
EXPRESSING NEGATIVE ATTITUDE BY THE USE OF NICKNAMES

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Abstract: Klerk and Bosch define nicknames as “relatively impermanent informal names which allow users considerable linguistic licence in breaking the rules” (De Klerk, Bosch 1997: 1). As they point out, most nicknames relate to the personal attributes of the user, and as such, create expectations about the user, which, in turn, can contribute to both positive and negative views of self and others and are often inaccurate (de Klerk & Bosch 1996, p. 526). Algeo points out, that nicknames are given specifically to their bearer based on some assumed quality and only him/her. According to Leslie and Skipper, nicknames are frequently semantically transparent and their usage reveals insights into the characteristics (personal and physical) of their bearers, as well as into their role in society (Leslie and Skipper 1990). Starks and Taylor- Leech (2017) conclude that most nicknames relate to the personal attributes of the user, and as such, create expectations about the user. As stated by Mehrabian and Piercy, the impressions evoked by names can be positive or negative and have corresponding effects in social interaction. Crozier (2002) points out that negative nicknames are used by the speaker to express lack of appreciation or a negative attitude towards the bearer.

A nickname can express endearment, make a mockery, or show disapproval. The paper deals with the way a negative attitude can be expressed through the use of nicknames. The following nickname patterns were observed: a negative adjective followed by a noun, a personal name followed by a noun with a negative connotation, and a rhyming expression. An example of a nickname formed by a negative adjective followed by a noun, is Meghan Markle’s nickname “Difficult Duchess” referring to her disagreeable character; a personal name to be followed by a noun with a negative connotation, is illustrated by the nickname given to the Prime Minister of the UK Boris Johnson- “Boris the Menace”, or the pejorative nickname sometimes given to the Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov “Boko Tikvata” (Boko the Pumpkin).; a rhyming expression is sometimes added to a personal name, such as Waity Katy, nickname that Kate Middleton used to be called before she married Prince William, referring to the long period she had to wait get married to him, or “Looney Clooney”- the nickname George Clooney was given after defending Meghan Markel in public); in some cases, a personal name is missing and the nickname consists of a word or phrase that is associated with some negative notion. In addition, this way nickname can phonologically resemble the real name of the bearer.

Nicknames that are aimed to express a negative attitude differ in their motivation. They could be used occasionally and sporadically when they aim to mock a specific single time action of the name bearer. However, it is possible to become well established and to continue to be used even though the occasion that led to their coinage is no longer topical. When nicknames are aimed to mock the character, or behavior of their bearer, however, they become well established. One of the main groups of nickname bearers that are object of negative attitude are political figures in both Bulgarian and English-language media texts.

Keywords: nicknames, media, negative attitude.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The paper aims to study the ways in which nicknames are used to express a negative attitude. It traces the main nickname patterns that are used and the main group of individuals that are given such nicknames. The paper also studies the semantic motivation of such nicknames.

Klerk and Bosch define nicknames as “relatively impermanent informal names which allow users considerable linguistic licence in breaking the rules” (De Klerk, Bosch 1997: 1). Algeo points out, that nicknames are given specifically to their bearer based on some assumed quality and only him/her. As stated by Mehrabian and Piercy, the impressions evoked by names can be positive or negative and have corresponding effects in social interaction. According to Leslie and Skipper, nicknames are frequently semantically transparent and their usage reveals insights into the characteristics (personal and physical) of their bearers, as well as into their role in society (Leslie and Skipper 1990).

A nickname can express endearment, make a mockery, or show disapproval. It is possible for one person to be given more than one nickname, each of them reflecting a different characteristic of the name bearer and bringing a different connotation (Stoykova, 2017).⁴³

The following nickname patterns were observed: a negative adjective followed by a noun, a personal name followed by a noun with a negative connotation, and a rhyming expression. In some cases, a personal name is missing and the nickname consists of a word or phrase that is associated with some negative notion. In addition, this way nickname can phonologically resemble the real name of the bearer.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the purpose of the study, a corpus of media texts from Bulgarian and English-language media was collected and analyzed. The patterns nicknames are based on were observed and compared. The groups of nickname bearers with the highest frequency of expressed negative attitude were identified.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main types of nickname patterns that were observed in the corpus are a negative adjective followed by a noun, a personal name followed by a noun with a negative connotation, and a rhyming expression. In some cases, a personal name is missing and the nickname consists of a word or phrase that is associated with some negative notion. A phonological similarity with the real name of the nickname bearer was also observed.

3.1. A NEGATIVE ADJECTIVE FOLLOWED BY A NOUN

One of the observed ways of forming nicknames, is a negative adjective + noun. In the following excerpt, the nickname *Difficult Duchess* is based on this pattern, as the adjective ‘difficult’ brings the negative connotation, while the noun ‘Duchess’ is neutral:

'Difficult Duchess' Meghan Markle was ‘problematic’ for Royal Family – but Prince Harry ‘loved her dynamism’ Meghan Markle was viewed as "problematic" by the Royal Family - but Prince Harry "loved her dynamism," it has been claimed.

Royal journalist Omid Scobie said the Duchess of Sussex did not "fit" the Royal institution, but "that's what made her so exciting" to the Duke. (The Sun, 05/09/2020, www.thesun.co.uk)

The whole nickname *Difficult Duchess*, however, expresses a negative attitude to the nickname bearer.

3.2. NAME FOLLOWED BY A NEGATIVE ADJECTIVE

The negative adjective in a nickname can acquire a second position- after the personal name, as in the next excerpt:

Мера Наглата: Кунева харчи 2 млн. лв. за запалки, химикалки и други рекламни дрънкулки.

Министерство на образованието и науката обяви обществена поръчка за сувенири и рекламни материали на стойност 2 050 000 лв., без ДДС. Финансирането е за сметка на държавния бюджет и на европейските фондове... (<http://www.bnews.bg/article/214954>)

Mega the Impudent: Kuneva spends 2 mln levs on cigarette lighters, pens and other advertising materials.

The Ministry of Education and Science made a public procurement announcement for souvenirs and advertising products to the value of 2 050 000 levs, VAT not included. It will be financed by the state budget and European funds.

The negative attitude is strengthened by the type of first name in the name slot position- a diminutive. Apart from expressing a positive attitude, diminutives can indicate depreciation, derogation and mockery (Aleksandrova 2012). In the above excerpt, the use of diminutive indicates depreciation and criticism. Apart from that, it creates a word play, since *Meza Haznata* can be interpreted as “the mega impudent one”, hence enhancing the negative meaning of the adjective.

3.3. NAME TO BE FOLLOWED BY A NOUN WITH A NEGATIVE CONNOTATION

An often observed nickname pattern is a personal name + a noun with a negative connotation. In the next excerpt, *Boris the Menace* is a nickname give to the Prime Minister of the UK Boris Johnson on analogy with *Dennis the Menace*, a character from an American family comedy.

Brexit chaos: what the rest of the world is saying

Foreign critics say ‘**Boris the Menace**’ is setting dangerous precedent that threatens democracy

(<https://www.theweek.co.uk/103220/brexit-chaos-what-the-rest-of-the-world-is-saying>)

The nickname *Boris the Menace* expresses the criticism of the Prime Minister’s line of policy, hinting that he will bring problems to the country by some of his actions.

In the next excerpt, Boris Johnson is called *Bob the Builder*- analogy with the children’s animated TV show character Bob The Builder, as a result of slogan to his speech:

⁴³ Translation mine

Social media nicknames Boris Johnson '**Bob the Builder**' after build build build speech!

Boris Johnson has been given a comedic nickname after he gave a speech today in Dudley – meet Prime Minister **Bob The Builder**.

Social media users are nicknaming Boris '**Bob The Builder**' after his speech had the tagline 'Build Build Build' and continued to reference the need to rebuild the economy..

Boris Johnson has been given a hilarious nickname after his recent economy speech in Dudley.

The Prime Minister is being likened to children's animated TV show character Bob The Builder, after the slogan to his speech was 'Build Build Build'.

(<https://www.hitc.com/en-gb/2020/06/30/social-media-nicknames-boris-johnson-bob-the-builder-after-build-build-build-speech/>)

Unlike the case in the previous excerpt, however, here the nickname does not express criticism, but is rather mockery. Yet, in both cases, a comparison to TV characters indicates a lack of respect and serious attitude.

The next excerpt is an example of a stronger criticism and depreciation. *Тиква* in Bulgarian has a literal meaning 'pumpkin', but used for a person it is considered offensive and has the meaning 'stupid':

Какво стана с **Бобо Тиквата**?

Интересно е да се живее в днешно време!

Миналата година по това време лидера на тогавашната опозиция вестниците галено наричаха „**Бобо Тиквата**”, тази – „Премьерът Борисов”, догодина – кой знае как... (www.e-vestnik.bg/23460/kvo-stana-s-boko-tikvata/)

What happened with **Boko the Pumpkin**?

We live in interesting times! That time last year the then-leader of the opposition was endearingly called “**Boko the Pumpkin**”, this year he is called “The Prime Minister Borisov”, who knows what he will be called next year...

3.4. A RHYMING EXPRESSION

A nickname can be formed as a combination of a personal name and some expression that rhymes with it and brings an idea of some feature ascribed to the name bearer. The name in the name slot position can be of any type. In the following excerpt, it is a diminutive.

Kate Middleton at 38: From 'Waity Katie' to the most beloved royal in the family

As Kate Middleton celebrates her 38th birthday today, Caitlin McBride charts her public perception from a desperate social-climber to the most effective weapon in the royal family's arsenal

By the time their engagement was announced in 2010 and being cruelly dubbed 'Waity Katie', whereas he said he intentionally waited so long to propose in order for her to truly understand what she was getting herself in for by saying yes. (<https://www.independent.ie/style/celebrity/celebrity-features/kate-middleton-at-38-from-waity-katie-to-the-most-beloved-royal-in-the-family-38841350.html>)

Waity refers to Catherine Middleton supposed willingness to wait for a marriage with William as long as she is required. The choice of a diminutive can be seen as a marker of belittling, presenting the nickname bearer as a young girl, who has no power of her own and depends entirely on someone else's decision.

In the next excerpt, the rhyming *Looney Clooney* is used to express a lack of respect and marks the feature ascribed to the nickname bearer at the time of its coinage:

Samantha Markle criticises 'Looney Clooney' for defending Meghan

Not one to take things lying down, Samantha Markle took to her Twitter account last night to blast Clooney's comments.

“Hey Looney Clooney!” Samantha tweeted.

“Your lawyer wife should have taught you not to make statements without full facts.

“I doubt GeorgeClooney Would ghost his mother for no legitimate reason. Be quiet Georgie.” (<https://news.yahoo.com/samantha-markle-criticises-looney-clooney-defending-meghan-104032613.html>)

3.5. PHONOLOGICAL SIMILARITY.

A nickname can be derived from a person's real name based on phonological similarity. In the following excerpt, *Me-gain* is used to express a negative attitude towards the name bearer and to achieve a derisive effect. The thus created nickname *Me-gain* refers to the assumption that the Duchess of Sussex self-centered and interested only in her own affairs:

Meghan Markle Can't Stop Talking About Herself, Critics Say

The “**Me-gain Markle**” critics are at it again.

Just when you thought the haters couldn't get any more vicious, now they're accusing the Duchess of Sussex of being too self-focused during a recent speech she gave at her first royal appearance since coming back from maternity leave.

Last week, Meghan Markle gave a short speech to introduce her capsule collection with Smart Works. The Duchess counts the organization as one of her patronages. (<https://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/meghan-markle-cant-stop-talking-about-herself-critics-say.html/>)

The first name *Meghan* is directly removed and substituted by the nickname *Me-gain*, while the surname Markle is preserved.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Apart from endearment, nicknames can express disapproval, criticism, and mockery. The following nickname patterns were observed: a negative adjective followed by a noun, a personal name followed by a noun with a negative connotation, and a rhyming expression. The negative attitude can be strengthened by the use of a diminutive in the name slot of the nickname.

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