Aspects of morphology and character choice motivation in Internet nickname constructions

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Abstract: The article presents an analysis of 7456 Internet chat room nicknames. Unlike previous studies, the author does not provide a semantic analysis of nicknames; yet, the attention is centered on morphological construction tendencies. This is supplemented with an investigation of motivation for the application of selected characters in nickname construction, with the non-standard use of capital letters, numbers and non-alphanumeric characters being of interest.

Keywords: Internet chat room, nickname, morphology, character motivation.

Introduction

Ever since computers became interconnected, a number of various forms of online interaction have been developed. Among those, chat rooms have gained a lot of interest both from users and researchers of various fields of science (Szymański 2013). In order to take part in a chat, this form of web-based communication requires its users to choose the name, with which they will be identified throughout the process of interaction.

An Internet chat room nickname is a commonly recognized identity marker within a certain community. Very often does it happen that online interaction participants know each other only by their nicknames. This may either help one to hide their real self or to create one's desired self-image (see Lakaw 2006). A study referred to in the present text concerns an empirical analysis of 7,456 unique chat room nicknames and focuses on the tendencies in nickname construction. In addition to this, attempts are made to investigate chatters' motivation for certain graphic elements in these constructions.

The present article centers on an empirical analysis of Internet chat room nicknames. The discussion begins with a depiction of how the author perceives nicknames, along with references to selected studies on these pseudonyms. This is followed by a brief presentation of the source of the researched samples. In the next part of the text, the reader becomes acquainted with a methodological approach the present author rejects, which is justified with a number of reasons. Equipped with this knowledge, the reader is taken through an in-depth investigation of chat room nicknames. The author discusses his morphological typology, as well as character-choice motivation, with capital letters, numbers and non-alphanumeric characters being of core interest.

What is a nickname?

All nicknames are proper nouns. Typically, these words are used to refer to individuals in informal settings. Primarily nicknames are given to people by others. Chat room nicknames, on the contrary, are different. This is so because these nicknames are chosen by the bearers themselves. Thus, unlike with traditional nicknames, chatters choose what they will be called in a chat room.

The uniqueness of chat room nicknames stems primarily from the fact that chatters make the choice of their chat room name when they log into such a communication platform. Szymański (2013) draws a contrast between two types of chat room nicknames. Firstly, the said scholar points to temporary nicknames. These are used by chatters who, probably, do not wish to maintain long relationship with either the chat room or the chosen nickname. Moreover, such a name entails the possibility to choose a different name every time a person logs into a chat room. The other genus of nicknames, according to Szymański (ibidem), includes permanent nicknames. Such a name is possible for a chatter to achieve after they have registered the chosen form with a certain password. Consequently, the registered nickname may only be used provided that the correct password is provided. Otherwise, the chat software forces the chatter to create a new combination of characters. What might be found interesting, such a once registered nickname may not be further used even as a temporary one without the password.

A considerable number of previous studies have shown that these Internet pseudonyms constitute research interest from a number of perspectives, especially with reference to the study of nickname semantics. One of the earliest studies in this area is the one by Bechar-Israeli (1995), who carried out an analysis of the semantics of nicknames. The scholar divided the pseudonyms into seven categories (see ibidem).

Other classifications of nicknames are also based on their semantic content (following Ecker 2011). Johnová (2004) finds four categories of nicknames and Stommel (2007) finds six such groups. In addition to this, all the cited researchers seem to agree that nicknames help Internet users create their own self. Moreover, these names may be of significant assistance to their bearers aiming at anonymity (Johnová 2004). In addition to this, Stommel (2007) raises the role of nicknaming in creating one's desired identity in an online society. This is so thanks to the fact that chatters do not have the direct face-to-face contact (Crystal 2001). As a result, they have an opportunity to present themselves to others in a manner they want to be perceived. Therefore a nickname is used as an information carrier.

A corresponding approach is taken by Lakaw (2006) who studied Internet nicknames with reference to the fact that they allow for certain anonymity. Chatters have been observed to hide their real self behind nicknames and they let others see themselves in the manner they themselves desire. The quoted author investigates also a meaning-based classification of nicknames, which leads him to conclude that the topic of a chat determines the choice of nicknames (see Lakaw 2006).

Online pseudonyms are also of interest to culturally contrastive studies. Chyrzyński (2009) looks for similarities and differences between nicknames of Polish and English language users. He states that language and culture do not have a bearing on creating Internet nicknames. The cited researcher, however, does not distinguish between chatters,

discussion board users and participants of social networks. One may argue that users of various forms of online interaction have different goals, and therefore their communication should be analyzed separately (cf. Szymański 2013).

Source

The study reported in the present article was conducted on 7456 unique chat room nicknames. Those nicknames were excerpted from a chat room which had contributed to a corpus of Internet chats. As a result, some of the discussed findings come from Szymański (2013). This article, however, is the only work focusing on the nicknaming tendencies in the research material exclusively, which came out as an aftermath development of the cited large-scale empirical study of chat room lexis. What is more, previous considerations pertaining to these chat room anthroponyms in the mentioned corpus were published in Polish, which might pose certain limitations to international audience.

What is not analyzed

The described analysis does not concern the semantics of chat room nicknames. This decision was made for a number of reasons. First of all, some of the collected anthroponyms come from languages unknown to the author. This would definitely have a bearing on the reliability of the study. In addition to this, the present author might also be unfamiliar with cultural elements, which might bring about improper perception of the intentions of chatters' whose nicknames were studied. What is more, the material includes also nicknames whose motivation is blurred. Such lack of data clarity might also have a significant impact on the reliability of the study outcome. Moreover, the spontaneous creativity of chatters poses certain inconveniences for the researcher, since some items might be left unclassified or, what is worse, misclassified. Finally, having collected the material, the communication for which lasted for over two years, the author does not have contact with the name-bearers any more. Along with this difficulty, chatters are unwilling to reveal motivations behind their choices. This reluctance would definitely disturb the reliability of the study.

All these arguments induced the author to abandon the attempt to build a semantic typology of nicknames and center his attention on the morphological construction tendencies exclusively.

Selected nickname construction tendencies – data analysis

As far as nickname structure is concerned, the study revealed a number of construction tendencies. In this section, the reader becomes acquainted with their types.

Allegedly random constructions

First of all, nicks composed of allegedly random sets of characters are distinguished. This category includes examples such as: *adsghrkuyk, assadasd, awdawdawd, Tettwtwtw, sgggwwfawe efwfe, sddsfsd, rmliviu, kdasda, fdsgdsfgdsf* or *gfdsgfdgsdgfd* (examples after Szymański 2013: 179). The studies material comprises 112 such constructions, which accounts for 1.5% of all the researched nicknames.

An analysis of the randomly-composed forms leads to a number of conclusions. For one thing, these constructions are not words commonly in use. What is more, all these pseudonyms are unbroken sequences of characters which do not express conventional meanings. Application of strings of random characters is a characteristic feature of users who do not intend to form any permanent relationship with the chat room community. This is assumed since keying in the same combination of characters pressing keyboard buttons at random several times in succession is hardly possible. In addition to this, having chosen accidentally constructed nicknames, chatters do not reveal information about themselves. This helps them achieve a desired level of anonymity.

One-word constructions

Secondly, one-word constructions may be distinguished. Such nicknames do not contain any conventional characters for word separation. This category includes forms such as: *gina*, *Jezyk*, *lysy*, *masatahe* or *mumik213131*. This group counts 5877 unique names, which represent 78.82 % of all the excerpted pseudonyms. The high frequency shows that one-word nicknames constitute the most numerous category as far as the type of construction is concerned. A conclusion then may be drawn that one-word construction is the prevailing tendency in nicknaming structure.

Multi-word constructions

The third category includes multi-word constructions. This class encompasses nicks built with the application of non-alphanumeric characters for the purpose of word separation marking. Among such nicknames one may find: *Nocny.Marcin*, *poker.luk*, *power...king*, *Sylwiunia&Andrzej*, *ZioMeK_RoBeK* or *eL*Diablo*. Out of the listed nicknames, 1579 were classified as multi-word constructions. This is 21.15% of all the analyzed nicknames.

Moreover, multi-word constructions do not include the conventional spaces for word separation. This is so since the chat software imposes such limitations on the users.

Nicknames with prefixes

Finally, 3247 nicks with prefixes were excerpted. These constitute 43.55 % of all the nicknames analyzed in the study. With reference to the discussed research, a prefix is an element preceding an actual nickname chosen by a chatter when logging in, according to the studied chat room regulations, included in square brackets (see Szymański 2013). This group of user names includes constructions such as: *#[IP][psv]Maly*, *#[VIP][psv]Maly_ Meteor*, *[NL][UTRECHT]mitza*, *[Istream]Andees* or *[psv][toya]InFeRnO*. Nevertheless, users tend also to feature prefixes with other non-alphanumeric marks as well, for example: *(115kb/s)Adrian*, *psv.kosik1* or *,pol,andrzej*.

The motivation for the use of prefixes was to group users with the same characteristics in one place on the list of users. The said features include:

– type or speed of Internet connection, for example: *(**T1**)Gandi*, *[**psv**]-Robik_ syberia_* or *[**Toya**]GroudZero[psv]*;

– location or nationality, for example: *[**wro**][psv]radek*, *[**RO**][B][RDS]squidy* or *[**PL**]AmBeer*;

– chat room hierarchy, for example: *#[VIP][psv]hatchet* or *#[VIP]optymisty*;

– interest groups, for example: *[RO][CS][RDS]Luchyan>*, *<[RO][DJ][RDS]Gaby222* or *[RO][B][EVOLVA]Sefu>*.

Since this article centers the attention on nicknames exclusively, prefixes will not be discussed at length.

Character motivation – data analysis

The study reported in the present article focuses on the tendencies in chat room nickname construction. Therefore a number of peculiarities as far as the investigated trends are concerned were examined with reference to the purposes for which they have been applied in constructing nicknames. Below the reader will find a discussion of the following phenomena: the nonstandard use of capital letters, digits and non-alphanumeric characters, all of which were found utilized in Internet nickname structures.

Capital letters

Chat room nicknames are proper names. The rules of orthography stipulate that such are spelled with the capital letter in the initial position. Instances of these were, of course, found in the researched material; however, other, non-standard positions of capital letters were also reported. Out of the 7456 listed nicknames, 4111 featured at least one capital letter. These characters in question were revealed to appear also in the middle or final position of the studied constructions.

Firstly, nicknames with the initial letter capitalized were excerpted. This category included names such as: *Gooffy*, *Jarox*, *Lovtza*, *Pralcio* or *Zenkolama*. Whereas constructions of this type should not come as surprising, with regard to the fact that this type of name spelling is due to the norms of orthography, nicknames with capital letters inside the construction attract one's interest beyond any doubt. This is so because such constructions, in a measure, stand out amid others. Among such constructions, two trends were unveiled.

For one thing, capital letters serve the function of word separators. This happens in multi-word constructions in a threefold manner:

– every word (with a conventional meaning) is spelled with the initial letter capitalized and word-separating spaces are not used, for example: *YarbaBuena*, *ZachwycajacoWspanialyNirgal*, *RedRover610* or *NewHere*;

– every word (with a conventional meaning) is spelled with the initial letter capitalized, even though word-separating characters were used, for example: *Mastah_Lukas*, *Walker.Cordell*, *Zapalenie_Gardla* or *Kosa-Ask*;

– words (with conventional meanings) are spelled with capital and small letters alternately, for example: *czytajTOwspak*, *OLOWEKpass* or *PARTYzanas*.

The other tendency revealed is the application of capital letters for the purpose of nickname ornamentation. This group gathers constructions such as: *CaRmEliA*, *ChRaBa*, *HoaXed*, *KiiUub* or *RaNeZkIThEmAn*. Such a utilization of capital and small letters is aimed at nickname decoration. Graphically adorned, such a word form becomes more attractive from the visual point of view. Thanks to such form building, these nicknames become distinguished from other names spelled more conventionally.

This is how chatters may intend to make their identifiers distinct, which, in turn, is aimed at attracting interlocutors.

Numbers

Among the studied nicknames, 990 constructions were found to include numbers. Similarly to capital letters, digits were reported in the initial, middle and final positions of nickname structures. In addition to this, some nicks were reported as created of digits exclusively. All these practices were carried out on purpose and with certain aims in the minds of their bearers.

25 nickname constructions begin with numbers. A certain variety of motivations for such choices were discovered. Among these forms, one may find proper names imported from other communication environments, for example *8-Ball* (a cartoon character) or *12groszy* (a reference to a Polish song). Furthermore, numbers beginning nicknames might also point to the speed of the user's Internet connection, for example: *640/256(psv)Kozik*. What is more, chatters also reveal their age via placing the alleged year they were born in, for example: *[psv]1984_zurek*. In addition to these, nicknames in whose construction numbers were used in initial positions are motivated with embellishment, for example: *[psv]5L4Y3R, 1K2i3r4y5s6t7o8b9u10r11a12k13, 4dv3rtiz3R* or *0gi3n*.

Out of the listed nicknames, 157 contain numbers in the middle positions of their structures. Such a placement of digits is also not without a reason. One may easily distinguish constructions in which letters were substituted with digits of a similar shape. Examples of such include: *[psv]5L4Y3R, 4dv3rtiz3R, de4th* or *[psv]M4Ci3k*. These practices were aimed at marking the users' individuality and playfulness. Of course, structure ornamentation may not be denied in these cases either.

Most frequently, however, numbers were used in the final position of nicknames. 717 such nicknames were found. To begin with, in this manner, chatters informed others about their age. This was shown, on the one hand, through the indication of one's alleged year of birth, for example in: *Zan_1985, Zbyszek1980, waldas1992* or *sylwus–1990*. On the other hand, some chatters indicate their supposed age directly, for example: *olokoziny17, KoCiCa_19* or *Adam21*. Furthermore, numbers at the end of a nickname also point to a user with a multiple connection to the same chat room, for instance: *Shalwia1* and *Shalwia3* or *[psv]adamidawid12345, [psv]adamidawid123* and *[psv]adamidawid12*. Aside from these, users utilizing numbers to mark the speed of Internet connection at their disposal were reported, for example: *beleker_psv_512/128* or *[pl]_mijamo_640/160*. Finally, the study found also nicknames in whose construction letters were substituted with digits of a close shape, for example: *(adsl)Bong0, [EU]DraK3* or *Kaz!0*.

Last of all, four nicknames were found to consist only of numbers. The following names: *[PL]256, [DS]13, 99* and *12345* constitute all the members of this group. As far as this class of nicknames with numbers is concerned, a certain motivation is hard to establish. In fact, the only assumption one may arrive at is that those chatters desired to manifest their individuality, originality or uniqueness. Moreover, with reference to motivation, the nickname *12345* might also be compared to the group of constructions built of randomly-composed strings of characters. The choice of such a nickname might, therefore, suggest

the user's unwillingness to maintain a longer relationship with the chat room community (Szymański 2013).

Non-alphanumeric characters

Aside from the above-mentioned peculiarities related to chat room nickname construction, 1415 nicknames were found to include non-alphanumeric characters. Those signs were either available from the keyboard or through a choice option in a text editor and further transmitted to the chat software. The characters in question include:

!	@	#	^	&	*	-	_	+	:	”	,	,	.	?	/	`	~	€	®

After a thorough analysis of these nicknames, several reasons for their application were ascertained. A significant role of the non-alphanumeric characters might be found in distinguishing users with a similar nickname. Examples of such include: *[psv]cichy* and *[psv]cichy_*, *[psv]GreG*, *[psv]GreG_* and *[psv]GreG___*, *Eugen.* and *Eugen*, *Hunter.* and *Hunter*, as well as *Krzysio...*, *Krzysio.* and *Krzysio*. These 12 names denote in fact five chatters: *[psv]cichy*, *[psv]GreG*, *Eugen*, *Hunter* and *Krzysio*. All of them used multiple connection with the same chat room. Due to the fact that the chat software does not allow users to join a room with the same nickname structure, they added supplementary characters to their nicknames. Thus, those chatters managed to evade, in a manner, the software-laid limitations. For the program, though, such strings of characters were divergent constructions. Yet still, they remained recognizable among chat participants with the conventionally known signifier.

Observations have proved that most frequently non-alphanumeric marks are incorporated into nickname constructions to serve the purpose of form ornamentation. This is done in a number of ways. For one thing, chatters include additional elements for the purpose of decoration. Out of the multiple examples, one may wish to mention: *[PsV]^pOziOmeczkA71^*, *[psv]#TroublemakeR#*, *[psv]*Duszek**, *[psv]----==DaBek==----*, *Lukasz14-==[[((((PSV))]]==--* or *..::[C][A][R][E][K]::...* Some of the users, substituted letters with letter-like characters or similarly looking character combinations. Examples of such practices include: *---I{r!s---* [Kris], *K!C!@* [kicia], *[ADSL]..€mm@* [Emma], *[psv]J@cek* [Jacek] or *Ma'][΄rix* [MaTrix]. Aside from these inclinations, several nicknames were found, whose constructions consist only of non-alphanumeric marks. Such examples include: *------* or *[psv]d(-_-)b*. The former structure may either be an instance of ornamentation or simply a reluctance to invent any string of characters for a nickname. The latter, however, constitutes a pictogram. *[psv]* is a prefix and as such is not of our interest. As far as the parentheses, dashes and underscore are concerned, thanks to their arrangement, an image of a person's head comes to the fore. In addition to this, the letters *d* and *b* imply headphones. Such a nickname might suggest that its bearer likes listening to music.

The non-alphanumeric characters were also used to manipulate with the order of displaying nicknames on the list. Of course, the natural order of listing nicknames was according to the Latin alphabet. Never the less, this method was further modified by creative chatters. Users attempted to deceive the chat software and used various characters

in initial positions of nickname structures. Such practices made their nicknames appear before those arranged alphabetically. A number of such forms were found, for instance: *_Alma,][-GRANT*, *&[Wenus]Hania*, *!!-VIP-Mrovaa*, *@artur@pl(PSV?)* or *#[=REG=] MDM*. Moreover, this tendency was equally applied to express the hierarchy in the chat room. Nicknames of high-status holders (or high-status claimers) were constructed with a non-alphanumeric mark in the initial position, for example: *#[VIP][psv]hatchet*, *![BVIP] Kirys*. or *~[REG]-Riw*. This tendency gave priority in display to such constructions because they were placed on the list before the ones without such a trick.

Another frequent employment of the non-alphanumeric characters served the purpose of word separation in multi-word constructions. Examples of such nicknames include: *adam-i-dawid*, *[psv]night-shadow*, *(psv)super_kasik* or *asia.i.ewelina*. As one may see, the non-alphanumeric characters substitute for the conventional spaces between words. However, additional information was also observed to be announced in a similar manner. Some users separate their alleged age, date or year of birth, for example: *miodziu_1978*, *KoCiCa_19*, *Sephiroth'91*, *pacan4ik–19* or *mody–85*. Others announce the speed of their Internet connection, for example: *[pl]_mijamo_640/160* or *beleker_psv_512/128*, as well as the type of their Internet connection, for instance: *poltos/ADSL/*, *[LAN].(PL). Krzys1962*, *[psv](T1_LAN)misiuniek1981* or *[Psv]Killer-lan*. Moreover, a certain group of chatters reveal in their nicknames their location, origin or nationality, separating them with non-alphanumeric characters. Such examples include: *Alia@home*, *[psv]K-wowy_PL*, *ex-log.pl*, *Judicator-PL*, *ZoMo(stalowa-wola)*, *TOMEK-CHICAGO*, *(psv)Pol_POLAND*, *[RO][B][FORNIX]el_Futre* or *Patryk_Szczecin*.

Another motivation for the use of the non-alphanumeric characters serves the purpose of a linking device. This class of nicknames includes examples such as: *[psv] Gabi29&Hevi*, *Tomek&Michal*, *Sylwiunia&Andrzej*, *chili&natulka*.

Finally, instances of the use of the non-alphanumeric characters to build emoticons were reported. These include nicknames such as: *Horror_:-)*, *katia_:)*, *[psv]Horror:(* or *[psv]niunia1804:):)*. On the one hand, such practices allow to incorporate a particular user's mood to the conversation through displaying a certain emoticon, conventionally used in chat room communication. On the other hand, however, the use of emoticons allowed users to distinguish their nickname from others, making the construction unique and original. Therefore this trend may also serve as a tool in one's desired self creation.

Conclusions

Chat room nickname is a special type of a proper name because the name-bearers choose what they are going to be called on their own. Such a possibility entails the ability to use one's imagination in the process of nickname construction. Some users, supposedly, enter a chat room without the intention of maintaining relationships with the chat room community. Such participants use allegedly random strings of characters when they build their nicknames. On the contrary, those wishing to enter the chart room community construct one- or more-word nicknames, with the former being a prevalent tendency. A significant proportion of chatters display additional information about themselves in prefixes. These perform the function of group membership identification.

　　In the forms of their nicknames, chatters deliberately employ capital letters, numbers or non-alphanumeric marks, aside from the conventional use of the letters of the alphabet. The non-standard application of capital letters serves certain purposes. These include: word separation and form ornamentation. Furthermore, numbers are used to inform others about the age of a given chatter, the speed of Internet connection or they constitute purely decorative elements. As far as the non-alphanumeric characters are concerned, these are utilized to divide or link items of information or to adorn the form.

　　Aside from the above, prefixes and the non-alphanumeric characters are used to manipulate the order of displaying nicknames on the list. A feature of chat software interface causes non-alphabetic characters to be exposed before the letters of the alphabet. Hence chatters use the former in initial positions of their nickname constructions. This helps them maneuver which nickname will be shown before which one. Moreover, such practices gather nicknames of users with the same characteristics in one place. This is how, among other measures, hierarchy in the chat room community is manifested.

　　Chatters given the opportunity to construct their nicknames on their own make attempts to use the chance to the maximum. They arrange where their nickname is going to be located and among which group of chatters. In addition to this, they select which information to reveal in the form with which a certain person is identified. All these attempts aim at expressing one's individuality in a nickname, plus they allow users to present their desired self.

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