

More than Mere Linguistic Tricks: The Sociopragmatic Functions of Some Nicknames Used by Shona-speaking People in Harare

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Abstract

This article demonstrates how urban Shona speakers often use nicknames as linguistic resources to perform a variety of social functions in everyday informal interactions. The intention of this article is twofold: to contribute to research on African nicknaming, often limited to nicknaming as mere verbal play, by illustrating their communicative utility and to present the common functions nicknames fulfil in particular relationships and situations. The data reveal that Shona nicknaming occurs in a wide array of relationships and age groups, although it happens more frequently among males than females. The forms nicknames take and the nicknaming patterns depend on the social distance between the participants, their relative social statuses, the context of nicknaming and the speaker's intention. The data for this article came from (a) field notes from participant observations taken of naturally occurring interactions in public and private spheres over a period of one year (from September 2003 to September 2004) in and around the city of Harare and (b) transcriptions of semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with 60 Shona native speakers of varying ages, gender, social status, occupations and religious affiliations.

Introduction

Scholars in various disciplines have shown considerable interest on nicknaming practices and the roles that nicknames play in social life. Sociolinguists consider nicknames as part of the study of systems of personal address (see Philipsen and Huspek's 1985 extensive bibliography). Anthropologists often look at nicknaming practices as part of the study of kinship terminologies and the social organisation of the communities under study (Antoun 1968, Barrett 1978, Gilmore 1982, Glazier 1987). Folklorists (e.g. McDowell 1981) have explored the nature of nicknames as folk expressions and social psychologists focus on their uses as observable mechanisms of group life (Morgan, O'Neill, and Harre 1979). "All these

studies bring out the essentially group-related nature of the use of nicknames in everyday interaction especially, their grounding in small face-to-face primary group relations" (Blum-Kulka and Katriel 1991: 59). Holland (1990: 258) argues that "nicknames rarely if ever serve a single function, but instead simultaneously play a variety of roles within the environments in which they occur." Also as de Klerk and Bosch (1997) put it: "The use of nicknames is sociolinguistically complex as they serve a range of functions over and above the merely referential function fulfilled by the first name" (102).

Despite this fascination with nicknaming, little serious research has been done on African communities, Shona included. De Klerk and Bosch (1997) focus on the phonological patterns of English nicknames and make a cursory acknowledgement of their function. De Klerk and Bosch's (1996) sociolinguistic study examines nicknaming as a form of verbal play, which offers speakers an opportunity "to display a touch of linguistic invention, to break the rules of language..." (De Klerk 1998: 1). According to Bruner (1970) and Korg (1977), nicknames allow speakers to indulge in the pure enjoyment that the sounds and meanings of words can give, because they enable free word play in their derivation, "motivated, one might say, by a delight in playing with language, in the only area where free creation is allowed" (Morgan, O'Neill and Harre 1979: 42).

In this article, we look beyond the aspect of play and, drawing on the insights offered by various studies, we contribute to the research on nicknaming patterns by investigating their utility or communicative value among the Shona in varied urban interactive settings. In spite of the high rate of literacy among urban Shona speakers and Zimbabweans in general, reliance on the spoken word is still strong. In fact, as Mashiri (2004) suggests, Harare, perhaps like other African cities, has structural features and types of relationships which endow nicknames with functional utility. There are communities comparable to those in the rural areas where everyone knows his/her neighbours intimately. Therefore, the crucial point is that nicknaming is not determined by group size or demography *per se*, but it is a function of community, and community can be defined in far more than merely spatial terms.

Defining nicknames

Shona people of Zimbabwe are traditionally assigned (an) 'official' personal name(s). In addition to this official name, one or more alternative or nickname(s) may evolve at different stages of life, allowing some choice as regards how one is addressed. The old English term *ekenname* ('also name') (de Klerk and Bosch 1997: 95), Van Langendonck's (1983: 644) term 'by-

name' and the Shona term *zita redunhurirwa* (Kahari 1990: 128) emphasise the role of such "optional and transient"¹ names.

Although the definition of a nickname as consisting of a name, other than the 'official' name is generally accepted, "it implies an overtly simplified dichotomy between the official name and the nickname" (Blum-Kulka and Katriel 1991: 62). Blum-Kulka and Katriel further argue that the dichotomy blurs the fact that nicknames are not uniform and their uses reflect various degrees of institutionalisation and routinisation that underlie the degree of linguistic 'markedness' that the various forms are felt to have in different contexts. Nicknames conventionally derived from given official names (e.g. Franco from Francis) sometimes become institutionalised and used obligatorily such that in-group members no longer perceive them as 'nicknames.' This means that the official name is used so rarely as to make its utterance a sociolinguistically marked occasion. Paying attention to the process of gradual institutionalisation of nicknames from new, creative ones to routinised, standard nicknames is essential. Its advantage lies in that "it forces us away from the easier (and less interesting) task of considering nicknames as linguistic 'products' to the more difficult (but more rewarding) task of exploring their uses with reference to an ongoing transactional web that marks for their gradual, differential adoption" (Blum-Kulka and Katriel 1991: 62).

The scope of name use

The scope of name use refers to the sociological boundaries, the social categories or persons favourable to it and those that constrain it. Our concern is the wider social network of nickname usage, for example, the family, neighbours, lovers, friends, work-mates, students, parishioners, street children, soccer players and fans, etc. We documented nicknaming among members of these communities, observing that the backdrop of common knowledge and assumptions speakers share provide the "moral unity" which allows such naming to occur. Thus, we see a community defined in terms of "an idea or a memory disembodied from its original physical representation" (Glazier 1987: 84), or in terms of shared rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety. The attempt to capture the nicknaming behaviour of various communities serves to show the heterogeneity of the larger urban

1. Nicknames are referred to as transient because they may be short-lived. Some are used as address terms in certain settings and not in others, and sometimes at a certain stage in one's life and then abandoned or forgotten at a later stage. However, some nicknames may replace one's official name permanently and others become surnames.

Shona speaking community. We hope that both the focus on the modern setting and diverse social relations vis-a vis nickname use will contribute to the understanding of nicknaming practices as an instance of the interaction of language and social life.

Our data reveals that in early childhood, nicknames are given and used by parents, siblings, relatives and caregivers within the family unit. In adolescence, peers and teachers may name and address children by nicknames and, in adulthood, peers, intimates (lovers and friends) and sometimes acquaintances, address and refer to members of their relational culture by nickname in appropriate situations. Social distance is one of the foremost factors that determine the way interlocutors use nicknames. Social distance "is a measure of the degree of friendship/intimacy (or absence thereof) between interlocutors" (Boxer 1993: 103). It determines the degree of comfort or politeness in a verbal exchange. Following Wolfson's (1988) theory of social distance termed 'The Bulge,' we view the social distance scale as a continuum, with complete strangers at one extreme and intimates at the other end, with friends and acquaintances nearer to the middle.

Speakers use nicknames directly when addressing or referring to intimates (same-generation or younger family members, friends, lovers) or acquaintances with whom they share a symmetrical relationship,, and covertly or clandestinely when referring to strangers and acquaintances with whom they share an asymmetrical relationship. For example, while children may call a sibling by a nickname, they may only refer to a parent by his/her nickname behind his/her back. Similarly, classmates may use nicknames to address each other, but they might refer to their teacher by his/her nickname only covertly.

Relative social status (achieved or ascribed) is also an important sociolinguistic variable in that a higher status interlocutor can address a subordinate or a younger person by nickname whereas the latter normally refers to the former by nickname behind his/her back or indirectly. When a lower status interlocutor refers to a higher status interlocutor by nickname indirectly, the latter relies on mutually shared background information, both linguistic and non-linguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference to identify him/herself as the referent of the nickname. It is not uncommon to have situations where a younger person shares a joking relationship with an older person. This joking relationship gives the younger interlocutor the liberty to address the older person by nickname, in some situations, since the licence to use a nickname directly signals a close or intimate relationship with the bearer, positive warmth and familiarity.

Beside social relationship, the choice of a nickname depends on context and the speaker's intention, and the pragmatic effect of that choice depends

on the range of available choices. According to Wierzbicka (1992: 230-1), the choice of using a full name, an abbreviation or a nickname can be very revealing of the subtle distinctions between indicating mere social acquaintanceship, behaving in a neutral way, expressing positive warmth and implying an affectionate in-group closeness or camaraderie.

Nicknames are also indicative of the gender relations within a group. This article will answer the questions: Do females use nicknames as much as male? Does the domain or style of nicknaming vary with the interlocutors' sex?

As all African names (see Mashiri 2003b), nicknames do not only refer, but also convey a great deal of information. Most of the nicknames that appear in our data derive from personal names, surnames, physical and personality traits, idiosyncrasies, ability, habits, events in one's life, occupation or geographical location or origin. Getting the 'sense' of a nickname is very much like understanding a metaphor, that is, establishing a cognitive link between the nickname bearer and some unconnected semantic domain in such a way as to highlight the properties of both. In this article, we classify nicknames according to their function as address and reference resources. Looking at function provides insights into the pragmatic value of using nicknames instead of other names and the social meanings of the nicknames. The value of nicknames is closely tied to the complex social networks in which they operate, and the meanings are often dependent on the context of use (Leslie and Skipper 1990). Nicknames serve a wide range of communicative functions (Holland 1990: 256, Alford 1987) in Shona society, as we shall now attempt to illustrate.

Method

We used two types of data for the analysis of nickname use: field notes from participant observations taken of naturally occurring interactions in private and public settings over a one year period (from September 2003 to September 2004) in and around the city of Harare and transcriptions of semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with 60 Shona native speakers of varying ages, gender, social status, occupations and religious affiliations. We observed the use of nicknames in families of friends and relatives, work-stations, city parking bays and street markets, the University of Zimbabwe, one primary and one secondary school classroom, church gatherings, etc.

We conducted individual and group interviews to elicit the Shona speakers' intentions reflected in and interpretations of communication in nicknames. The interviews were transcribed and we captured the types and some phonological features of discourse such as length and tone, as we considered them part of the "speakers' cues" (Mashiri 2004: 31) that shape the addressee's interpretations of the nicknames.

We chose semi-structured interviews, as they are flexible and allowed us to vary the questions as we moved from one interviewee to another, probing categories of nicknames and functions. Sometimes we allowed interviewees to relate stories of encounters and relationships in which other people had addressed them using nicknames at one time or another. The stories provided crucial information on the sociopragmatic functions respondents attributed to the nickname choices of themselves or others.

Participant observation complemented the interview method. We managed to record use patterns, some which were described in interviews, others, which interviewees use unconsciously. The latter is important since Silverstein (1981), cited in Briggs (1983: 256) suggests that the meaning of the most pragmatically creative and least referential signs (nicknames, in this case) lies beyond the "limits of awareness" of native speakers. Thus, the significance of such forms will only be fully grasped when they are studied in use, not as repeated and glossed in interviews (Briggs 1983: 254).

Participant observation also allowed us to work out the speakers' contextualisation cues that accompany their use of nicknames and influenced the addressees' interpretation of the function deriving from the usage.

Let us now look at the sociopragmatic functions of nicknames that are apparent from our data.

Affection and Positive Feelings

Our data shows three types of nicknames that perform an affectionate function: children's nicknames, romantic nicknames and nicknames for public personalities. Of these three, children's nicknames have the highest frequency of occurrence. According to Jespersen (1954: 33),

Every family has a certain tendency to acquire a language of its own with its own expressions, pet names and nicknames, and indeed with words and sentences of its own which are either not known in that particular meaning outside the family circle.

We noted that children's nicknames that have the highest frequency of occurrence are "pet names" (Morgan, *et al* 1979, de Klerk and Bosch 1997). These are names invented by parents for their young children and are often used by parents, siblings and caregivers within the family setting. Two types of pet names are common: those derived from a child's personal name and those coined from a child's social behaviour. Examples of the former are: *Popo* < *Portia*, *Chibhe* < *Belinda*, *Momo* < *Memory*, for females and *Silver* < *Silvester*, *Titi* < *Tinashe*, *Nashe* < *Panashe*, *Tadi-boy* < *Tadiwa*, *Tamezh* < *Tamirirashe* and *Tendi* < *Tendai*, for males. Some names such as *Tendai* are unisex and they are shortened in the same way for boys and for girls. The phonological and morphological manipulation of the personal names evident

in these nicknames is not just for enjoyment (Bolinger 1984) but enhances affective meaning.

These names act primarily as signals of love and affection and can be used in the presence of strangers or acquaintances. We observed how family members could also use these names to achieve particular pragmatic goals. Amina, age 32, orders her son, Panashe, with eating disorders, to finish his breakfast,

1. *Nashe, poriji iroro ngaripere tione.*
(Nashe, make sure you finish that porridge.)

Learnmore, age 28, rebukes his 2 year old daughter Portia, playing with television switch buttons,

2. *Popo, chaya!*
(Popo, stop that or I will smack you!)

In both cases the pet names *Nashe* and *Popo* are used to introduce directives, resulting in the directives being gentle.

We noted that members of the same family might not address a child by one and the same nickname. Some nicknames are used by parents and never by siblings and vis-versa, while only grandparents use others. Some of the pet names derived from a child's social behaviour illustrate this point. In an interview, Rudo, age 36, says that her mother, age 56, nicknamed her grandson, Michael, age 5, *Mr. Smart* from his love for jacket and tie as his Sunday best. Although the rest of the family members know this nickname, they never address or refer to him by it. Only the grandmother addresses him as such to index positive feelings towards the child's habits. Charles's (age 30), daughter, *Chiedza*, age 9, is tall, slim and very fashion conscious. Her two younger brothers tease her as *chidhoma* (a ghost), from the make-up that she wears, but her mother addresses her affectionately as *Chiye*, a short form of *Chiyedza*. Her father however, affectionately calls and refers to her as *Miss Malaika*.²

2. Malaika means angel in KiSwahili. In 2001 Ernest Coovi Adjovi initiated and became the founder and Chairman of the Trust that set out to run an exclusively African beauty pageant based on African perceptions of beauty. The rationale for running this beauty contest is that traditional contests have been run by westerners and are based on western principles of beauty. Hence, the white female would invariably be the icon of beauty. White women would always outclass their African counterparts in the contests. The Miss Malaika beauty pageant therefore celebrates African beauty and allows African women to compete among themselves and be judged by African parameters.

It appears that as children grow into adolescence they become rather ashamed of their pet names and distaste their use in the presence of outsiders or outside the familial circle. Some adolescents used our interview to complain against their parents' occasional lapse into nicknaming in the presence of "*vamwe vanhu*" (other people, usually visitors who include relatives and family friends.) Yet many parents seem to be aware of drawing the lines "between the inner, private familial circle and society at large, between the private and the public" (Blum-Kulka and Katriel 1991: 68). Andrew, age 45, says that his 14 year old son is called *James* at school, but at home his parents address and refer to him alternatively as *Jemu* (from James) and *mudhara* (old man). Andrew stresses,

3. I always call him *James* in front of others. I am aware it is embarrassing for him to be addressed as *Jemu* or *Mudhara* among his friends.

In some of our data, there is evidence of nicknames that young lovers (spouses and others with romantic interest) use as part of their "restricted codes of communication" (Bell, Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gore 1987: 48). In an interview, a young woman says that she calls her husband *doctor* when they are alone to tease him for his self-professed knowledge of home-based treatments of colds. Anna, age 23, a university student says that she addresses her lover as *50 cents* to praise him for his sweet talk that resembles the love hip hop lyrics of the American hip hop musician "50 cent". Daniel, age 39, says that he passionately addresses his wife as *Gadhijeri* (Jail guard) for insisting on him drinking from home while she closely monitors his movements; Pepetua, age 21, tells us that her boyfriend addresses her as *Babyface*, to express his admiration for her attractiveness and delightful personality akin to that of a child and Samson, age 35, is teasingly addressed by his wife as *Dangwe rangu* (my first-born child) to connote her preparedness to look after him as lovingly as a mother does with her own children, especially the first-born child.

Commenting on the use of idiomatic communication between young lovers in America, Bell *et al* (1987) say that nicknames, for instance, give a partner the opportunity to express to the other that he or she is considered "one-of-a-kind". This implies that lovers use nicknames to express their affection of each other and perhaps, also to create bonding. The nicknames, like other restricted (private) labels, may play an important role in relational development since bonding requires partners to "extricate each other from broad social categories and indicate the uniqueness of each other's self through positively evaluative and identity confirming commentary" (Wood 1982: 79). This means that in addition to indexing affection, nickname use in romantic relationships indicates solidarity.

Shona people have nicknames for the great, the famous or the notorious in different contexts and relationships. However, nicknames with the highest occurrence in our data are from politics and soccer. Politics and sport (particularly soccer) are very popular with most Zimbabweans, including the Shona. Many people have their own heroes and villains and they use nicknames to express their positive feelings or their affection towards their heroes. The proliferation of nicknames appears to be directly correlated with the level of social interest. As de Klerk and Bosch (1997: 113) observe of the use of nicknames among English adolescents in South Africa, the more interest generated in a particular individual the greater the likelihood of proliferation of terms of address.

Nicknames of politicians and soccer players are used mostly as reference terms among friends, peers, or audiences that share the same attitude towards the referents as the speaker. Many Zimbabweans, including the public media, refer(ed) to the late Vice-President Joshua Nkomo as *Father Zimbabwe* or *Mudhara* (Old man) (*uMdala*, in Ndebele) to register their admiration of his exemplary and nationalistic leadership.³ These names also celebrate Nkomo's stewardship in the armed struggle of Zimbabwe.

Robert Mugabe has been Zimbabwean President since his party's historic and resounding election victory in 1980.⁴ Since that election, his party ZANU PF uses a *jongwe* (a cock) as its election symbol. Many ZANU PF supporters regard Mugabe as the party icon and affectionately refer to him as *Jongwe*. Others refer to him as *Bob*, the institutionalised nickname for Robert in the American naming system.

Many soccer players in Zimbabwe have pet names that teammates, fans or commentators coin or use to address or refer to them at appropriate occasions. A pet name may be derived from a player's style (e.g. Wifred Mugeyi — *Silver Fox*, from his scoring prowess), commitment, (e.g. Peter Ndlovu — *Captain Fantastic*, from his commitment in the national team), position (e.g. Dumisani Mpofu — *Commando*, steadfast defender) and events in the player's life (e.g. George Mbwando — *Zambia*, from scoring a goal that led to the under 23 team's victory against the Zambian team in the 1990s).

3. In the 1950s when Joshua Nkomo was a trade union leader and then from the early 1960s to independence a prominent nationalist leader in Zimbabwe, those who supported him addressed him as 'Father Zimbabwe' or *Mudhara* or *umdala wethu* in Ndebele.

4. In the first democratic elections held in Rhodesia in 1980, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU (PF)) swept the board of 80 black members, winning 57 seats against 20 by ZAPU's Joshua Nkomo, and 3 by Bishop Abel Muzorewa's United African National Council (UANC) (Weiss 1994: 7).

This naming practice resembles the Shona traditional nicknaming of famous individuals. Pongweni (1983: 20) reminds us that traditionally, prowess in hunting and distinction in farming or good manners earned one a name. Most of the soccer nicknames have the same function as these prowess-related names. Because the name generally celebrates the addressee's or referent's dexterity and talent, the player readily accepts it and the use of that name motivates him to display exceptional skill (Mashiri 1999: 99). The naming practice pertaining to the national team is not unique. The practice is widespread in individual teams, at street level, school or club level. A separate study would describe the nicknames of soccer players in different contexts and relate their social meanings to the circumstances of their use.

Social Demarcation and Solidarity

When used with social equals within a sub-culture, a nickname usually acts as a cohesive social device indicating "social demarcation" (Blum-Kulka and Katriel (1991: 66) and solidarity. As Skipper (1986: 137) notes in his study of coal miners and their nicknames:

Groups which face an external threat to the group itself, or to individual members, and which can best maintain the existence of the group and the safety of its members through a cooperative effort, are likely to have a degree of solidarity.

Nicknames help to construct and are symbols of such solidarity. Skipper found that their use was common practice in coal miners, serving as the badge of a miner's acceptance and membership in the work group — "a mechanism of integration which contributed to both production and safety in the mines" (Holland 1990: 258).

In our data no solidarity enhancing nicknames were found among female dyads. Only male nicknames were found. A group of street children patronising the parking slots in the area bordering Union avenue/First street to Union avenue/Second street on one end and Jaison Moyo avenue/First to Jaison Moyo/Second street, on the other end are determined to protect this area as their sphere of influence from other groups. The more influential members of the group have nicknames. Jack, age 16, calls himself and is addressed by others as *Taison*, Chandafira, age 14, is addressed as *Chibhanzi*, and Naison, age 11, is called *Hondo yeminda*. *Taison* is derived from Jack's fighting prowess that he displayed when his group displaced the one that occupied the area before them. To the younger members of the group the name assures them of safety under Jack's leadership. *Chibhanzi* comes from the slang term for money popular among Zimbabweans of all backgrounds. Explaining the meaning of the name in an interview, Chandafira says,

4. Area *ino ine chibhanzi mudhara, munhu wese anofanira kugara akangwarira izvozvo.*

(We get good money from this area sir and every member of the group must guard it jealously.)

The name itself is an instrument of solidarity since it encourages members to fight anyone who invades their source of survival. *Hondo yeminda* reminiscent of the government land redistribution programme cliché, seem to legitimise any acts of violence that the group could engage in to protect their territory.

Earlier we mentioned how the use of some nicknames is restricted to the family unit or to intimate dyads and how these nicknames can become restricted codes. In the case of the family unit, the confinement of certain nicknames to that unit both reflects and reinforces the existence and the continued cultivation of a shared family culture, sketching the boundaries of the family as a social unit and enhancing a sense of solidarity among its members. But, our data reveal that even within the family unit, some members may confine the use of yet another member's nickname to themselves, especially when the use of the name violates rules of respect or is offensive. Grace, age 21, says that she and her three younger sisters refer to their mother as *Kabegi* (small bag) from her habit of carrying her little handbag on her even to the bathroom. Grace tells us that since their mother is not aware of this nickname, and because the name is derived from a common noun that denotes a commonly used object, the siblings can refer to their mother in her presence without her knowing.

Similarly, Steven, age 16, a high school student says that students in his Geography class nicknamed their teacher *However* from his regular use of the word, and their headmaster *Chikwama* (purse) from his pot belly that looks like a bag of coins. Members of a Pentecostal congregation in Harare refer to one prominent preacher as *Madhimoni* (demons) from his habit of scorning demons in all his sermons and the humorous way he pronounces the word.

What seems to be clear in all the cases cited above is that those using the nicknames are all social inferiors and the bearers of the nicknames are superior in terms of both age and rank. The rules of address would not allow them to address the referents directly using the nicknames. It is also clear that the nicknames are offensive. Hence, their covert usage can only occur in the company of like-minded people: siblings, classmates, and church-mates. If we compare these like-minded people to friends, then Dorian's (1970) claim that "one way in which a group of friends express social solidarity is in freely using certain offensive by-names among themselves" (313), applies to them as well. McGreachy (1978) in studying student nicknames for college lecturers (faculty) notes that nicknames can "serve to integrate the community" (282).

Besides people related through their institutional membership, close friends also have names that they use privately to refer to people outside their relationship. These nicknames often reflect the friends' attitude towards the bearer(s) of the nickname(s). It seems that use of nicknames for others is more prevalent among female friends of all age groups (from adolescents to adults) and social classes than men. One possible explanation for this imbalance is that Shona women tend to use more covert language forms and engage in gossip more than men. This hypothesis is consistent with Bell and Healey's results in their study of idiomatic communication in friends' relational cultures. Their study reveals that at one university, students named a certain room in which a group of female friends gathered for gossip "Bitch nitch".

The nicknames for others are of two types. First, there are nicknames for specific individuals. For instance, two female friends used *Svikiro* (spirit medium) to reference a female acquaintance that distastes using perfumes, while another pair referred to a janitor at their hostel as *Matissue* (tissues) from his role of distributing tissue rolls to students living in the hostel. The second category is composed of nicknames that denote an entire class of individuals. At a private college in Harare, two female friends refer to any cute guy who might qualify as a potential formal date as *Muchato* (a wedding) to index their wish for a stable date that could culminate into marriage. Nicknames that derogated men judged to be sleazy (e.g. *Matigimu*, after a character in Chidzero's novel *Nzvengamutsvairo*) or unsophisticated (e.g. *Adam*, after the biblical Adam) were also reported. For one pair of male friends at the University of Zimbabwe, *N'anga* (traditional healers) referred to pompous students in the medical faculty.

However, friends often have nicknames for each other. Examples of nicknames for female friends are *J Lo* (after American singer Jennifer Lopez), *Mai Mufundisi* (pastor's wife), *Princess Di* (after the late Princess Diana), *Big mamma* (after the main character in the movie *Big mamma's house*). Male nicknames include *Rodger Miller* (after the Cameroonian soccer legend), *War veteran*, *Madzibaba*, *Razaro* (after the biblical Lazarus) and *Big cat* (after a lion/cheater). In addition to the affective meanings of the nicknames in each interactive encounter, friends' nicknames for each other or for others maintain the boundary between friends and those who are not friends and reinforce bonds between those who use them.

People from the same ethnic group, those who share the same totem or who originate from the same home area tend to exchange nicknames that express a sense of belonging and solidarity. Some young men working as construction assistants to and coming from Chipinge call Mathias, age 44, *Mutape* (commonly used in Chipinge to refer to a headman). We observed that some men from Manicaland address each other as *Wasu* or *Samaz*

(slang form of *SaManyika*). As Pfukwa (2003: 5) notes, these names are used exclusively to refer to men since the title *Sa-* (lit. Mr.) is a masculine term.

Some men address each other by their praise-names so frequently that they almost function as nicknames (e.g. *Sinyo* < *Sinyoro*, *Mhofu*, *Musayigwa*, *Madyira* < *Madyirapazhe*). Speakers often use these nicknames as conflict resolving devices, negotiation instruments or patronising tools. Use of nicknames on such occasions evoke feelings of patriotism and solidarity and implies entitlement to certain rights and obligations.

Social Control

Generally speaking, Shona people seem to rely most heavily on nicknaming practices for defining inappropriate or excessive behaviour, uphold cultural ideals and politely rebuking deviant behaviour or personalities. In the broadest sense, the function of social control performed by the use of a nickname is not different in essence from the social power encoded in the choice of address terms in general (Blum-Kulka and Katriel 1991: 68). There is a power potential embedded in nickname systems, which speakers can exploit in dynamic ways at any given discursive instance. Normally, only people endowed with power (through age, rank or role status) or equals may use language to control the behaviour of others. But, nicknaming seems to provide licence to social inferiors to express their opinion, mood and elocutionary intent towards superiors.

Nicknames can perform a social control function in the family circle, between individuals (equals and non-equals), acquaintances, and institutional relations (e.g. teachers, students and headmasters).

In the family unit, parents, siblings, caregivers and relatives address children by certain nicknames to achieve the control function. Esther, age 36, says that she addresses her niece, age 11, as *Madhafinya* (the fat one), “to discourage her overeating tendencies since she is already overweight.” Sam, age 40, addresses his son, age 12, who is a prefect at his school as *Mr. Prefect*, to rebuke him for controlling his younger siblings. Two adult daughters call their mother *Mother Teresa* (after the late humanitarian legend of India) when trying to talk her out of excessive generosity. In these instances, nicknames are used either as “aggravators” (intensifiers) or “mitigators” (softeners) of utterances meant to direct people’s behaviour. Our observation of Esther and Sam’s interactions with their children revealed that when calling these children to order, they say out the children’s nicknames with a raised voice and an emphatic intonation.

Esther says that she often addresses her niece as *Madhafinya* when she orders her to stop eating “junk food”. The use of a nickname with a directive aggravates the coercive impact of the directive. For example, according to

Esther, *Madhafinya* at times refuses to eat her regular meals as a reaction to the directive,

5. *Madhafinya usadya izvo!*
(Madhafinya stop eating that junk food.)

This example illustrates that preceding a directive with a nickname violates Brown and Levinson's (1978) face maintenance requirement that "people will generally proceed with circumspection and due regard for the feeling of others" (Wood and Kroger 1991: 147) and conforms to the Gricean rule of clarity (Grice 1975). This directness is common in utterances directed at children in Shona culture.

Our data also revealed that names of lower class, witty but scruffy television drama characters such as *Gringo*, *Paraffin*, *Bhasiriyo*, serve as handy control devices for children. Once a child is nicknamed *Gringo*, *Paraffin* or *Bhasiriyo* he/she makes an effort to reform immediately, although it is not uncommon that others may feel great and continue behaving like these characters.

In the classroom conversation we recorded from some schools (especially secondary), most nicknames meant for social control come from villain characters in the students' literature prescribed books and local television drama characters. A drunkard teacher who dated schoolgirls was referred to as *Gararirimo* (after a drunkard and polygamous character in Zvarevashe's novel *Kurauone*) and female students addressed a chauvinist male student as *Babamukuru* (uncle) (after the character Babamukuru in Tsitsi Dangarembwa's novel *Nervous Conditions*). Teachers tended to give some students critical names (e.g. *Sleepy*, for a docile female student; *Big Bossman*, for a primary school boy who bullied other pupils; *Maths*, for a student who did badly in Mathematics and *Door-keeper*, for a student who always got the worse results in end of term tests). Mike, age 37, a teacher at a secondary school in Chitungwiza said that students' nicknames given by teachers tend to decrease with student age because in the cities teachers may be attacked by older male students for addressing them by scathing names.

Where the bearer of a nickname is an older person, the users may attach a title of respect to the nickname. Samuel, age 47, a guard at a brick moulding company was popular with his colleagues for soliciting for money from customers, saying,

6. *Hamusi kundisiirawo yebhotoro chete here nhasi?*
(Are you not giving me money just enough to buy a bottle of soft drink?)

From this habit, Samuel earned himself the nickname *Kabhotoro*. But, the younger colleagues softened their utterances by calling him *VaKabhotoro*. In

an interview, Samuel remarks that at first he resisted the nickname but it stuck to him although he had since stopped his habit from shame. Some of his colleagues say that Samuel cannot ask for money even from his fellow workers, because whenever he does, the respondent shifts from his formal name to his nickname in the response. The use of a nickname preceding an utterance serves as a first signal for the control act to come and switching from formal name to nickname aggravates the speaker's refusal to honour the request.

It appears that critical nicknames can run the whole gamut of group behavioural norms; nothing seems to be excluded from driving in the stakes of acceptable limits (Kehl 1971: 160), the nicknamed person acts as a negative model for others.

Intimate Play

Intimate play is one important facet of less serious, everyday side of personal relationships and nickname use helps us to understand it. Before we discuss examples of nickname use in intimate play, let us briefly outline what play entails and what functions it serves.

According to Baxter (1992: 337), from a relational culture perspective, play is a particularly significant resource for constructing the systems of meaning that constitutes personal relationships. Scholars have suggested that play performs a number of functions for relationship parties. Only those relevant to the use of nicknames are summarised here. First, play is viewed as an index of intimacy, suggesting to the parties that their relationship is one of synchrony, closeness and intimacy (Bendix 1987, Betcher 1981, Oring 1984). Second, play is perceived as a successful moderator of tensions and conflict, allowing the relationship parties to manage sensitive and conflictual issues without fear of risking the underlying relational stability (Bendix 1987). Third, play is assumed as a "low risk" or safe communication strategy that allows parties to say things that might otherwise prove embarrassing to them. There are many more functions (cf. Baxter 1992) and obviously, these functions are interdependent on one another.

We found that intimate play among the Shona is acceptable and frequently occurs between same-sex and opposite sex close friends, married and unmarried romantic partners and parents and their young children. We noted that the frequency of nickname use increases and the constraints on this practice decreases from same-sex to opposite sex close friends. Contrary to other relationships mentioned here where nickname use is reciprocal, only the parent uses a child's nickname in a playful manner.

Two types of nicknames that serve an intimate play function were noted: those used by a group of friends in a humorous and jocular way and those

that are sensitive and only used by very close selected friends. The first category emerges at school or work places among peers who know the bearer well.

Male names given by friends display an enormous amount of humour, creativity and topicality. There are names based on a pun or prosody of an individual's own name (e.g. *Mabirds* < Mashiri, *Dutch* < Duche, *President* < Robert, *Fatso* < Francis). Other names are based on the bearer's behaviour (e.g. *Special meat*, for a boy with feminine traits, *Gondoharishari*, for a promiscuous young man, *Mapitikoti* (literally translated from petticoat), for a man who likes to hang around with women). Although the primary function of these names is play, they often serve a didactic function as well, especially where the bearer's behaviour deviates from the norm.

Nicknames exchanged between female friends are slightly less daring although we noted some imaginative names (e.g. *Jam puff*, after her popularity with men; *Bubbles*, after her entertaining talking style; *Head girl*, after her domineering attitude; *Fattie*, after her chubby body). Like the male nicknames, some of the female names also have undertones of social control. We noted that female friends tend to use nicknames derived from their personal names (e.g. *Kuku* < *Kudzai*, *Tate* < *Tatenda*, *Kwini* < *Aquilina*). These are frequently affectionate.

The playful nature of nicknames is more explicit in the use of two-word names (e.g. *Doctor Love*, *Big Sam*, *Uncle Tich*, *Madzibaba Johane* for males and *Untie Pee*, *Miss Edgars*, *Beauty Queen*, *Princes Mary* for females). Related to this type of nickname is the compound nickname, that is, a compound noun phrase used to address or refer to two people sharing a particular relationship. Parishioners at a Methodist congregation in Mbare often engage in social play with their old pastor and his wife since they regard them almost as grandparents. In situations that require formal address, the parishioners address the pastor and his wife as *Mufundisi namai* (Reverend and Mrs), but a switch to the nickname *Timmy naBonzo* (after a television comedy featuring very close and popular friends), even in that formal interaction indexes intimate play.

Sensitive nicknames are either those given and used by the bearer's foes or those that refer to or are derived from delicate occurrences. Tamuka's (age 30) relatives coined the nickname *Vakadzidza* (the educated ones) for her and use it behind her back to spite her for what they call westernised attributes. Tamuka is aware of the nickname and gets annoyed by its use. She informed us that when she acts western in the company of her husband, he sometimes teases her addressing her by this nickname. According to Tamuka, the intimacy level with her husband and the awareness that "he is only joking anyhow" makes her accept the nicknaming as play. In fact, she says, this nicknaming by someone close to her helps to release the tension caused by the social meanings the nickname derives from its use by other people.

A male colleague says that he had conflict with his wife over how she should address him in response to his calls. As a traditionalist Christian he insists he that his wife responds to his calls with *Shewe*⁵ (master) “as Sarah did to Abraham”. His modern wife, Christian though, differs vehemently and their close family friends have often intervened to cool down tempers. The female family friend nicknamed our colleague *Shewe* and uses it in a light-hearted manner in the presence of the bearer’s wife. This playful use of the nickname, says our colleague, has helped ease the conflict between him and his wife. However, despite the level of intimacy, the name bearer’s mood at the time of name use is important. An apprehensive mood could actually exacerbate the conflict.

A whole neighbourhood refers to Tendai, age 34, as *Reuben Barwe* (after the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Cooperation chief correspondent), for her gossiping tendencies. None except her close friends address her directly by that name. When they do, the atmosphere is punctuated with laughter and pushing and shoving, characteristic of game-based play. Yassin (1978), studying personal address among the Kuwait Arabic, similarly notes the use of nicknames between close friends. Such names, often based upon an individual’s behaviour or other personal attributes, imply a friendship more intimate than that shown by personal names.

Sometimes when parents are in a happy and relaxed mood they playfully use their young children’s names, even the more sensitive nicknames. James, aged 38, says that his 5 year old son wets his bed and family members often address him as *Zi* or *Ziwozhe* (one who wets his bed) as a way of appealing to his ego. The nicknames make him vulnerable, hence he cries against its use. But, there are times, says, James, when the bearer accepts the nickname as indexing play and joins the parents in laughter.

The nicknaming practice between intimates sometimes overlaps with insulting. The major difference is that while nicknames may stick or last a lifetime, insulting labels may just be momentary and ephemeral.

Demeaning/Disrespecting

We observed that some workers refer to their unpopular employers or superiors by scathing nicknames when talking among themselves, or when

5. *Shewe* is a contracted version of the noun phrase *Ishe iwe* (lit. You chief). *Ishe* means chief in Shona. Its use predates western Christianity. Traditionally, aunts and mothers socialised young women to address or respond to their husbands’ summons using this term to index their reverence for and subordination to them. With the advent of western Christianity, many churches perpetuated the patriarchal subordination of women by citing Old Testament relational models. More research is needed to establish the effect of the feminist ideology and urbanisation/modernity on this address practice, but the low frequency of occurrence of the term *shewe* among Harare female dwellers probably indicate women’s resistance to its use.

the name bearer is within over-hearing range. Some University of Zimbabwe employees refer to their Vice-Chancellor as *Changamire Chipfupi* (the short chief) to indicate their negative attitude towards “his hard-handedness”; students at a female hostel call their “mean and strict” warden *Boarding Mistress* as an expression of their dislike of her behaviour, and workers at a bakery refer to their manager as *Dyke* (after the former Rhodesian army chief Colonel Dyke) for his military management style.

In a country like Zimbabwe, which is fraught with racial and political tension,⁶ and in which colonialism and party politics have caused enormous damage to human relationships, the use of nicknames as critical or demeaning devices becomes significantly high. Some employees refer to white employers or managers by nicknames whose meanings are masked by virtue of their being in Shona. Aaron, age 44, a shop assistant in an Indian shop says that they call their manager *Mhepo* (wind) to denigrate him for his erratic mood. Workers at a clothes-making factory in Masasa address and refer to a white supervisor as *Murehwa* (after the praise-name of the Soko clan). Adam (the white supervisor) either walks or cycles to and from work and is popular for his “khaki trousers and farmer-shoes” making him symbolically a black man. Shona nicknames for whites can be used with relative safety, over and over, within or outside the earshot of the bearer, giving the user enormous pleasure. The observations made in this study are consistent with those made by de Klerk (1998) in her study of Xhosa speakers’ nicknames for white farmers in South Africa.

In some of his oral presentations at election campaigns for ZANU PF, President Mugabe has referred to the opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai as *Tsvangison*, a slangish nickname that some ZANU PF supporters and sympathisers repeat in their casual degrading talk about Tsvangirai. Some members of the opposition political parties refer to President Mugabe as *Hitler* (after a former German Chancellor), to index their hostility against some of his “inflexible and intolerant” policies. This kind of nicknaming falls under what Holland (1990: 263) calls “public” or “official” nicknames.

Our data show occasions where some young children in high-density suburbs shout insulting nicknames of unpopular older people passing by their neighbourhood, from the crowd or hiding places to avoid identification. Interviews with some of the children revealed that some of the victims of

6. Although soon after Zimbabwe gained political independence in 1980, the then Prime minister Robert Mugabe, extended a hand of reconciliation to whites, after the compulsory acquisition of land by the ZANU PF government that saw most white commercial farmers losing their farms, racial antagonism and hate resurfaced. The tensions were exacerbated by intervention by some foreign governments through sanctions of various kinds and funding alternative ‘democratic’ political parties.

this disrespectful naming practice are unpopular teachers, police officers, members of some African independent churches and women.

Praising

Earlier we noted that nicknames could be either self-ascribed or assigned by others. "Self-ascribed names typically identify some of an individual's positive traits or characteristics" (Blount 1993: 35). In a study on the general Shona address system, Mashiri (1999) remarked that, "the self-selected nickname is always positive and has overtones of self-praising and bragging."

We recorded children, young adults and adults' self-ascribed nicknames and the meanings that they derive from their usage. Some children from wealthy families, which can afford digital satellite television, adopt names of cartoon characters such as *Spiderman* and *Superman*. Many of the children, who watch the local television station mostly, choose nicknames from the names of some prominent musicians like *Aleke "Borrowdale" Macheso* or *Cheso/Cheso Power*, *Simon "Chopa Cellular" Chimbetu* and *Leonard "Musorowenyoka" Dembo*. A child who names himself after a musician may alternate that name with the namesake's nickname. For instance, a child may refer to himself as '*Cheso Power*' in a naming-game situation and '*Borrowdale*' in a self-praise chant when imitating the musician's dance style.

This naming style is consistent with naming practices in two Oceanic societies, Truk in the Caroline Islands and Lakalai on the north coast of New Britain as observed by Goodenough (1965). Goodenough notes that, "Once established a nickname becomes part of what is handed on to the namesake, who receives all the names of the person he is named for" (270). Most of the children's self-ascribed nicknames enable the bearer to celebrate his individuality and prowess, on the one hand, and represent a kind of wish-fulfilment in their owners, on the other hand.

While secondary school students tend to choose names of heroes/heroines from books, (e.g. *Macduff* in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Nyasha*, in Dangarembwa's *Nervous Conditions*); some university students name themselves after well-known theorists/scholars (e.g. *Chomsky*, *Hymes*, *Achebe*, *Okot p'Bitek*). The secondary school students use the naming practice to display their emotional attachment with certain points of view represented by the characters that they name themselves after. However, the university students seem to choose names that indicate their learned status or competence as well as legitimise their ideological or theoretical orientations.

We observed that older, particularly working class men, choose nicknames from what they perceive as prestigious occupational/professional titles. Some of the names that we recorded from casual conversations at beer

drinking sessions when naming, including self-praise, seem to be rife among peers and friends. Some of the commonly occurring names were *Captain* (after army rank), *Doctor* (medical doctor), *Member-in-charge* (after head of police station), *Gweta* (lawyer), *Gavhuna* (after the popularity of current governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, Gideon Gono) and *Professor* (academic rank). What is evident from the names both students and older people choose is that self-praise: "Nicknames may influence the bearer's own self-perception and act as a self-fulfilling prophesy" (de Klerk and Bosch 1997: 104). As Morgan, O'neil and Harre (1979: 7) put it, a person's name and the various appellations, which he acquires through life, may reflect the kind of person he takes himself to be.

It seems apparent from our data that self-praise nicknames are more common among men than women, and more so among children than adults. The reasons for the gender variation in this naming practice do not appear to be immediately clear from our data. Let us attempt to offer two explanations. First, we tend to agree with Lakoff's (1975) claim, (although we do not share her feminist arguments), that there are universal differences in men and women's "choice and frequency of lexical items; in situations in which certain rules are performed..." (8). Second, if we take self-ascribed nicknaming as self-assertive and aggressive discourse, then its infrequency in females is explained by Mashiri's (2000a) assertion that Shona culture (both modern and traditional) generally socialises women to be self-effacing and unassertive. Self-praise nicknames are used mainly as reference terms. However, use of self-praising nicknames as address terms is an indication of the acceptance of the nickname by members of the bearer's social network.

More commonly, members of a social network assign praise nicknames to individuals with or without these individuals' knowledge. The nicknames are usually associated with a particular salient feature of the individual, physical or behavioural. There is a very low frequency of praise nicknames based on an individual's physical attributes. Those that we recorded are derived from the bearer's beauty, height and fitness. Martin, age 29, says that he addresses his 7 year-old daughter as *Miss Zimbabwe* since "she is tall, slim and cute". One bus rank marshal at Mbare Musika is well known by colleagues and acquaintances as *Jaindi* (giant). His tall and heavy frame frightens away pickpockets to the relief of bus operators and passengers.

Some nicknames are semantically ambiguous. For example, one commuter conductor with a small built body is called *Kambeva* (a small mouse) by his workmates. When his small body works to his advantage (e.g. when the bus is full and he can comfortably tuck himself in a small corner), the nickname connotes an accolade, but when it works to his disadvantage (e.g. when he fails to reach for the roof of the bus to put luggage), it indexes an abuse. In an interview, *Kambeva* notes that he can infer from the type of

applause, the accompanying comments and non-verbal signals whether the name is being used to praise or to demean him.

Praise nicknames based on the individual's behaviour occur with very high frequency in our data. One old woman says that she addresses her 9 year-old grandson as *Mufundisi* (pastor) for his passion for reciting biblical memory verses at Sunday school; a grade 2 teacher at one private school addresses one girl in her class as *Calculator*, as praise for her arithmetical acumen and students at one secondary school address a prominent soccer player for the school team as *Warrior* after scoring the winning goal in a provincial soccer competition in 2001. Anderson, age 35, the school coach talks of how the school shouts "*warrior, warrior!*" during a match and how the cheering prompts not only the player in question but the whole team to play their hearts out and win.

Students at the University of Zimbabwe give praise nicknames to students who display academic excellence, those who show bravery and militancy in fighting the riot police or local security guards and those who are popular in sport or other social activities. Some of the names we recorded are, *Professor* (for maintaining high scores in assignments), *Commander* (for bravery in leading an attack against the riot police in a demonstration), *Green bomber* (insulting nickname for local security guards, from their green uniform, but given to a student as a recognition for stoning security guards into submission during a demonstration), and *Mwaruwari* (after popular national team soccer player Benjani Mwaruwari). No praise nicknames for female students were recorded. One possible explanation is their general absence from student public activities.

We noted that some Christians or fellow parishioners give each other praise nicknames. For example, *Moses* (for an older man who is popular for his leadership ability), *Murevi* (priest, for a young male lay preacher who speaks eloquently), *Dorcus* (for a woman talented in crocheting and popular for community work), *Joseph* (for a young boy who acted very well in a Christmas play featuring the birth of Jesus) and *Paurosi* (for a prominent male evangelist). These names are normally used vocatively and their use is limited to the church setting and by fellow parishioners. Deriving praise nicknames from prominent biblical personalities is a way of evoking solidarity among fellow parishioners. In this sub-culture too, nicknames for men are more common than for women, perhaps because the traditional Christian culture tend to subordinate women to such group roles as worshipping, singing and serving.

Conclusion

In this article we demonstrated that nicknaming is a widespread linguistic phenomenon among urban Shona speakers of various social networks and

that nicknames convey a great deal of information. Our data revealed that nicknames perform six sociopragmatic functions: affectionate, social demarcation/solidarity, social control, intimate play, demeaning and praising.

The form that a nickname takes and how it is used depend mainly on the social distance between the participants, their relative social statuses, age, sex, and the nickname's intended effect. It was clear, for example, that pet names and private labels (both for in-group and out-group referents) frequently occur between intimates than they do among mere acquaintances, as expressions of affections and solidarity enhancing nicknames are more common among like-minded people or members of the same network where they serve to integrate participants.

Although this article does not offer sufficient data to claim that nicknaming among the Shona is male linguistic behaviour, it is clear from the data discussed here that men use nicknames more frequently and more overtly than women. Of the functions discussed in this article, female nicknames occur most frequently as intimate or solidarity markers and less frequently as praise names. Praising (both self and others) seems to be more common among males as it is among children than adults. Praising is mostly self-assertive and aggressive, features that Shona culture does not normally associate with femininity. In addition, as our data shows, nicknames exchanged between females (for example friends) are less daring than that exchanged between males, but they are equally imaginative.

This study answers an old question that has since turned into an adage in Onomastics, "What's in a name?" and legitimizes naming as a serious area of study in Zimbabwean sociolinguistics or socio-onomastics, since, unlike the more obvious topics of language planning and policy, naming is either taken for granted or often relegated to literature and anthropology.

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