

## Study of Nicknaming Among University Students

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### Abstract

*This research aims at examining the use of nicknaming among three universities' students. A questionnaire is set as a method to collect data from 77 students participated in this study. The results show that nicknaming is a common practice among university' students. A gender differences is indicated through the use of nicknames to address classmate students and close friends. Also, the use of nicknames reveals the close relationship among the students of each class or department at each university.*

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### 1. Introduction

In all cultural settings, every individual is accorded a name after birth, perhaps, to give a unique identity to the child. At birth, parents or senior members in a family give personal names to the new born baby which he/she may retain throughout his/her life (Mehrabian, & Piercy, 1993). As Aceto (2002) asserts, “true names” are acquired at birth through a culturally accepted arrangement. These names remain with a person though they can be changed either through a new status acquired by marriage or other circumstances. Brender (cited in Deluzain, 1996) avers that family tradition is an important factor in the names many children receive. It is unlikely for people outside a family would give real names to others on this universe. By the time a child becomes capable of going outside the home on their own, they have personal names which are used in all encounters. Irrespective of the names given to children by their parents however, it is common to hear students being called some names other than their real names. Some of these nicknames have positive, neutral or negative connotations (Mehrabian, & Piercy, 1993). Certain nicknames are generally considered desirable and have positive feelings associated with them while others are humiliating and are looked down upon as being undesirable and carry negative associations. Nicknames that are deemed undesirable can have deleterious effects on the bearers' self-esteem, their learning and social relations. Anderson (1979) opines that nicknames have impact on the process of building a self-concept because

the nickname helps determine the messages other people send the child. While some students love and cherish their nicknames, others hate and cannot stand theirs. This shows that not all nicknames are hostile; it may be deferential or signal membership of a friendship group (Wilson, 1998).

### **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.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Nicknaming of students is a common practice in tertiary institutions. Through nicknames students convey a wealth of implicatures on student-student relationships and perceptions they have about their classmates and close friends. Although nicknaming is a very useful communicative resource, very little research has been done in this area. The study tries to answer the following questions:

1. Is nicknaming a common practice among university students?
2. Is nicknaming limited to close friend students?
3. Is there a gender differences in using nicknames?

## **3. Aim of the Research**

This research aims at investigating the use of nicknaming among three universities’ students.

## **4. Nicknames**

Klerk and Bosch (1997) define nicknames as impermanent, informal form of address, which are coined to a bearer to serve a certain purpose and indicate the level of formality interlocutors share. These address forms are designed to be not stable or universally known, but in some cases they become more famous than the original names.

Nicknames' appearance is associated with social reasons and is thrown back to history. Cassidy (1993) writes that “when there are many people named John in society, it is necessary to add a word, which would distinguish this John from another, for example, John Baker (from “to bake”), John Brown (from “brown”) and the like”. Another reason for nicknames' appearance is the intention to trigger bright associations. They are pointers of individual's subjective assessment on the objective qualities of the person. For example, the 21<sup>st</sup> president of America Ch. Arthur was called Arthur the Gentleman \ Elegant Arthur because of his courteousness and polished manners. In addition, "the Queen of hearts or the people princess" are nicknames for the princess Diana for her peacemaking and charitable activities (Garayeva.et al,2016).

Nicknames bear certain social features, they reflect the relationship's formality between the dyads. In addition, they induce what attitudes the

speaker has towards the addressee (De Klerk and Bosch,1996).It is clearly known that nicknames are derived from the bearer's personal and physical features, and they are used referentially in most situations. Thus, nicknames are important indicators that show the positive or negative attitude of the speaker towards nickname's bearer and what personal or physical characteristics of the bearer are approved or disapproved by the speaker.

Nicknames determine the relation of power in a community. In educational institutions where students have a heightened insight about the relationships and social roles, nicknames carry a wide span of implicatures about perceptions and power relation. Their functions are to offer significant knowledge about the relation between the student and the lecturer in addition to their cultural and social roles and expectations (Klerk and Bosch,1997).

Most studies on nicknames, (De Klerk and Bosch 1996, 1997; Zaitsow, 1997, Crozier and Dimmock, 1999) divide them into two groups according to the communicative intention and the participant power relations that they reflect. (Khalaf, 2020)

#### **4.1. Nicknames with a Positive Communicative Intent**

This type of nicknames has a positive social and communicative intent. Speakers coin and use them to express a positive attitude towards their bearers. The same view is supported by Gladkova, (2002) who points out that nicknames' usage implies a positive emotional attitude towards the addressee. The speaker expresses this positive emotional attitude towards the addressee through using a nickname that indicates endearment and affection (Crozier, 2002: 135). According to the communicative intent they bear, these positive nicknames are usually used to express solidarity between the interlocutors. Thus, they are used between familiars such as colleagues, relatives or close friends (De Klerk and Bosch, 1997). They show feeling towards the bearer, support a common ground for interlocutors and create a sense of belonging between the dyads. They are used vocatively and referentially because they do not have an offensive meaning and with the expectation that the addressee will approve them. Ibid

#### **4.2. Nicknames with a Negative Communicative Intent**

Negative nicknames are those nicknames with negative communicative intent that a speaker coins and uses to show a negative attitude or lack of appreciation towards the addressee. Their use is mainly limited to referential use among special groups and they become widely spread as common currency within group's members. Sometimes, nicknames can be

used vocatively by the speaker when he intends to annoy the bearer (Crozier,2002:136).

In the same vein, Crozier (2002:136) mentions that students use negative nicknames to express their vengeance towards their teachers as a strategy to overcome school life and teachers' attitude and behavior towards them. Ibid

## **5. Methodology and Data Analysis**

(hameed, 2020)The data was collected using a self-designed questionnaire which was published in three student groups. The sample size will be taken at the site of the study, namely fourth year students of English Department, College of Education for Humanities, University of Mosul, fourth year students of English Department, Al-Noor University college and fourth year students of English Department, College of Education for Humanities, University of Al-Hamdaniya . The number of students who answered the questionnaire was 77 students. They were 32 students from Al-Noor University College, 26 students from University of Mosul and 19 students from University of Al-Hamdaniya

As for Al-Noor University College, 32 students participated in the questionnaire. They were 18 males and 14 females. The results of the questionnaire show that 50% of female students have a nickname while 33.3% of male students have a nickname.

When addressing a male classmate, the results show that 22.2% of male students use the nicknames to address their male classmates while 7.1 % of female students use nicknames to address their male classmates. So, the use of nick names to address a male classmate is more frequent with male students than female students.

On the contrary, when addressing a female classmate, the results show that 21.428% of female students address their female classmates with nicknames while only 11.1% of male students address their female classmates with nicknames. So, the use of nicknames to address a female classmate is more frequent with females than males.

When addressing a male close friend, the results show that 50% of male students use the nicknames to address their male close friends while 42.8 % of female students use nicknames to address their male close friends. So, the use of nick names to address a male close friend is more frequent with male students than female students.

On the contrary, when addressing a female close friend, the results show that 85.7% of female students address their female close friends with nicknames while only 72.2% of male students address their female close friends with nicknames. So, the use of nicknames to address a female close friend is more frequent with females than males.

Finally, only 14.21% of female students declare that the use of the nickname annoy them while 16.6% of male students declare the same. The table below shows the number of responses and percentages.

Questions	Males' responses		Females' responses		Total percentages
	number	percentage	number	percentage	
Do you have a nickname	6	33.3%	7	50%	83.3%
Addressing a male classmate	4	22.2%	1	7.1%	29.3%
Addressing a female classmate	2	11.1%	3	21.4%	32.5%
Addressing a male close friend	9	50%	6	42.8%	92.8%
Addressing a female close friend	13	72.2%	12	85.7%	157.9%
The use of the nickname annoy you	3	16.6%	2	14.21%	30.81%

Table (1) responses of the students of Al-Noor University College, Department of English

As for University of Mosul, 26 students participated in the questionnaire. They were 9 males and 17 females. The results of the questionnaire show that 41.1% of female students have nicknames while 11.1% of male students have nicknames.

When addressing a male classmate, the results show that 22.2% of male students use the nicknames to address their male classmates while 5.8% of female students use nicknames to address their male classmates. So, the use of nick names to address a male classmate is more frequent with male students than female students.

On the contrary, when addressing a female classmate, the results show that 17.6% of female students address their female classmates with nicknames while only 0% of male students address their female classmates with nicknames. So, the use of nicknames to address a female classmate is more frequent with females than males.

When addressing a male close friend, the results show that 55.5% of male students use the nicknames to address their male close friends while 52.9% of female students use nicknames to address their male close friends. So, the use of nick names to address a male close friend is more frequent with male students than female students.

On the contrary, when addressing a female close friend, the results show that 88.2% of female students address their female close friends with nicknames while only 44.4% of male students address their female close friends with nicknames. So, the use of nicknames to address a female close friend is more frequent with females than males.

Finally, only 17.6% of female students declare that the use of the nickname annoy them while 66.6% of male students declare the same. The table below shows the number of responses and percentages.

Table (2) responses by students of University of Mosul, Department of English

Questions	Males' responses		Females' responses		Total percentages
	number	percentage	Number	percentage	
Do you have a nickname	7	41.1%	1	11.1%	52.2%
Addressing a male classmate	1	5.8%	2	22.2%	28%
Addressing a female classmate	3	17.9%	0	0%	17.9%
Addressing a male close friend	9	52.9%	5	55.5%	108.4%
Addressing a female close friend	15	88.2%	4	44.4%	132.6%
The use of the nickname annoy you	3	17.6%	6	66.6%	84.2%

As for Al- Hamdaniya University, 19 students participated in the questionnaire. They were 12 males and 7 females. The results of the questionnaire show that 42.8% of female students have a nickname while 33.3% of male students have a nickname.

When addressing a male classmate the results show that 16.6% of male students use the nicknames to address their male classmates while 14.2 % of female students use nicknames to address their male classmates. So, the use of nick names to address a male classmate is more frequent with male students than female students.

On the contrary, when addressing a female classmate the results show that 0% of female students address their female classmates with nicknames while only 16.6% of male students address their female classmates with nicknames. So, the use of nicknames to address a female classmate is more frequent with females than males.

When addressing a male close friend the results show that 33.3 % of male students use the nicknames to address their male close friends while 28.5 % of female students use nicknames to address their male close friends. So, the use of nick names to address a male close friend is more frequent with male students than female students.

On the contrary, when addressing a female close friend the results show that 42.8% of female students address their female close friends with nicknames while only 75% of male students address their female close friends with nicknames. So, the use of nicknames to address a female close friend is more frequent with females than males. Finally, only 42.8% of female students declare that the use of the nickname annoy them while 41.6 % of male students declare the same. The table below shows the number of responses and percentages.

Table (3) responses by students of Al-Hamdaniya University, Department of English

Questions	Males' responses		Females' responses		Total percentages
	number	percentage	Number	percentage	
Do you have a nickname	4	33.3%	3	42.8%	76.1%
Addressing a male classmate	2	16.6%	1	14.2%	30.8%
Addressing a female classmate	2	16.6%	0	0%	16.6%
Addressing a male close friend	4	33.3%	2	28.5%	61.8%
Addressing a female close friend	9	75%	3	42.8%	117.8%
The use of the nickname annoy you	5	41.6%	3	42.8%	84.4%

## 6. Conclusion

The study investigates the use of nicknames among university students. 77 students from three universities participated in the questionnaire. The



results show that nicknaming is a common practice among university students and sometimes is extended to address classmates which reveals a close relationship among students within the class. A gender differences are shown between male and female student in addressing each other with nickname. Male students show reservation when addressing female classmates while female students extended nicknaming practice to male classmates. In addressing close friends, male and female students use nicknaming to address their close friends with a high frequency.

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