

## **A RESEARCH PROJECT ON NICKNAMES AND ADOLESCENT IDENTITIES**

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There are many different types of naming practices, of which personal naming is one. In most personal naming practices, names are assigned and the holder has little or no control over their designation and use. By contrast, nicknames are designated through life, providing the users with a powerful tool for both self and other identification. Most nicknames relate to the personal attributes of the user, and as such, create expectations about the user. These can contribute to both positive and negative views of self and others and are often inaccurate (de Klerk & Bosch 1996, p. 526). Although cultural differences exist (cf. Liao, 2006 for Taiwanese; Wardat, 1997 for Jordanian Arabic), typologies of nicknames claim that they tend to cluster into specific categories (Crozier, 2002; Crozier & Dimmock, 1999; de Klerk & Bosch, 1996). Nicknames tend to relate to the users' physical characteristics, such as their weight, height, or hair colour or to the users' personal habits and traits, often aptitude or lack thereof. Some relate to personal histories including cultural or racial background, while others include play on rhymes or hypocoristic renditions of personal or family names (e.g. Smithy). Renditions of names include commonly accepted forms (e.g. Beth) and those which are more unique to the user (e.g. Be). Wierzbicka (1992) argues that important pragmatic differences exist between standardised and less-standardised forms of personal names and the two should be considered separately. Our proposed study includes all forms of nicknames, as we believe that these fulfil a similar function, to identify the user. Moreover, in many domains, forms of personal names are often the most frequent type of nickname (cf. Bechar-Israeli, 1995 for internet use).

The sociological studies of nicknaming practices have shown that naming practices are often associated with domains of language use. For example, nicknaming practices are frequent in gangs (Rymes, 1996; Zaitzow, 1998), the army (Potter, 2007), in sport teams (Kennedy & Zamuner, 2006; Skipper, 1984; Wilson & Skipper, 1990), in political arenas (Adams, 2008, 2009; Gladkova, 2003; Lieberman, 2007), and within the family (Blum-Kulka & Katriel, 1991; Goicu, 2008; Goitein, 1970). The majority of research has focused on nicknaming in the domain of the school (Back, 1991; Crozier & Dimmock, 1999; Eliasson, Laflamme & Isaksson, 2005; Kepenecki & Cinkir, 2006; Kolawole, Otuyemi & Adeosun, 2009; Thomas, 1985), yet to our knowledge, no research has been conducted on nicknaming practices in schools in Australia or New Zealand. Research that can fill this gap can potentially develop deeper understanding of adolescent naming practices and has the potential to help interpret the belief systems of student populations. Research data on nicknames can also be used to

educate students on potential differences in attitudes about naming practices within the school community and help student wellbeing. The following paper surveys the literature on nicknames, noting in particular gaps which exist in the Australian and New Zealand context. The paper ends with a short overview of a proposed nickname project on Australian nicknames in schools and some suggestions for potential cross-Tasman research.

## **Prior literature**

Nicknames have been the subject of extensive investigation in a wide variety of languages, including English (Chevalier, 2004, 2006; Glazier, 1987), Icelandic (Wilson, 2008), Spanish (Brandes, 1975; Fernandez, 2008; Gilmore, 1982), Russian (Drannikova, 2006; Shcherbak, 2006; Superanskaya, 2003), Lithuanian (Butkus, 1999), German (Koss, 2006), Xhosa (de Klerk & Bosch, 1997), Zulu (Molefe, 2001), Chinese (Wong, 2007), Arabic (Haggan, 2008; Wardat, 1997), Greek (Lytra, 2003), and indigenous languages in Mexico and Australia (Collier & Bricker, 1970; Nicholls, 1995). The linguistic analysis of nicknames tends to focus on its phonological aspects (Liao, 2006) and on the word formation processes involved in nicknaming (Kennedy & Zamuner, 2006). As mentioned earlier, there is also a wealth of studies on typological classifications. To a limited extent, nickname studies have also considered what nickname usage reveals about the characteristics of the bearers and their role in society (McDowell, 1981; Wilson & Skipper, 1990). The majority of the latter studies, which focus on social aspects of naming practices, are published outside of the field of linguistics in sociological and educational journals, or in the fields of health and well-being.

Another noticeable feature of the current state of research on nicknaming is that although there is a wealth of information about nicknaming practices in different cultures worldwide, little information exists on minority communities within these cultures. Studies which do investigate minority cultures do so in isolation from their greater sociopolitical context. Studies of minority groups, such as Brandes' (1975) study of nicknames in a Castilian village, focus on community practices and do not consider naming practices with the wider dominant population in which minority communities reside, creating a picture of naming practices within rather than across communities.

The lack of cross-community analyses of nicknaming practices thus runs against a common theme in the sociological conceptualisation of nicknaming as a two-way interaction centred on the individual(s) being named and on those doing the name calling (Brandes, 1975; Gilmore, 1982; Fernandes, 2008; Superanskaya, 2003). The interaction is a complicated one because of the dual connotations, both positive and negative, and the rules associated with who has the right to use a nickname. Our final point concerns the educational literature, which is somewhat slanted in its portrayal of nickname use. Studies which consider the sociocultural use of nicknames tend to focus on their negative connotations, often in association

with bullying and name-calling behaviour (cf. Kepenekci & Cinkir, 2006; Kolawole *et. al.*, 2009). Although the focus is often on the negative effects of nicknames, some studies do attend to the total repertoire of use (Busse, 1983), while a restricted few focus only on the positive nicknaming practices which help express warmth, affection, or build solidarity (e.g., Mendler, 2001; Pearson, 1988).

There have been few studies on naming practices in the Australian or New Zealand context. In a study of hypocoristic forms in New Zealand and Australia, Bardsley & Simpson (2009) include personal names in their analysis. In an analysis of the pragmatic force associated with personal names, Wierzbecka (1992) draws on data from the Australian context, and Poyton (1990) and Taylor's (1992) studies of naming practices and address terms use Australian English as a database. The latter provide useful information on personal naming classifications as well as insights on naming in Australia. Of particular note is Poyton's distinction between name-based nicknames (based around the addressee's given or surname), addressee-based (based on attributes of the addressee) and event-based nicknames, derived from a "significant incident" in the person's life. Chevalier (2006, p. 133) draws on this work for her analysis of nickname use, described below.

The only detailed study on Australian nicknames was conducted by Chevalier (2004, 2006), who completed a detailed study of the naming practices of Sydney residents based on data from 304 interviews. She surveyed the naming practices of adults and their family members, reporting on data from 498 individuals in total. The study is useful in that it involves a substantial number of nicknames (1,207) and includes a detailed analysis of nickname types in this sample. Chevalier's study contains information on the gender, age, occupation and birthplace as well as the home languages of the speakers, their parents and their grandparents. Although the participant sample is divided equally on the basis of age, gender and to a certain extent occupation, it is less structured for ethnicity due to the relatively low number of participants from non-English speaking backgrounds and to the coding strategies employed. The language backgrounds of the participants, their parents and their grandparents were often combined, thus making both the distinctions and interrelationships between ethnic identity and language difficult to interpret.

Chevalier's study considers both given names and nicknames and therefore provides a useful point of departure when considering coding in future studies. Although her study makes some reference to pet names, other nomenclatures are not considered (i.e., ethnonyms, ethnic labels, and self-labels). A survey of the literature reveals that the latter terms are confined to the analysis of different discipline areas, many of which deal with interesting sociolinguistic issues relating to ethnicity and language use (cf. Lee, 2009).

To our knowledge, these are the only studies of naming practices in Australia, and

most of these do little to focus on the naming practices of young people, even though it is widely accepted that such language practices can have both positive and negative effects on adolescents' perceptions of themselves and others.

## **Our study**

There are several important differences between Chevalier's study and the present study. First and foremost, they differ in their context: Chevalier's work focused on adults while the present study is centred on adolescents. Very little information is available on the naming practices of Australian youth. A deeper understanding of Australian adolescent naming practices highlights potential differences in the belief systems within the student population and can be used to educate students on potential differences in attitudes about naming practices within the school community and student well-being. To provide a deeper understanding of student beliefs, the project also explores potential differences amongst students entering and exiting high school to investigate whether adolescent naming practices and views about language remain constant throughout schooling.

Second, our study is concerned with ethnic differences: Although Chevalier noted several differences in the type of nicknames employed by overseas-born individuals, a systematic analysis of ethnic differences in nicknaming is not the focus of Chevalier's study. Worldwide, few studies mention nickname use in ethnic groups in immigrant communities or ethnic differences within school contexts. Consequently, little is known about whether students from different ethnic backgrounds use and understand nicknames in similar ways. Our analysis has the potential to add to our understandings of the role of nicknames in the lives of adolescents from different ethnic backgrounds in Australia.

Australia is a multilingual and multicultural society. Despite widespread language shift to English amongst indigenous and immigrant communities, data from the 2006 census reveal that some 350 languages continue to be regularly used in Australian homes; 150-155 of these are Aboriginal languages (Clyne, Hajek, & Kipp, 2008). Approximately 17% of Australians report that their dominant language is not English, implying that the numbers using a language other than English on a regular basis is higher (Lo Bianco, 2009). Australia is internationally well-regarded for its commitment to an inclusive policy of multiculturalism and despite various policy swings and shifts, this commitment has informed the social and educational policy agenda since the 1970s (see Liddicoat, 1996, 2009; Lo Bianco, 2009; Scarino & Papademetre, 2001 for summaries and critiques of the changing face of Australian multicultural ideology). Education policy documents acknowledge the value of linguistic and cultural diversity, recognising that cultural and linguistic sensitivity are essential for engagement and participation in the local, regional, and international communities of the twenty-first century (see, e.g. MCETYA, 2005). Intercultural knowledge and skills are also widely recognised in policy documents as having great importance in the enduringly pluralistic

Australian society and in a multilingual world (Lo Bianco, 2009). Set against this context, our study hopes to contribute to disseminating intercultural proficiency and building intercultural awareness amongst Australian high school students.

Finally, Chevalier notes that the study of names and nicknames is often demoted to a secondary position in linguistics. Chevalier's arguments are based on associative meaning rather than on the interrelationship between nicknames and other aspects of language. We acknowledge that research to date which examines nicknames tends to isolate nicknames from other aspects of language and we agree with Chevalier that the study of names and nicknames needs to be placed within a broad linguistic context. The project attempts to go one step further to achieve this goal. It provides an initial exploration into the role of language in the representation of identity with a specific focus on how naming practices relate to other aspects of language use including language background and views about English, including views about pronunciation (cf. appendix for details). We outline our project below.

## **Methodology**

A great number of frameworks for investigating nicknames have been employed in disciplinary fields from Educational Psychology through Sociology to Linguistics as well as a range of methodologies from questionnaires (Crozier, 2002) and interviews, to recollections (Crozier & Skilopidou, 2002), to the exploration of student yearbooks (Liao, 2006). As this study is exploratory in nature, it uses as its primary research tool a written self-administered questionnaire. The research instrument is a five-page questionnaire administered to students entering High school in Victoria and Queensland and those in the second to final year. Year 11 students study Australian language and identity as part of their English curriculum. The research partners have therefore assumed that both students and their teachers might be more receptive to the research. Schools are also reluctant for students to be distracted in their final year of studies and for this reason, the target students are pre-final rather than final-year students.

The questionnaire contains three sections: (1) Naming Practices; (2) Attitudes Towards Australian English; and (3) Background Information. Each section consists of a combination of closed responses, with boxes for students to add optional additional information and comments (see Appendix). Section 1 focuses on the use of nicknames, the semantic categories, the form of the words, and the values these contain. These questions serve to elicit detailed information about nickname use. They are also designed to serve as an initial student awareness-raising exercise, encouraging students to place nicknames into categories and to evaluate how they are perceived; a subsidiary aim therefore is to open avenues for future discussion.

Section 2 considers how adolescents view other aspects of Australian English and seeks to find out whether there are overlaps between the views of language (accent, Australian identity) and nicknaming practices. Section 3 provides background information about the participants, their age, and ethnicity and residence history in Australia. This section of the questionnaire allows for a deeper understanding of the ethnic and age-graded differences amongst our participants.

The data will be cross-tabulated to evaluate whether entering and exiting students vary in their naming strategies and language attitudes, the extent to which immigrants are aware of naming strategies and the extent to which their awareness may be related to attitudes towards Australian English. This information will be followed up with detailed analyses based around focus-group discussions and the findings will be reported back to the school communities.

## **Conclusion**

Although the study is in its initial stages, there are many ways in which the study could be expanded to enable comparisons between New Zealand and Australia. Both countries share similarities in their history and cultures, and both employ a heavy use of hypocoristic forms of personal names (Bardsley & Simpson, 2009). Both countries are experiencing increasing multiculturalism and schools are becoming increasingly diverse in their student populations. Although this study reports on the research plan for the Australian context, a similar study could be usefully employed to explore New Zealand nicknames. Another fruitful area of study would be cross-Tasman usage within and across dominant and minority communities to help develop a better understanding of how naming practices affect today's youth and how they transcend national boundaries.

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## Appendix

### Nicknames, Identity and Language Questionnaire

#### SECTION 1: NICKNAMES

We would like to know about nicknames. Many students have nicknames. A nickname usually refers to some aspect of a person's traits.

Think about nicknames for people you know. **In the table below:**

- (1) write their nicknames and state what their nickname refers to
- (2) categorise the nickname as **P B E N** or **O**

- P** 'refers to a physical trait such as hair colour'  
**B** 'refers to a where the person is from'  
**E** 'refers to the person's emotions'  
**N** 'refers to variation on the person's given or surname'  
**O** 'something else'

Remember to circle whether the nickname is a **positive**, **neutral** or **negative** term for you. You may give more than one response (*neutral in some contexts, negative in others*).

Some examples

Nickname	Refers to?	Trait Type	Evaluation
Pom	from England	Background (B)	☹
Bubbles	easily excited	Emotional (E)	☺ and ☹
Jonsy	Surname Jones Name (N)		☺

1. Please fill in as many names as you can.

Nickname	Refers to?	Trait Type (B, P, E, N, O)	Evaluation (Circle one or more)
			☺ ☹ ☹
			☺ ☹ ☹
			☺ ☹ ☹
			☺ ☹ ☹
			☺ ☹ ☹
			☺ ☹ ☹

3. **If you have a nickname, tell us what your nickname refers to and how you feel about it.** (Please, **don't** tell us your nickname. We don't want to be able to identify you from your questionnaire responses)

1. Have your friends ever talked about the way YOU speak English?

YES OR NO

If YES, tell me what they have commented on.

2. If you moved to another country, how important would it be for you to keep your Australian accent? Circle one.

- A. **Extremely** important. It reflects who I am.
- B. **Important.** Australians need to speak like Australians. It is where we are from.
- C. **Not Important.** It doesn't matter. English is English!

If you feel you have more to say about this issue, feel free to write more in the box. **Otherwise move on to the next question.**

2. Do you think all Australians [*no matter where they were born*] should try to speak English with an Australian accent?

YES OR NO

If you feel you have more to say about this issue, feel free to write more in the box. **Otherwise move on to the next question.**

4. Do you think it is important for Australian migrants to learn Aussie terms such as “sunnies”, “thongs”, “G'day mate” and “arvo”?

YES OR NO

If you feel you have something more to say about this issue, feel free to write more in the box. **Otherwise move on to the next question.**

5. Do you think it is important for Australian migrants to be able to speak English before they move to Australia?

YES OR NO

If you feel you have more to say about this issue, feel free to write more in the box. **Otherwise move on to the next question.**

6. When you think about “**Australian English**”, tell me the first three things that come into your mind.

Three empty rectangular boxes for writing answers, each preceded by a right-pointing arrow.

### SECTION 3: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

*I'd like to know a little more about yourself and the languages you and your family speak.*

#### ***First, tell us about your family***

1. Which country were your caregivers (i.e., your parents or legal guardians) born? (You may circle **more than one**)

SAME AS ME  
DIFFERENT FROM ME

If one or more of your caregivers were born in a **different country than you**, provide details below

2. A. In what language/s do your caregivers speak to each other?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- B. **If your caregivers speak more than one language**, what is the language they use most of the time?  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### ***Now tell us about yourself***

3. In which country were **you** born? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What was the **first** language you learned to speak? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What language do you speak **most of the time** now? \_\_\_\_\_
6. In what languages can you talk about a **lot** of different things (e.g., English)?  
Language 1: \_\_\_\_\_  
Language 2: \_\_\_\_\_  
Any other languages? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Do you think of yourself as:  
A. Australian  
B. Mostly Australian and a bit of another nationality  
C. Mostly another nationality and some Australian
8. If someone asks you "*where are you from*", how do you answer this question, and why?
9. What do you think is important in a friend?
- |    |                       |     |    |
|----|-----------------------|-----|----|
| A. | The way they dress    | YES | NO |
| B. | The way they think    | YES | NO |
| C. | The way they talk     | YES | NO |
| D. | The way they act      | YES | NO |
| E. | Who their friends are | YES | NO |
| F. | Where they are from   | YES | NO |

If you have anything else to add, please do so.

Thank you sooooo much for taking time to answer these questions for us!!