

# The Pragmatics of Nicknames Students Use for their Lecturers

by

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## Abstract

*Nicknames are a very special communicative tool in institutions; therefore, this paper sets out to explore nicknames that are used to lecturers by students at NUL. The paper discusses the nicknames in terms of their origin and the reasons for which such nicknames are coined. The paper also looks at the pragmatics of the nicknames and the implications that they have about student-lecturer relationships in the institution.*

## Introduction

In communication, speakers usually engage in the use of address terms in order to refer to, identify or even call each other. This makes address terms an important communicative tool through which societal norms and practices can be inferred. Because of their interpersonal communicative function, they are also a vital tool with which human relationships are established and modified. (Afful, 2006:76). From the way a speaker addresses a hearer, either vocatively or referentially, one is able to infer the formality or informality of their relationship or the nature of the power relations that hold between these participants (Traugott and Pratt, 1980).

One of the different types of address terms, which cut across many cultures, is nicknames. De Klerk and Bosch (1997) perceive nicknames to be relatively impermanent, informal names. That is, a nickname is coined to a bearer to serve a specific purpose and it signals the level of formality that a speaker and a hearer share. It is not meant to be permanent nor universally known; although in some cases they end up being more well-known than real names.

In addition to being reflective of the formality of relationships, nicknames are indicative of the attitude that the speaker has towards the bearer (De Klerk and Bosch, 1996). The fact that they can originate from the bearer's physical and personal characteristics; and that they are mostly used referentially, renders them an important tool in gaining insight into whether the speaker approves or disapproves of the bearer's characteristics and thus the positivity or negativity of the user's attitude towards the bearer.

Nicknames are determinants of the power relations in a community. According to De Klerk and Bosch (1997), in tertiary institutions where students have a heightened knowledge about the social roles and relationships, nicknames can bear a wide range of implicatures about power relations and perceptions. They are functional in offering a significant insight into student-lecturer relations as well as their social and cultural expectation and roles.

In many African cultures nicknames exist and they serve a wide range of functions. Among the Ibibio in Nigeria, peers or age-mates coin a nickname for themselves or are endowed with one to reflect their peculiar attributes or achievements like prowess in intercommunity battles or contributions in community development. In the same way among the Igbo, Chinua Achebe (1958:3) writes in the novel, *Things Fall Apart*, about a celebrated community wrestler, Amalinze, nicknamed "The Cat" because his back would never touch the ground. In the Basotho community nicknames are used either as praise names or as ridiculing devices as will be shown below.

## Previous Studies on Nicknames

Despite their richness in meaning and creativity, nicknames to educators, be it at tertiary institutions or lower education institutions, have attracted very little research. This point is further intensified by Crozier

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(2002) who points out that nicknames for teachers are a very common feature of school life, and they reflect many aspects of a school as a speech community, yet there has not been much research on them.

However, available research on nicknames suggests that the use of nicknames is ambiguous. Crozier and Dimmock (1999) view nicknames as an ambiguous social event. Their ambiguity results from the fact that they can be used to achieve positive as well as negative communicative goals. It is for this reason that most studies on nicknames, (De Klerk and Bosch 1996, 1997; Zaitsow, 1997, Crozier and Dimmock, 1999) divide them into two groups depending on their communicative intention and the participant power relations that they reflect.

### **Nicknames with a positive communicative intent**

The first category is nicknames that have a positive communicative and social intent. The speaker coins and uses it to express a positive attitude towards the bearer. This is supported by Gladkova, (2002) who points out that the usage of these nicknames implies a positive emotional attitude towards the speaker. This positive emotional attitude can be expressed through the use of a nickname that shows affection or endearment (Crozier, 2002).

Because of their positive communicative intent, positive nicknames are usually used to reflect solidarity power relations between the speaker and the bearer. They are therefore used among people who know each other such as close friends, relatives and even close colleagues (De Klerk and Bosch, 1997). Their usage is indicative of a need to express warmth and affection towards the bearer and to supply a common ground for communicators, or in some cases to create a sense of belonging between the user and the bearer.

Positive nicknames are usually used vocatively because they are not meant to offend the bearer. They are also used referentially in the third person where the interlocutors refer to the bearer. De Klerk and Bosch (1997) show that positive nicknames are semantically transparent, that is they do not carry any hidden offensive meanings. As a result, they are usually freely used to address the bearer with the expectation that the bearer will approve of the nickname.

### **Nicknames with a negative communicative intent**

Research has also established the existence of negative nicknames. Crozier (2002) says these are nicknames that speakers coin and use with a negative communicative intent in order to express lack of appreciation or a negative attitude towards the bearer. This kind of nicknames is used referentially without the bearer knowing the name. Since they are used among certain groups they become common currency among the members of a group which uses them. It should be noted, however, that in some cases these nicknames are used vocatively when the speaker consciously intends to offend the bearer. According to Crozier (2002), negative nicknames serve as a device with which students get vengeance on their teachers and as their strategy of coping with school life and therefore with the attitudes and behaviour of teachers towards them.

### **Statement of the problem**

Nicknaming of lecturers is a common practice in tertiary institutions. Through nicknames students convey a wealth of implicatures on lecturer-student relationships and perceptions they have about their lecturers. In some cases they can be a useful resource for a lecturer's self-evaluation. Although nicknaming is a very useful communicative resource, very little research has been done in this area.

### **Purpose of the study**

With the understanding that the coining of nicknames is an act of indirectly communicating a particular message about the bearer, this paper sets out to explore the types of nicknames the NUL students use for

their lecturers and the factors that account for this communicative behaviour. Specifically, the study has the following objectives:

- To examine the types of nicknames students coin for lecturers.
- To identify the bearers' characteristics from which nicknames are coined.
- To establish reasons why students use nicknames for their lecturers.

### **Methodology: Sampling and Data Collection**

Data for this paper was collected from a sample of 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> year students across the seven faculties of the National University of Lesotho. Six students were randomly selected in each faculty, two in each year of study, one male and one female. Therefore, 42 students participated in this study. The study use students from different faculties to avoid repetition of the same names. If students from the same faculty were used, it was likely that they would repeat the same names because they are taught by the same lecturers.

A questionnaire was given to each participant. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and each of them filled the questionnaire in their spare time.

### **Data Analysis**

Data for this study was analysed by classifying the nicknames collected. The nicknames were classified firstly in terms of the gender of their bearers. Then they were further divided into their communicative purposes. The reasons why students use the nicknames were also looked into. Then, the origin or basis of each nickname was examined.

### **Findings of the study**

The study collected a total of 32 nicknames for this study. 17 of the names were borne by males while 15 of them were borne by females. All the nicknames served a referential function. The nicknames were also divisible into two categories depending on their communicative purpose. 28 of the nicknames were found to have negative connotations while only four were found to have neutral connotations. This implies that while they are not meant to express a negative attitude, they cannot be classified as positive either because they are not used vocatively or are they used where there is a solidarity power relation between the user and the bearer. Two of the neutral nicknames were shortenings of the bearer's name and they were a common currency to all the students. These are:

*Puly* from Puleng and

*Koni* from Konosoang. These nicknames were reported to be used within earshot of the lecturer. These derivations do not have any implied meaning; the student uses them as a shorter and less time consuming way to address the concerned lecturers.

Other neutral nicknames were coined from the bearer's frequent usage of a particular word or phrase. Students reported that they use these as a reminder of the particular concepts the lecturer taught them. However, they are not used within earshot of the lecturer because the students are uncertain about the likely reaction of the lecturer. These included:

*mookameli*, 'one with a superior status'.

*la langue*, 'a linguistic concept'.

*Taetsano* 'oral literature'.

Another type of nicknames that were established was negative ones. These are nicknames that students reported to use with a negative communicative intent and they were reported to be common currency among students of the concerned department. They are generally used to ridicule, mock and

belittle the bearer. Some of them are actually insulting to the image of the bearer. This type of nicknames can be sub-classified into three basic types depending on their basis.

The first basis from which students coin nicknames is the physical appearance of the bearer. In these cases, students pick out an unusual physical characteristic and turn it into a nickname in order to reduce the image of the lecturer to an object of humour. Examples of such names include:

*Mantsoai-tsoai* ‘an insect with thin legs and tiny body’.

*Earthquake* ‘obese person whose whole body shakes when walking’.

In some cases, the bearer is named after a popular person, but in a mocking way in order to ridicule or tease him/her. For example, one nickname was *Chakela*, a popular Sesotho musician. The lecturer has what according to them, is an unacceptable accent, and he calls himself Mosotho, a nickname for Chakela which in this case connotes “uncivilized”.

In some cases, nicknames reflect the bearer’s taste in fashion. In this category, there were nicknames that foreground the unacceptable clothing taste of the bearer. These included names such as:

*Yellow*, ‘the bearer wore a yellow pair of trousers everyday for a week’

*Nkhono*, ‘grandmother, connoting that the bearer dresses in old-fashioned clothing which are unacceptable to the students.

Another source from which students form a negative nickname is the personality of the lecturer. Some of these reflected the authoritarianism and strictness of the bearer, attributes that are not admired by the students. Such names include:

*Scorpion*, this is coined for a lecturer who is very strict and has a ‘bad attitude’ towards lazy students.

*Child’s Play*, coined for a lecturer whose course is regularly failed and who boasts that his course is no child’s play.

Some nicknames imitate the bearer’s linguistic behaviour such as inability to pronounce certain words for example: *sontimes* instead of sometimes; and the frequent use of certain of certain phrases such as *motho e mots’o* ‘a black person.’

### **Discussion of the findings.**

A common feature among these nicknames is that regardless of their origins and usage, it is obvious that lecturers who are nicknamed are those that are not popular with the students, and overwhelmingly, these nicknames are used referentially. Students gave several reasons for this.

In the case of referentiality of usage, students report that they feel that lecturers do not have to know the names. The reason is that they understand that lecturer nicknaming is not an appropriate behaviour. If the lecturer was aware of the nickname, their relationships would be jeopardized. They are also afraid that the lecturer might institute disciplinary proceedings with grave consequences. It should be noted that this applies to both neutral and negative nicknames.

The study also found that students coin nicknames for lecturers in order to express contempt or hatred. The most unpopular lecturers seem to be those who are strict on time, deadlines and class contributions. Students said that these lecturers pose a threat to their freedom to attend to other non-academic matters such as socializing and drinking. Strictness is also resented when it comes to awarding marks in students’ work. Strict lecturers are said to pose a threat to students’ graduating.

Another reason why students use the nicknames is that nicknames serve as a coping mechanism for them. If they do not like the bearer, yet they have to be with, work with and obey him or her, the nickname serves as a way in which they can amuse themselves and relieve the stress of having to listen to

and obey someone they hate. By mocking the bearer through a nickname, students become less afraid of him or her and cope with their academic work.

Students also use nicknames to establish and reinforce solidarity and in-group membership. Nicknames serve as a common ground with which they identify as a united front in opposition to the 'enemy' (lecturer) they have to deal with. The names therefore facilitate confidentiality when they talk about the lecturer.

## Conclusions

It can be concluded that lecturer nicknaming at the NUL has a lot to do with student-lecturer relationships. Students generally nickname their lecturers because they have a negative attitude towards them. Of particular interest in this matter is the fact that students seem to hate lecturers who demand them to concentrate on their work and to perfect their skills. This implies that there is a need of intensive orientation for students, to make them aware of the duties of lecturers and their expectations for students.

Nicknames also serve as a concealed weapon that students opt to use where they have misunderstandings with a lecturer. Issues such as not being audible enough in class, not adequately explaining concepts and other irregularities such as a lecturer dodging classes, are dealt with by simply coining a nickname for that person. The implication here is that the students are not mature enough to formally handle matters that are of concern to them.

In general, there is a need to open some communication channels between students and lecturers so that a conducive learning environment at National University of Lesotho can be achieved. If students despise their lecturers, they will concentrate more on amusing themselves about that lecturer's disposition and idiosyncrasy rather than doing their work. This could lead to high failure rates and worsen student-lecturer relationships.

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