

# Generation and Attribution of Nicknames among Secondary School Students: Indices of Linguistic Creativity

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## Abstract

The subject of naming is a universal one (Ajileye and Ajileye, 2003) but it has different importance in different clans. The motivation for this study is hinged on the extent to which nicknames are generated and attributed among secondary school students in the study area, as well as the meaning negotiation involved. Different approaches to the study and classification of names and nicknames are adopted for the study. Using random sampling technique, the paper drew data from four secondary schools in Ilorin metropolis for its analysis. The study found that secondary school students generate and attribute nicknames based on certain factors like physical qualities, bearer's behaviour, media influence, Anglicism, etc., and that all these are pointers to their linguistic creativity. The paper's conclusion is that a study like this will go a long way to expand the frontiers of knowledge and provide useful insights for language study, especially in the area of names and naming where context plays important roles in meaning negotiation.

**Key terms:** Name(s), Categorisation of Names, Anglicism, Contact Linguistics, Linguistic Creativity

## 1. Introduction

Every language has a culture within which it is situated, and the two, that is, language and culture, are like two sides of a coin. Hence, it is right to say that both language and culture are inseparable. Nonetheless, the concept of contact linguistics has given birth to the death of "pure culture breed" and "pure language breed" (coinages ours), because contact linguistics has resulted in both linguistic and cultural hybrid across the globe. From the perspective of nicknames among secondary school students, this paper examines instances of linguistic productivity which stem out of the multilingual context within which the students find linguistic security in Nigeria because it may, in the long run, lead to backlash effects and even language death.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Language and Culture Contact: the Case of English and Yoruba

Language is the foundation of every culture and it provides meanings and symbols for all aspects of culture (Schaefer, 2006 p.62). This indicates that language serves as an expression of culture because it is a critical element of culture which facilitates the day-to-day exchange of ideas, thoughts and values among its users. This makes it possible for someone to mention a word, e.g. *dog* (English) or *aja* (Yorùbá) and the listener will immediately have a mental picture of a four-legged domestic animal different from other ones like goat, sheep and cat. Similarly, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that a people's language determines their perception of things around them because the language helps to focus the attention of its users to certain phenomena rather than others (Wardhaugh, 2006). With the notion of contact linguistics, however, there is now interconnectivity between different cultures. An insight into the concept of contact linguistics can be given thus.

According to Schmid and De Bot (2006 p.215), contact linguistics attempts to provide the classification of linguistic materials in terms of likelihood for transfer. This shows that in a situation of linguistic contact, there are the chances of "borrowability" or the opportunity for a language to make use of terms, vocabulary items, expressions, etc. from another language with which there is a contact. Contact linguistics, therefore, refers to the study of languages in contact, and language contact occurs when two or more languages or varieties of a language interact. This contact can come as a result of population drift, immigration, invasion, trade relations, transfer of knowledge through books or technology and many more (Hall, 2005 p.123). Hall goes further to assert that the notion of cross linguistic influence motivates all language contact situations which include "the birth of pidgin and creoles, the development of multilingual communities, the process by which languages become extinct, and the learning of foreign languages through classroom instructions or individual study" (Hall, 2005 p.126). In all these, the conception of multilingualism is very important, and it goes thus:

With language contact came culture contact. Different aspects of the ways of life of the Europeans were introduced. Gradually, our modes of dressing, eating habits, hairstyles, religion, and many more were fashioned towards the Europeans'. There was also the introduction of western education through which the western culture also penetrated into our socio-cultural and linguistic environments. In expressing Yoruba culture now, various aspects of it are done in

English, e.g. the hunter's song, nuptial song and folklores, just to mention a few (Ajadi, 1999 p.246).

Owing to language contact and culture contact, nicknames among secondary school students now reflect a hybrid nature of both English and Yoruba. Hence, the fusion of the two languages and cultures gives rise to linguistic productivity among secondary school students in the area of nicknames. Before the nicknames are considered, however, we shall briefly discuss the idea of names among the Yoruba people.

## **2.2 Names: Meaningful or Meaningless Labels?**

Some scholars have posited that there is no meaning attached to names but rather, they are mere means of identification. Aligning to this view is Kempson (1977 p.14) who says; “it is not obvious that proper names have any meaning at all”. This indicates that names do not mean anything and neither do they have any importance. This assertion, however, has been debunked by Johnson (1969), Ajileye and Ajileye (2003), Olajubu (2003) and Dadzie and Awonusi (2004), especially when Yoruba names or nicknames are considered.

According to Ajileye and Ajileye (2003), the subject of naming is a universal one because all objects of creation have names. This means that a name is attached to everything, whether living or non-living, material or abstract, and regardless of someone’s origin, social status, educational achievement, religious-cum-political affiliation, such a person will have a name. Hence, a name has been defined as “a word by which a person, animal, place, thing or concept is known and spoken to or of” (Ajileye and Ajileye, 2003 p.196). This means that it will be very difficult, if not completely impossible, to talk about or know any concept without attaching a name to it.

## **2.3 Names among the Yoruba People**

The idea of names in Yoruba is often seen in a different light from the way it is seen in other cultures of the world. Strong cultural significance is attached to names among the Yoruba people, and it is believed that one’s name bears influences on one’s personality. According to Olajubu (2003 p.293), “the Yoruba give names to babies using appearance, behaviour, and the environment in which the birth occurred”. Thus, the name of every Yoruba person is a reflection of the prevailing situation in the life of members of the household to which they are born because it is often said that “we have to look into the home (the family) before naming a child” (Olajubu, 2003 p.293). This means that names are not just given to children in Yorubaland because their parents like the names but because there are some situations or circumstances leading to the choice of such names. Dadzie and Awonusi (2004 p.300) share this view when they say that adult members of the society “give personal names that are quite relevant to the families to which the bearers of the names belong”. Similarly, Ajileye and Ajileye (2003 p.195) in their research say that a large number of their respondents affirmed that their nicknames have semantic and pragmatic relevance and “these nicknames demonstrate particular characteristic strategies of naming”. This indicates that in Yorubaland, nicknames are as meaningful as real names.

## **2.4 Categorisation of Yorùbá Names**

Three categories of names will be discussed here. The first is *oruko abiso* (names given to babies at birth). The second category deals with those names referred to as *oruko amutorunwa* (names brought from heaven). These are discussed by Olajubu (2003), and will be referred to as Olajubu’s categorization. The third category deals with those discussed by Ajileye and Ajileye (2003), which will be referred to as Ajileye and Ajileye’s Categorization of Yoruba names. It must be noted that all these categories are hinged on one form of meaning or the other from the Yoruba world view. It should, however, be noted that Ajileye and Ajileye’s categorization is based on nicknames just as this paper also deals with nicknames.

### **2.4.1 Oruko Abiso (names given to babies at birth)**

These are names that reflect the profession of the baby’s father or parents, their religious beliefs, the prevailing situation in the lives of the family members, the state of mind of the natural parents, their political or social status and a whole lot of others (Olajubu, 2003:293). Hence, children born to royal families have different names from those whose parents are from the lineage of hunters, goldsmiths, Ifa worshippers, Sango worshippers, etc. The circumstances surrounding one’s birth may also determine the name as the Yoruba people believe in the introspective attachments to names.

Thus even without prior knowledge of someone’s identity, family background or religious attachment, their names may give a lot of information about them such as when they were born, the family into which they were born, the kind of occupation they do in the family and many more. Examples of such names include Adewale and Aderopo. While both are royal names, it can be deduced from the second name that someone in the family had died before the birth of the new baby. Hence, the new baby is a sort of replacement for the dead person, usually a child, too. Other names include Sangobiyi, Sangoseyi (names associated with Sango, the god of thunder); Oyadiji, Oyafunke (names associated with Oya, the river goddess); Ogundiran ‘Ogun (the god of iron) has become a living tradition in the family; and many more.

### **2.4.2 Olajubu’s Categorization of Yoruba names**

Olajubu (2003) has three categories of Yorùbá names. The first category of names deals with those based on vivid signs observable on the body of the child with naked eyes. Vivid signs observable on the body of the child at birth have been grouped into four by Olajubu (2003 p.295). These are the positions of the umbilical cord and the amniotic sac, the nature of the baby's birth, and the peculiarities in the limbs and hair. Names in this sub-category include Igisaririn, Oso, Ondu, Igberi and Abatan, etc.

Category two deals with names relating to the pre-natal clinical information about mother and child because special incidences may precede the birth of a baby. In these instances, names given to such babies often reflect those special instances. Olajubu (2003 pp.297-8) gives some examples of these names. We have Omope (a child born from a pregnancy that lasted more than the normal duration); Abisogun (a child given birth to during the period of war); Ayoka (the name given to a child born when there are two eggs fertilized but one dies off) and Ilori (a baby whose pregnancy was not preceded by menstruation).

The last category consists of names based on the observations about the behaviour and the development of the child in the first week of life. This is mostly related to unusual behaviour. Some of these names are Oni, Aasa, Olomitutu and Oke. Oni is the name of a child that does not cry immediately it is born. A child like this is usually smacked for it to cry. Aasa means a child that cries always in the night. Olomitutu is the name given to a child that does not like having its birth with warm water, as this is the normal thing. Thus the parents will have to use cold water for the baby's birth. A child that reacts against being fed in the traditional way is named Oke.

#### 2.4.3 Ajileye and Ajileye's Categorization of Yoruba names

According to Ajileye and Ajileye (2003 p.200), it has been revealed that Yoruba nicknames are not just meaningless tags or labels but they are products of an intricate interplay of language, context and meaning. Hence five categories of names are given, and these are: **Ironic Category, i.e.** nicknames that are used to express something that is the direct opposite of the actual thought, e.g. *Opelenge*, given to a fat person. **Descriptive Category, i.e.** nicknames given to people based on their physical qualities, e.g. *kinkinyinun*, given to somebody who has a very some stature. **Kinship Category, i.e.** nicknames that indicate a kind of blood relationship between the speaker and the bearer of the name. An example of this type of name is *Iyako*, meaning 'mother-in-law'. **Historical Category, i.e.** nicknames that have a link with past events in the family or the society at large. These events may be political, social or economic. An example of this is *Okondo* - bald head. It refers to the time the person was born without any hair on his head. **Virtuous Category, i.e.** names that indicate a particular kind of virtue or excellence in the bearer of the name. Examples of such names are *Ejiwura* and *Ejiwumi* which means "golden diastema" and "I love diastema" respectively. The reason being that among the Yoruba people, diastema is considered a virtue or a beautiful thing.

In this work, the writers prefer to align with Olajubu's (2003) categorization of Yoruba names for some reasons. The first is that Olajubu's categorization fully takes into consideration the Yoruba cultural values in its entirety. For instance, a name like Aderopo shows that the bearer of the name serves as a replacement for the child lost earlier. Other names in his categorization also show clearly the circumstances that brought about the names as well as their meanings. In essence, it can be said that while Ajileye and Ajileye's categorization deals with the immediate context or the restricted context, Olajubu's categorization deals with the wider or open context. Another reason is the fact that most, if not all, of the names in Olajubu's categorization are self explanatory. This makes it accessible to anyone who is familiar with the Yorùbá culture and language.

### 3. Methodology

Random sampling technique has been used for the collection of data for this study. In doing this, four secondary schools in Ilorin, the Kwara State capital of Nigeria have been selected. Two of them are private while the remaining two are public secondary schools. The data collected are grouped based certain themes that inform their generation and attribution, such as physical qualities, behavioural qualities, etc.

### 4.0 DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Secondary school students have traditional and religious names such as Omolade, Yetunde, James, Esther, Akeem, Azizah, and Aishah, among others. They also give nicknames or pet names to themselves, their teachers, or their colleagues. However, we are more concerned in this study with the students' nicknames. Below is a table containing some nicknames from some secondary schools in Ilorin metropolis. The table contains the first names of the students, their nicknames, meanings of the nicknames and reasons for giving such nicknames.

| Student's name | Nickname                   | Meaning   | Reason for the name                                    |
|----------------|----------------------------|---|--|
| Aisat          | <i>Wuruwuru</i> is my logo | identified with being rough                                       | She is very rough.                                     |
| Femi           | <i>F.M</i>                 | ----  | Short form of Femi.                                    |
| Gbemi          | <i>Omoga-Esegun</i>        | A tall person with long legs                                      | He is very tall.                                       |
| Kehinde        | <i>Kenny Royal</i>         | -----   | He is from a royal family.                             |
| Nafisat        | <i>Aunty Abi</i>           | Aunty Isn't it?   | She often says 'abi?' (isn't it?).                     |
| Olaitan        | <i>Olox</i>                | Wealth will never end   | -----  |
| Shade          | <i>Slim Shady</i>          | -----   | She is very slim.                                      |
| Toluwalashe    | <i>Tolux</i>               | God has the final say   | -----  |
| .Toyin<br>     | <i>Toyin Tomato</i>        | Phonological addition to the name, meaning Spicy/Edible substance | -----  |
| Tunmishe       | <i>2face</i>               | A popular musician  | She had eczema on her face, resulting in two colors    |
| Ogunleke       | Ogun                       | God of iron in Yoruba land  | Short form of Ogunleke                                 |
| Demola         | O.B.O (omo baba olowo)     | Richman's child   | His parents are rich                                   |
| Shade          | Blade                      | The cutting edge of a knife                                       | She talks a lot  |
| Hassan         | Ronaldo                    | Name of a star footballer   | He is skilful in playing football                      |
| Qudus          | Erin                       | Laughter  | He laughs a lot  |
| Dare           | D'banji                    | Name of a popular hip-hop star artiste                            |  |
| Femi           | Jelili                     | Name of an imbecile character in a movie                          |  |
| Odunayo        | Hawk                       | A predatory bird  | She exploits men for her personal gains                |
| David          | Davido                     | Name of a Popular hip-hop singer                                  |  |
| Titi           | Olori                      | Queen   | She is beautiful                                       |
| Kunle          | Aro                        | Funnel  | He loves drinking beer or any drink that has alcoholic |
| Bolakale       | S.S                        | Sharp shooter   | He often wins the heart of women he desires            |
| Kanyinsola     | Slim- kay                  | Someone who is skinny   | She is thin  |
| Bankole        | Banky                      | A famous musician   | Similar to the artiste's name                          |
| Muyiwa         | Authentic                  | A name of a movie producer  |  |

#### 4.1 Data analysis

The data analysis for this paper is divided into 5 groups. Each group is based on the reason(s) behind the formation of the nickname or the quality from which the names are drawn. The data analysis has been thematized along the lines of similarities or differences that are found in the data. As such, the themes give five groups altogether. The groups are as follows: physical, qualities, behavioural (positive and negative), Anglicism, media influence, family background and mannerism or idiosyncrasy.

#### 4.2 Physical Qualities

From the data collected, it has been discovered that many of the nicknames are derived from the physical qualities of the bearer. What the names reflect is that certain physical characteristics of the bearer are put into consideration before the nicknames are given. For instance, there are nicknames like *Omoga-Esegun*, *Slim Shady*, *2face*, etc. In the case of *Omoga-esegun*, the bearer is tall and thin so the height has been used as a way of giving the nickname. Similarly, the name *Slim Shady* is given to a girl bearing Shade but slender in stature. In addition, *2face* indicates that the bearer has two 'colours' on her face. In essence, there is a close affinity between the physical appearance of the bearer of the name and the name given. Also, hearing the nicknames alone has a way of indicating something about or some of the characteristics of the bearer even without seeing or knowing the person.

##### 4.3.1 Behavioural Qualities

From the data presented above, it can be seen that some people bear nick names which are as a result of their behavior. Such nicknames can be divided in two: Negative and Positive.

The name Shade which is related to the crown in Yoruba language has been turned to *blade*. Being a sharp object, a blade has the capacity to hurt somebody, especially if not properly handled. The bearer of the name is given such a name because she talks a lot. The pragmatic meaning of this name is that the tongue has the capacity to hurt or destroy if not positively deployed. Similarly, *Odunayo* literally means "good festival", and the name is specifically given to someone born during a festive period. However, the bearer is nicknamed *Hawk*, a predatory bird which specializes in killing small animals like rats, lizards, chicks, etc. for food. The nickname is as a result of the negative behaviour of the bearer because she exploits others for her personal gain (selfishness).

Another name in this category is Bolakale, meaning *long-lasting wealth*. The bearer has been nicknamed *S.S.*, and the meaning is a *sharp shooter*. The acronym or short form, i.e. *S.S.* poses a threat because one may think of sickle cell, whose bearer will be in a terrible state of health. The bearer is given such a nickname because he mostly wins the heart of women he desires thus, he is a *sharp shooter*. Lastly, the name Kunle goes with the nickname *Aro* meaning funnel, which is a tube with a wide top for pouring liquid or powder into small openings. Ironically, such nick name is given to the bearer because he loves drinking beer or anything that has or contains alcoholic. Another example of a nickname based on the bearer's behavior is 'Wuruwuru is my logo', given to someone who is very rough.

#### 4.3.2 Positive

Unlike nicknames that are given based on negative behavior of their bearers, others are given based on positive behavior. For instance, Qudus, a name which originated from Islamic religion has led to the nickname *Erin* which means laughter. Although the name may first portray the bearer of such nickname as someone with mental deficiency because of the picture given to us- 'he laughs a lot', a further consideration shows that laughter is good for the health. Also, the bearer of the name Demola meaning one that comes with wealth, has been nicknamed *O.B.O* which is the acronym or short form of *omo baba olowo*. It means son of a rich man. Hearing the acronym is absurd because as a word, it means "virgina". However, if one understands the meaning of the acronym, one will easily know that the reason for such is because his parents are rich.

#### 4.4 Anglicism

According to Atolagbe (2011 p.26), Anglicism refers to "the appropriation of English terms, expressions or concepts into any language." It has also been defined as "loanwords with a visible Englishness-like outlook" (Knospe, 2007 p.1) which must be accepted as a linguistic item in the vocabulary of the receptor language. It can be integrated at the phonological, orthographic, morphological, etc. levels.

The table presented earlier shows that some nicknames are given to people as a result of Anglicism. Such names are anglicized because they want to make such names English in character. Although this is a sign of linguistic creativity, it poses a threat to African culture because Anglicizing African names detaches such names from African context of meaning. For instance, Bamikole goes with a nickname, *Banky* which is the name of a famous musician. Oluwabamikole in Yoruba land literally means *God helped me build a house* which is given to a child at a significant period, that is, when that family has just finished the building of their own house and this same period is when such a child is born. Other names that fall under this category are *F.M*, *Kenny Royal*, *Olaw*, *Slim Shady* and *Tolux*

#### 4.5 Media Influence

Some nicknames also emerged as a result of media influence on the students. In other words, some people were given nicknames as a result of media influences especially from radio and television. For instance, Hassan which is derived from Arabic meaning "to be beautiful or to be good" has been nicknamed as *Ronaldo* which is a name of a famous footballer in Europe. Although this name emerged as a result of the character of the bearer on the football field, it would not have been given without media influence. Furthermore, Oluwadamilare in Yoruba means "God has vindicated me" or "God has justified me" but it has been changed to *D'banji* who is a famous Nigerian singer and songwriter. Oluwafemi in Yoruba means "God loves me" goes with the nickname *Jelili* which also emerged as a result of media because the name was given to an imbecile character in a popular movie titled (JELILI). However, this nickname is given to Oluwafemi because he behaves like a child. Also, David which is derived from Hebrew under the Christian religion which means "beloved" is nicknamed as *David* who is a famous or popular hip hop star artiste. Lastly, Muyiwa which means "God has brought this" is being nicknamed as *Authentic* meaning undisputed which is a name of a popular film producer and the real name of the director of that organisation is Muiyiwa Ademola. Other examples of nicknames that are formed from media influence are *2face* and *Toyin Tomato*.

#### 4.6 Family Background

Some nicknames also came into existence as a result of the bearers' background. An example is Ogunleke, literally meaning *Ogun has triumphed*. Ogun is a deity (god of iron and war) in Yoruba creation myth. Yoruba blacksmiths have traditionally sacrificed dogs to Ogun, and each year they hold a three day festival in his honour, and there are two reasons for the festival. First, it is a thanksgiving for all disturbances they had already overcome. Second, it is an appeasement and propitiation to ward off accidents, conflict, wars and strife. Based on these good qualities of Ogun, the worshippers bear the name in different forms such as Ogunleke, Ogunakin, Ogundele, etc. Thus, the bearer of Ogunleke is nicknamed *Oguns*.

#### 4.7 Mannerism or Idiosyncrasy

Nicknames can also be derived from the bearer's mannerism or idiosyncrasy. Mannerism or idiosyncrasy refers to a behavioural attribute that is distinctive or peculiar to an individual or a person. An example of this is *Aunty Abi*. This name has been given to the bearer because she likes saying 'abi', a Yoruba word that is meant to confirm a statement.

### 5. Findings

The analysis done in this study reveals a number of things. For instance, it has been found out that many of the names are not derogatory but a few of them are. Examples of derogatory ones are *Wuruwuru is my logo*, *Hawk*, *2face*, *Chicken* and *Omoga-Esegun*. Special attention should be given to the name *2face* because it involves the use of sarcasm. The name really belongs to a Nigerian musician; so it may be thought that the bearer is a good singer or that the name is not derogatory; but an understanding of its origin makes it clear that it is sarcastic. Hence the underlying meaning is derogatory. It has also been found out that some of the nicknames are given based on the bearer's physical qualities, especially those that cannot be influenced by the bearer, e.g. their height, stature, etc. Some of the nicknames lead to Anglicism, e.g. *F.M*, *Kenny Royal*, *Olax*, *Slim Shady*, etc. Media, family background and mannerism are also sources of generating nicknames.

The most important finding from this study is that of linguistic creativity. This is evident because secondary school students are quite productive linguistically in the various ways in which they give nicknames to themselves or their friends. In addition, many of the names do not yield themselves to quick understanding of their meanings by their hearers. So, one has to understand the context that brought about the name in the first instance.

## 6. Conclusion

Linguistic creativity is not simply a property of exceptional people but an exceptional property of all people (Carter, 2004 p.13) in other words, every language user is linguistically and exceptional creative. This paper has examined the generation of and attribution of nicknames among secondary school students, and linguistic creativity has been at the forefront. In this study, it was revealed that secondary school students have successfully manipulated the two languages (i.e. English and Yoruba languages) and exercised their right to be linguistically creative in such a way that effects are created. Thus, the findings of the study could go a long way in broadening the frontiers of linguistic studies by shedding more light on the expansive importance of names and naming concepts, especially where context plays important roles in the decoding of meanings. Hence, it is not only in the teaching of literature and culture where research into learner's exposure to more open-ended and creative aspects of language use is developed but also for "creative and expressing their social and cultural selves" (Carter, 2004 p.214).

A fusion of both English and Yoruba languages can be found in the nicknames. However, there is much more presence of Englishness in the nicknames than Yoruba. This has led to a dominance of English and can pose a lot of challenges to Yoruba even in Yoruba land that we are.

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