

# NICKNAMES AND CULTURE: ANALYSING ANTHROPONYMIC NICKNAMES, REFLECTING CULTURAL REALIA

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## **Nicknames and culture: Analysing antroponymic nicknames, reflecting cultural realia**

**Abstract:** The paper focuses on exploring nicknames of persons and their potential to reflect realia of a culture. The term 'realia' is understood as: 1) an object of extralinguistic reality, specific to a particular culture; 2) a lexeme, naming this object.

The analysis of over 6,000 British and American antroponymic nicknames revealed the following groups of extralinguistic realia that nicknames fix:

- 1) objects of material culture: celebrities, geographical, urban, ethnographic objects, e.g. *Washington Monument* (tall);
- 2) phenomena, reflecting mental aspects of culture, its stereotypes, e.g. greediness as attributed to the nickname *Pig* in English-speaking cultures but lacking in the Russian culture.

**Keywords:** nomination, nickname, realia, culture.

## **Introduction**

The present research is focused on exploring nicknames of persons and their potential to reflect the *realia* of a culture. The following questions are to be discussed: 1) how do nicknames reflect culture? 2) what aspects of culture do they reflect?

The first question presupposes pointing out the peculiarities of linguistic units pre-determining their cultural specificity. Discussing the methods of comparing such semiotic systems as language and culture, R. Lado suggests analysing cultural and linguistic phenomena on the following levels: form, meaning and distribution (Lado 1958: 76–92, 110–121). In this paper we will focus on the first two aspects of a nickname, i.e. meaning and form, as fundamental parts of any language unit.

1. On the *level of meaning*, or *semantic level*, the connection between nicknames and cultural phenomena is direct, as it is determined by extralinguistic similarity or contiguity of the objects named.

2. On the *level of form*, or *formal level*, the connection between nicknames and cultural phenomena is purely superficial, accidental and coincidental, as it is based on phonetic similarities and does not affect the similarities between the objects themselves. We will call this type of connection an indirect one, as it reflects the similarity of the nominative units rather than of the objects named.

Answering the second question, we must take into account the aspects of culture and types of objects that bear cultural value.

Most of the existing definitions of culture can be brought to three aspects pointed out by A. Chernobrov (Chernobrov 2006: 126):

- 1) *material aspect*, including artifacts as well as people and natural phenomena;
- 2) *mental or psychological aspect*, reflecting cultural stereotypes, beliefs inculcated in a person by society;
- 3) *behavioral or pragmatic aspect*, referring to the way of life, rules of behaviour, habits, imposed on a person by society, e.g. rituals, ceremonies etc.

Consequently, three corresponding types of realia can be distinguished, namely, material, mental and pragmatic. The term “realia” is used in this research in the following meanings, pointed out by G. Tomakhin (Tomakhin 1981: 64):

- 1) an object of extralinguistic reality, specific to a particular culture (*extralinguistic realia*);
- 2) a lexeme, naming this object (*linguistic realia*).

Thus, nicknames can be treated as linguistic realia naming extralinguistic realia of material and mental types. As nominative units, nicknames cannot name pragmatic realia, at least not directly<sup>1</sup>.

## Data

The present sample of data consists of over 6,000 British and American nicknames of persons (anthroponymic nicknames), selected from dictionaries and websites focused on nicknames and culture. Internet resources involved include informational websites as well as Internet forums and blogs where participants discuss nicknames they know<sup>2</sup>.

## Methods

Most of the collected items are the result of continuous sampling from the aforementioned resources. Contextual analysis, interpretational analysis, lexical-semantic analysis and quantitative analysis were also employed in the course of this study. Interviewing and association experiment were used as well. For this purpose a questionnaire was made and distributed among 117 Russian participants, and 60 British and American participants<sup>3</sup>.

## Results and discussion

The results of the quantitative analysis show that 38% of the nicknames in the British sample and 54% of the nicknames in the American sample refer to culture-specific extralinguistic phenomena of material and mental types.

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<sup>1</sup> However, nicknames can allude to situations, which can be characterised as culturally determined. Indirect reference to pragmatic realia deserves deeper analysis and is viewed as a perspective for the present research.

<sup>2</sup> The research does not concern virtual nicknames (usernames).

<sup>3</sup> Nicknames collected by means of interviewing and association experiment are labelled as (IV).

**Nicknames and material realia**

Objects of material culture are reflected in 64.6% of the nicknames in the British sample and 67% of the nicknames in the American sample.

Being culture-specific, such objects are also called *lacunae* or *denotative realia*. The unique character of these realia is also reflected in the fact that their names are words with no direct equivalent in other languages.

Let us consider nicknames referring to this type of realia taking into account the levels of conveying culturally relevant information (meaning and form).

On the *semantic level* nicknames are used to link the properties of the nickname-bearer to the original name-bearer (denotative realia), such as:

1) ethnographic realia:

(1) **Burger lips** < *full lips* (IV) – BrE<sup>4</sup>;

(2) **Goober** < *freckles* < *a chocolate covered peanut* (IV) – AmE<sup>5</sup>;

(3) *we used to call a lad in school “Fa” because he had big ears and a big head – he resembled the F.A. Cup* (Humorous / Possibly Cruel Nicknames) – BrE;

(4) **“Double Decker Ben”** *received his name because of the unique barn he owned* (Amish Nicknames) – AmE;

2) urban realia:

(5) *Namath was also popular off the field, especially with the ladies (which he indulged in happily) and was known for his love of the New York nightlife. Because of this, he was dubbed “Broadway Joe” by the New York press.* (Biography for Joe Namath) – AmE;

(6) **Washington Monument** – *Frank Howard, US baseball player < tall and athletic* (Phillips 1998: 171) – AmE;

3) geographical realia:

(7) *My high school soccer coach even nicknamed me “Hollywood” because I always wore my white Roxy sunglasses to practice* (My Thrifty Chic 2013);

4) celebrities (actors, musicians, singers, politicians, public figures, athletes):

(8) **Boris (Karloff)**: *He was considered to resemble Boris Karloff* (Staff Nicknames) – BrE;

(9) **Will Smith** < *sticking out ears* (IV) – AmE;

(10) *When I had sideburns and a bit of a quiff, I got called Elvis a fair few times, I also got Ralf Little as well, and the girls that said it seemed to like me more, just because I looked like someone famous* (Cool nicknames) – AmE;

(11) **Ol’ Blue Eyes** < *eye colour, allusion to F. Sinatra* (IV) – AmE;

(12) **Angelina Jolly** < *full lips* (IV) – BrE, AmE.

The examples above show that nicknames from the sphere of show business mostly emphasise physical resemblance between a celebrity and a nickname-bearer.

<sup>4</sup> The label “BrE” stands for the British nickname contexts.

<sup>5</sup> The label “AmE” stands for the American nickname contexts.

However, nicknames alluding to politicians and public figures are mostly based on their character or behaviour:

(13) *I call a fella I know **Churchill**, because you can't believe a thing he says* (Humorous / Possibly Cruel Nicknames) – BrE;

(14) **Honest Abe**, **Abraham Lincoln** < honesty (IV) – AmE;

(15) **Amy Vanderbilt** < politeness (IV) – AmE;

Nicknames alluding to outstanding athletes usually characterise athletic build, physical abilities:

(16) Mildred "**Babe**" *Didrickson Zaharias*. *An outstanding golfer and tennis player, Babe was often compared to baseball's Babe Ruth* (Origin of Athlete Nicknames).

The nicknames enumerated above demonstrate explicit reflection of culture in the language. However there is a special type of denotative nicknames metaphorically alluding to objects functionally similar but visually different in cultures under comparison. For example, the word "mop" and the corresponding Russian translation "shvabra" both denote "a tool for washing floors" (OALD). However the visual image of these two objects differs in the English-speaking cultures and the Russian culture. The contrast becomes more obvious if we compare the motives prompting the nickname *Mop* in English-speaking culture and the nickname *Svabra* in Russian culture. Due to the difference in design, the nickname *Mop* can indicate rumbled hair, whereas in the Russian culture the image of *svabra* is associated with a skinny person (IV).

On the formal level nicknames refer to denotative realia indirectly, emphasising phonetic similarities between the name of a person and the name of a culture-specific object:

(17) **Lollipop** – *Lolley, Adam* (Nicknames: Who Are you?);

(18) **Kal Jack Daniels** < *Kal Daniels* (Chris Berman's nicknames) – AmE;

(19) **Dave Supreme Court Justice** < *Dave Justice* (Chris Berman's nicknames) – AmE.

Obviously enough, nickname-bearers and a sweet, a strong drink and the US Supreme Court lack external connections and are linked due to phonetic associations. However, these associations are very strong and determine 15.3% and 10.6 % of the British and American nicknames respectively.

Nicknames motivated by extralinguistic factors form a predominant subgroup (49.3% in the British sample and 53.4 % in the American sample).

The examples above show that most of these nicknames are of allusive character due to the nature of their *denotata*.

### **Nicknames and mental realia**

Aspects of mental culture are reflected in 31% and 29% of the nicknames referring to realia in the British and American samples respectively.

Unlike the previous group, these nicknames do not refer to unique objects. As they refer to objects and phenomena that are ordinary and culturally universal from the material point of view, such nicknames accentuate their subjective, stereotyped perception and

evaluation in a particular culture. As their cultural specificity is reflected on the level of meaning (connotation), such objects can be classified as *connotative realia*.

For example, the idea of greediness is implied in the zoomorphic nickname *Pig* (*Piggy, Pig, Porker, Porky*) in the British and American cultures but lacks in the Russian culture. The nickname *Chicken* connotes cowardice, unlike in the Russian culture, where it characterises small size, quiet voice, helplessness, shyness of character. Also compare *Cocky* – arrogant, whereas in Russian – bully; *Bear* – unpredictable, strong, whereas in Russian also – awkward, clumsy (IV).

Another example of reflecting stereotypes in implicit culturally motivated connotations can be found among nicknames based on occupations. For example, nicknames of British politicians hinting at their working class or middle class descent, are mostly sarcastic or derisive, thus reflecting class consciousness of the British society: *the Brewer* (O. Cromwell), *Grocer* (E. Heath), *the Grocer's Daughter* (M. Thatcher), *Ironmonger* (S. Baldwin).

At the same time American society, proclaiming the ideas of equality, values professional qualities, which people accomplish through hard work. That explains why American nicknames alluding to the initial occupation of a politician have positive connotations: *Surveyor President* (G. Washington), *Our Hero Farmer* (W. Harrison), *the Wool-carder President* (M. Fillmore), *the Rail Splitter*, *the Flatboatman* (A. Lincoln), *the Tanner President* (U.S. Grant), *the Haberdasher* (H.S. Truman), *the Canal Boy*, *Boatman Jim* (J.A. Garfield), *the Peanut Farmer* (J. Carter) (Shankle 1955).

The group of nicknames based on mental realia also refers to characters created by people's imagination. Thus, nicknames allude to characters from:

1) cartoons, films, comics, TV programmes (28.3% and 31% of the nicknames, based on allusions):

(20) **Goofy** < teeth (IV) – BrE;

(21) **Bugs Bunny** < teeth, ears (IV) – BrE;

(22) **Miss Piggy** < obesity (IV) – AmE;

(23) **Bambi** < big eyes (IV) – AmE;

(24) *As a light-skinned brother, I've carried several nicknames since childhood – Casper, Light Bright, Red or White Boy – depicting whiteness as opposed not to blackness but to darkness (The Secrets Nicknames Reveal About Youth Life) – AmE;*

(25) *Nick "Jabba The Hut" Carter. Okay Nick got it because some pictures he looks really fat. I'm not against fat people guys!! One of my friends was calling Nick fat and I said at least he's not like Jabba the Hut and the nickname stuck (Nick's Nickname) – AmE;*

(26) **Spock** < pointy ears (IV) – BrE, AmE;

(27) **Egghead** < head shape (IV) – BrE, AmE;

(28) **Dumbo** < big ears (IV) – BrE, AmE.

Many movie and cartoon characters derive from books, but gain popularity when they appear in films:

(29) *These days I have been told I look like Spiderman, Harry Potter, the main character from lord of the rings (I think because he also played spiderman). So many faces... one person (Do You Have A Nickname?).*

(30) **Pinocchio** < 1) liar; 2) long nose; 3) sticking out ears (IV) – BrE, AmE;

2) fiction as well as legends, fairy tales and folklore (25.7% and 19.5% of the nicknames, based on allusions)<sup>6</sup>:

(31) **Elf** < *pointy or sticking out ears, small height* (IV) – AmE;

(32) **Santa** < *beard* (IV) – AmE;

(33) **Paul Bunyan** < *strong, hardworking* (IV) – AmE.

The motivations discussed in the examples above are mostly based on the visual image of the character, created by movie and cartoon-makers. This makes them to a certain extent similar to material realia.

At the same time nicknames which allude to inner qualities of the characters belong entirely to the mental sphere. Most of them reflect stereotypes and standards of certain positive or negative character features:

(34) *When [T. Blair] became leader of the Labour Party in 1994, his relative youth and inexperience led the British press initially to give him the nickname **Bambi**, after the young deer in Felix Salten's story for children* (Delahunty 2003: 9) – BrE;

(35) **Rip Van Winkle** < *lazy* (IV) – AmE;

(36) **Spock** < *serious* (IV) – AmE;

(37) **Superman** < *courageous, brave* (IV) – AmE;

(38) **James Bond** < *cunning* (IV) – AmE;

(39) **Syd the Sloth** < *stupid* (IV) – AmE;

(40) **Scrooge** < *greedy* (IV) – BrE, AmE;

(41) **Cruella de Vil** < *cruel* (IV) – BrE, AmE.

Nicknames activate mental realia mainly on the semantic level (26% and 25.5% in the British and American samples respectively).

Besides, mental realia representing fictional characters can produce nicknames based on phonetic associations (4.8% of the British and 4% of the American nicknames):

(42) **Bilbo, Bilbo Baggins** < *Billie* (Teen. Hut. Your nicknames – good and bad).

### **Nicknames combining material and mental aspects of culture**

Besides nicknames reflecting either material or mental aspects of culture, there is a group of nicknames based on both of these aspects. Such nicknames are rather rare, as they require creativity on the part of the name-giver:

(43) *My ginger friend gets called all manner of fanta related things by a guy from a coffee shop in my town. The most recent (being chrimbo and all) is **Fanta Clause** (Weebl's Forums. Nicknames) – BrE.*

In the given example, on the one hand, the nickname *Fanta Clause* refers to a material aspect of culture, the connection being reflected on the semantic level (the orange colour of the Fanta logo corresponds to the red hair colour). On the other hand, the nickname

<sup>6</sup> Nicknames alluding to mythological or biblical characters are not considered in this work, as they are well known across cultures.

alludes to a fictional character that is a part of both the imaginary and real world. However, this connection is purely superficial, based on formal phonetic associations which highlight the expressive potential of this nomination.

## Conclusion

Using names of material objects in secondary nomination acts is a universal tendency connected with the cognitive process of perception (Whorf 1941; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The results of our research of antroponymic nicknames prove this tendency: of all nicknames connected with realia, 64.6% (the British sample) and 67% (the American sample) reflect a material aspect of culture.

49.3% of the nicknames in the British sample and 53.4 % of the nicknames in the American sample are motivated by extralinguistic similarity or contiguity between culture-specific objects and the qualities of the nominee. Nicknames based on formal phonetic motivation, indirectly referring to material realia, include 15.3% and 10.6% in the British and American samples respectively.

Aspects of mental culture are reflected in 31% and 29% of the nicknames referring to realia in the British and American samples respectively. Nicknames activate mental realia mainly on the semantic level (26% and 25.5% in the British and American samples respectively). 4.8% of the British and 4% of the American nicknames refer to mental realia on the phonetic level. The most frequent references are made to fictional characters from imaginary worlds.

The least numerous group (4.4% and 3.5% in the British and American samples respectively) includes nicknames representing the fusion of: 1) aspects of culture (material and mental); and 2) levels of motivation (meaning and form). Being the least numerous, nicknames of this group are, however, the most expressive and informative of all.

Thus nicknames of persons exemplify relations between language signs and signs of material and mental culture, reflected on the semantic and formal levels, the semantic motivation showing deeper interconnections between these two fundamental semiotic systems.

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