drosophila*, she doesn't know anything, shame on her!'), *Madame Poulet* ('Mrs Chicken' < the name of the professor of French is *Puiu*, lit. 'chicken'), *Ribo(zom)* ('ribosome' < biology teacher). Psycholinguistically, these nicknames capitalise on the terms that students acquired while learning for the subjects taught by the teachers in question.

A Nickname / Several Nicknames for the Same Person

Some nicknames originate in associations between a teacher's countenance, appearance, nature, and behaviour or, as Van Langendonck states, in 'a continuum from activities to physical properties, i.e. from professions, occupations, or other activities, social behavior, social status, personality features, psychological peculiarities, to physical appearance' (2011b: 282): *Baubau* (< the teacher is very stern), *Blonda cool* ('the cool blonde' < she was overweight, wore inappropriate clothes and make-up, but offered advice about clothing), *Claxon* ('horn' < the vice principal always shouted at disobedient students), *Fericitu* ('happy', definite masculine form < his gait was believed to be suggestive of homosexuality and, as he was a teacher of English, he always translated the word *gay* by 'happy'), *Madame Fatigué* ('Mrs Fatigued' < a teacher of French whose attitude during classes was languid), *Mimoza* ('the mimosa' < the teacher was easily upset and had numerous complexes), *Scorpiia* ('the shrew' < she was stern, demanding, and her laughter was ironic).

While most teachers only have a (characterising) nickname, there are some who have several nicknames, which one may call *cascade-nicknames*. They pertain to different grades / generations or multiple situational contexts, which are memorable to students with a

well-developed sense of humour. In this case as well, ‘the taxonomy divides into four categories: physical traits, psychological and behavioral characteristics, playing with sounds and word-forms, and finally, the combination of these sounds and forms with meanings associated with the teachers’ family-names’ (Van Langendonck 2011b: 283): *Balena* (‘the whale’) / *Clopot* (‘bell’) / *Tomo* (< the professor is overweight / her family name is *Tomoiağă*), *Buni* (‘granny’) / *Baba* (‘the old woman’) / *Bety* (< she was approaching retirement / her first name is *Beatrice*), *BuŃniță* (‘owl’) / *Melcișor* (lit. ‘little snail’) (< the teacher’s hairstyle / the family name *Melcea*), *Curcubeu* (‘rainbow’) / *Multicolora* (‘multi-coloured’, definite feminine form) / *Pălăriuță* (‘little hat’) / *Cușmă* (‘fur hat’) (< the clothing style), *Gay* / *Femeiușcă* (‘little lady’) (< he was classy, well dressed, passionate about fashion, clothes, and appearance / the teacher had a sharp voice and a ladylike gait), *Hălencuță* (‘little turtleneck’) / *Povești nemuritoare* (‘immortal tales’) (< the teacher wore thick clothes and turtlenecks / during every class, the teacher spent about 10-15 minutes recounting all sorts of events from her university years), *Mami* (‘mum’) / *Cloșca* (‘the broody hen’) (< she cared very much about her students, whom she called ‘my children / chicks’), *Sexy Luci* / *Pui congelat* (‘frozen chicken’) (< very thin teacher), *Umbreluță* (‘little umbrella’) / *Preci* (from *precipitații* ‘(rain) showers’) (< the teacher stood in front of the first row of desks in the classrooms and she ‘showered’ the students with spit), *Vampir* (‘vampire’) / *Demon* / *Vrăjitoare* (‘witch’) (< the teacher had a gloomy and sombre look).

Nicknames – A Lexicological Perspective

Lexicologically, the nicknames bestowed on teachers by students may be divided into base forms and derivative forms, which are obtained especially with the help of diminutive suffixes. Nicknames with a simple structure consist of nouns without articles (*Crin* ‘lily’ < the teacher is beautiful and wears a perfume that smells like this flower; *Fată* ‘girl’ < a very young teacher, who is treated with little respect; *Pinguin* ‘penguin’ < short, stout teacher, with short, curly hair; *Portocală* ‘orange’ < the teacher looked like this fruit) or nouns with the definite article: *Pisica* (‘the cat’) < the teacher had green eyes and keen sight, just like a cat; *Șchiopul* (‘limp’, definite masculine form) < he was limp. As N. Felecan notes, nicknames inspired by animals, birds, or insects may occur with everyone, and they ‘constitute a relatively constant, predictable subclass, but they are defined by the fact that, once chosen, they become indicative of the nicknamed person’s behaviour. [...] Negative aspects are taken into account, either regarding an animal’s appearance: big, strong, fierce, and so on, or its characteristics: ferocity, slyness, greed, savagery, slowness, and so on’ (2010: 112-113).

Names of various beings, alongside other lexical-semantic categories, also appear in nicknames obtained through the addition of diminutive suffixes, which are omnipresent in all the stylistic registers of the Romanian language: *Așchiuță* (< *așchie* ‘splinter’ + suffix *-uță*; tall and thin teacher), *Băiețaș* (< *băiat* ‘boy’ + suffix *-aș*; he is young and gets along well with students), *Băluță* (< *bală* ‘drool’ + suffix *-uță*; the students sitting in the first row of desks needed umbrellas or tissues), *Bestiuța* (< *bestie* ‘beast’ + suffix *-uță*; due to the teacher’s nature), *Broscuță* (< *broască* ‘frog’ + suffix *-uță*; despite his looks, the teacher was loved by the students), *Bretonelu* (< *breton* ‘fringe’ + suffix *-el*, definite form; the teacher had

a short fringe), *Bulinuță* (< *bulină* ‘dot’ + suffix *-uță*; he used the term *dot* very often), *Castronașul* (< *castron* ‘bowl’ + suffix *-aș*, definite form; the teacher always wore a hat that looked like a bowl), *Crăcănel* (< the verb *a crăcăna* ‘to sprawl’ + suffix *-el*; a physical education teacher, who was tall, thin, and used to sprawl), *Cuțulache* (< the dialectal term *cuțu* ‘doggie, pup’ + suffix *-ulache*; the teacher always talked about his four dogs), *Lebădel* (< *lebădă* ‘swan’ + suffix *-el*, masculine form; a teacher who moved gracefully and talked slowly and drowsily), *Mustăcilă* (< the verb *a mustăci* ‘to smirk’ + suffix *-ilă*; he had a funny moustache), *Pătrățelu* (< *pătrat* ‘square’ + suffix *-el*, definite form; a teacher of mathematics, who was short and had a large head), *Rățușca* (< *rață* ‘duck’ + suffix *-ușcă*, definite form; the teacher had a waddling gait), *Scărpini* (< the verb *a scărpina* ‘to scratch’ + suffix *-ici*; the teacher scratched all the time), *Vițică* (< *vițel* ‘calf’ + suffix *-ică*; a malicious teacher of mathematics). These nicknames highlight their emotional nature or their metaphorical one, and they are ubiquitous in Romanian schools.

Another word-building device used in nicknames given by students to teachers is back-formation. In Romanian, this process ‘seems to be more productive and diversified than in Latin and the other Romance languages’ (Vasiliu 2001: 483). In the realm of onomastics, back-formation facilitates the creation of masculine first names from feminine ones, as in the following example: the principal of a high school is called *Mirel*, because the first name of the vice principal is *Mirela*.

I also recorded nicknames formed by the blending of words, especially proper names, although this mechanism is not as widespread in Romanian as it is in German, for instance: *Memo* (< *Mihăilă*, the principal’s family name + *Nemo*, because he was strict and scary), *Tonpom* (< *Tonciu*, the surname of a Romanian show business personality, who has got a long nose + *Pomian*, the teacher’s family name).

Of the word-formation devices that are based on lexical-semantic contraction, clipping and acronymy occur in nicknames given to teachers by young people. Clippings: *Crăci* (< *Crăcita* ‘sprawling’, definite feminine form; she had a funny gait and a strange way of sitting down at the desk), *Iepu* (< *Iepure* ‘rabbit’; the teacher had large, rabbit-like teeth), *Pisi* (< *Pisică* ‘cat’; very young and pretty, especially admired by students), *Zgripti* (< *Zgripturoaica* ‘the harpy’; mean and strict teacher). Acronyms: *H₂O* (< the chemistry teacher; she was obsessed with the pronunciation of this chemical formula), *PDI* (< the initials of the teacher’s name: *Pop Dumitru Ion*), *PDI* (< the mathematics teacher used to say ‘o problemă depinde de ipoteză’ ‘a problem depends on the hypothesis’), *TC* (< full name initials: *Tatiana Cauni*). A particular situation is that of the nickname *SIL*, which is not based on the teacher’s name, but on the fact that he chose these letters for his licence plate. Since many car owners opt to have certain number plates when they register their cars, plates that contain their (first or last) names in full form, as acronyms or clippings (see Felecan 2013: 445-455), some students turned to the reverse, unconventional mechanism of naming their teachers after the licence plates they have on the cars they drive to school: *EMO*, *SOE*.

Nicknames – A Structural Perspective

According to D. Felecan, nicknaming promotes ‘a grammatical configuration that renders it prone to stereotypy and expressivity’ (2009: 70); thus, from a structural point of view, there are one-word, phrasal, and sentence nicknames.

As the previous examples have shown, the first category (one-word nicknames) is the best-represented one, because it combines the law of least effort in pronunciation with the efficiency of a suitable nickname: *Albina* (‘the bee’ < a short, lively teacher, who wears colourful clothes and enormous hats), *Băscuță* (‘little hat’ < he wears a knitted cap all the time), *Bilă* (‘marble’ < he used to fillip students), *Bișnițarul* (‘the dealer’, masculine form < the teacher counts his money during classes, under the desk), *Pălărie* (‘hat’ < the teacher wore a different hat every day), *Șobolanca* (‘the female rat’ < the teacher’s appearance and hair colour made her look like a rat), *Țapu* (‘the billy goat’ < he has got a beard).

Phrasal nicknames are relatively numerous and allude to a teacher’s outward aspect or his / her psychological and behavioural characteristics, a memorable event that occurred in class, or famous phrases in literature, films, religion, and so on: *Balena Roz* (‘the pink whale’ < an overweight teacher that often dressed in pink), *Cetățeanul turmentat* (‘the tipsy citizen’ < referring to a character in a well-known play; the teacher enjoyed going out for ‘coffee’ with students), *Doamna cu senzații* (‘the lady putting on airs and graces’ < the teacher had the appearance, clothing style, voice, and airs of a diva + the conversations she used to have), *Madame Îhî* (< she utters this sound of approval at each word said by the interlocutor), *Marele Alb* (‘the great white’ < he was tall and white-haired), *Nas strâmb* (‘crooked nose’ < he had a flawed nose), *Pom de Crăciun* (‘Christmas tree’ < she used to come to school wearing flashy, loud-coloured clothes), *Porcu epileptic* (‘the epileptic pig’ < he talked to students in an offensive manner and, as a result of an accident, his hand used to shake terribly), *Piticul porno* (‘the pornographic dwarf’ < a hint at a character in adult films + he was short and fancied students), *Regina fișelor* (‘the queen of worksheets’ < she always gave worksheets to students), *Scuturăciunea Dumneavoastră* (‘your shakiness’ < referring to a form of address from historical literature + he had a motor tic that caused him to shake all the time), *Sfânta Linguriță* (‘the holy teaspoon’ < the teacher of religious education once said, by mistake, *Holy teaspoon* instead of *Holy Mass* – Romanian *linguriță* / *liturghie*), *Speedy Gonzales* (< she was short and wore glasses), *Ting Tang* (< due to the her size, the teacher had a waddling gait).

Sentence nicknames are fairly rare, probably because, in the youth’s opinion, a successful nickname must be short and incisive: *2 metri și-o barbă* (‘two metres and a beard’ < he was very tall and had a beard), *2 metri și-un zâmbet* (‘two metres and a smile’ < she was very tall and smiled all the time), *Nu te mai juca cu pixul!* (‘Stop playing with your pen!’ < a sentence employed compulsively by the teacher in reply to every movement made by the students), *Stai acasă!* (‘Stay at home!’ < when there was clamour, she told students to stay at home, so they would not disturb her classes), *Students, nu intrați în bac* (‘Students, you will not make it to the baccalaureate exam’ < the teacher of English used to say this sentence very often during the last two years of high school), *Un metru și-un zâmbet* (‘a metre and a smile’ < she was short, but always kind and smiling).

Nicknames – A Morphological Perspective

Morphologically, most nicknames bestowed on teachers by students consist of nouns: *Bila* ('the marble' < a tall, fat, and bald teacher), *Capra* ('the nanny goat' < based on the teacher's countenance + she edited the school journal, which she called *Muguri* 'buds'), *Cocostârc* ('heron' < very tall and thin), *Contrabas* ('double bass' < a plump music teacher), *Foca* ('the seal' < due to the sounds the teacher made when laughing), *Libelula* ('the dragonfly' < due to the teacher's oblong face and large spectacles), *Meduza* ('the jellyfish' < she was short and fat, and had a wobbly gait), *Mop* ('mop' < she always came to school with the hair tied at the top of her head), *Pușcăria* ('the jail' < he had the hairstyle and countenance of a prisoner), *Rândunica* ('the swallow' < she was short, frail, and had a nice voice), *Șuvița* ('the lock of hair' < albeit bald, he had a lock of hair that dangled over his glasses).

In the order of frequency, adjectives come in second: *Cheala* ('bald', definite feminine form < her hair got thinner in time), *Crizatul* ('hysterical', definite masculine form < he yells often), *Gotica* ('gothic', definite feminine form < she has got a strange clothing style), *Împuțitu* ('stinky', definite masculine form < he smelled horribly), *Puturoasa* ('stinky', definite feminine form < her breath smelled disagreeably), *Supta* ('emaciated', definite feminine form < she was so thin that her face was emaciated), *Șocata* ('shocked', definite feminine form < she spoke slowly and drowsily, only to raise her voice suddenly).

One finds that there occur few interjections (*Fâl-fâl* 'flap-flap' < the teacher had chubby cheeks; *Oac-oac* 'croak-croak' < the teacher had big, bulging eyes), adverbs (*Rapidu* 'fast', definite masculine form < he walked with great speed), numerals (*Cinciucu* lit. 'small five' < the mathematics teacher gave many such marks, namely 5, and uttered the numeral with the diminutive suffix), and pronouns (*Dumneavoastră* 'you' < the teacher addresses students using this politeness pronoun).

Another interesting grammatical feature of nicknames consists of their abolishing gender differentiation, that is, 'the transfer from an appellative to a nickname does not observe grammatical gender' (Felecan 2010: 116). Words that display a masculine form designate female individuals (*Cocostârc* 'heron' < very tall and thin; *Hitler* < a malicious teacher; *Mâț* 'kitten' < a woman biology teacher, who spoke in an affected manner and with a squeaky voice; *Pinocchio* < a woman teacher of literature, who had a long nose; *Ponei* 'pony' < she was extremely short; *Rambo* < a woman teacher of logics, who was easily recognised from a distance by her gait) and vice versa, feminine words are associated with men: *Girl* (< an effeminate teacher of art), *Pupăza* ('the hoopoe' < a teacher of physical education whose name was *Pupeze Claudiu*).

Concluding Remarks

In school, nicknames can be considered language products, concise messages that students convey to their peers in relation to their opinion about certain teachers. Usually, teachers are sovereigns during classes and, at the same time, they establish the rules of the game: what, how, and how much students should learn. 'Investigations carried out in different locations and countries around the world have shown that in classroom interactions, teachers talk approximately 75% of the time' (Hinkel 2010: 251). During breaks, however, students are the

ones who decide on the schedule and means of their relaxation: the verbal sanction of certain flaws, behaviours, attitudes, vocal tics of their teachers – nicknaming is the way in which students manifest their authority; they make the rules of the game, while those sitting at the teacher's desk become mere puppets, named according to the students' liking and good humour. 'Much of the classroom spoken language centers around knowledge and information elicitation turns between the teacher and the students, cohesive topical stretches of talk, or exchanges motivated by instructional activity in the classroom. In general terms, teacher-student exchanges reflect the unequal and hierarchical relationship of their participants in teacher-fronted classrooms' (Hinkel 2010: 251). Whereas teachers steer discussions during classes in the direction of their choice, students claim the right to demonstrate total freedom and express their preferences in nicknaming their teachers. The use of the name of a famous character to nickname a teacher is yet another proof of young people's tendency to be imitative, to the detriment of being creative. The explanation may lie in speakers' lack of difficulty in understanding such a nickname: the analogy facilitates the comprehension / interpretation of a nickname by students' peers. While in other environments – the rural one, for example – the motivation behind a nickname is often vague and irrecoverable, in student groups it is transparent and easily available to any informant.

Psycholinguistically, the diversity of nicknames can also be accounted for through their oral character. A nickname is almost the only kind of name that is linked to orality, and the cases when it is set in writing (by means of graffiti, for instance) are extremely rare. Due to this fact, on the one hand, young people give free rein to their imagination and rebellious nature, without taking into consideration the potential repercussions of their written action.

On the other hand, nicknaming does not imply constant effort – such as the complexity of the learning or memorising process –, but only attention, intuition, keen observation, and humour. 'The act of producing language is a peculiarly human ability that typically proceeds quickly (2-3 words/second) and without apparent effort' (Berndt 2011: 565). Therefore, it can be performed by most students. Taking into consideration the difference in social status, nicknaming appears as an exciting activity, as it offers students the chance to exert unbridled freedom.

At the same time, one can identify a similarity between nicknames and slang. In schools, a nickname may be seen as an argotic means employed by students to name teachers, and the success of certain nicknames corresponds to young people's attraction to slang words and phrases. Originating in classroom talk or classroom interaction, nicknames become a form of relaxation for nickname givers and their peers, provided that the circuit of their use is kept closed (namely that they do not meet the ears of their bearers). 'Nicknames are normally not combined with address terms, and they often are not even known by the person to whom they refer' (Spillner 2012: 217). Students' perception of nicknames bestowed on teachers is almost always positive. However, the effect these names have on teachers is mainly negative, as most nicknames are pejorative, deprecating. As they are created continuously and occasionally, nicknames are characteristic of the act of unconventional naming in teaching institutions, regardless of geographical space or historical context.

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