

## What's in a Name?

Suranjana Barua and Tanmoy Bhattacharya

Department of Linguistics

University of Delhi

[s12\\_barua@rediffmail.com](mailto:s12_barua@rediffmail.com)

[tanmoy@linguistics.du.ac.in](mailto:tanmoy@linguistics.du.ac.in)

### 1 AIM OF THE TALK

To investigate nicknaming as hate-speech in the framework of Butler (1990, 1993, 1997) and respond to the moral conundrum it poses.

### 2 PROBLEM: THE MORAL CONUNDRUM

Post-structuralist stand: linguistic *signs* are unstable and reiterable

Butler (1997): arrives at the same conclusion via Nietzsche (1887:29) -

'there's no "being" behind doing, acting, becoming; the "doer" is merely a fiction imposed on the doing – the doing itself is everything.'

⇒ *All* speech is in some sense beyond the speaker's control or *ex-citable* (Butler 1997:15)

Thus there's no hate-speaker behind the hate speech -- s/he is absolved of the guilt.

☞ How do we respond to this in the realm of nicknames as hate speech?

### 3 TYPOLOGY OF NICKNAME ASCRIPTIONS

☞ Are nicknames always hate-speech?

They are broadly of two types: Proper and Common Noun nicknames.

#### 3.1 Proper Noun Nicknames

##### 3.1.1 Abbreviation

This strategy is commonly employed for purely for the purpose of shortening and doesn't constitute hate-speech and demonstrates a relation of closeness:

*Madhu* for *Madhubala*, *Madhumita* etc.

*Raj* for *Rajesh*, *Rejendra*, etc.

*Krish* for *Krishna*, *Krishnaswamy*, etc.

*Bob* for *Richard*

etc.

##### 3.1.2 Physical Attribution

Majority of nicknames fall into this category and they often constitute hate-speech, the body being a visible signifier of identity always stereotypes an individual:

*moTu* for an overweight person

*kaNRa* for squint-eyed

*kalu* for dark skinned person, often employed as a racist term in India

*naTaa/ Tingu* for a short person

*Taklu/ baldy* for a bald/ balding person

*ciknaa* for a smooth skinned male (effeminate); also see section 3.1.6

etc.

### 3.1.3 Characterising Attribution

Character ascription is also a major reason for investing a person with nick names:

*purki* (Tamil) for a ruffian (often, female)  
*tomboy*  
*Dhilaa* 'loose' for a lazy person  
 etc.

### 3.1.4 Religious/ Caste Attribution

These often acquire dangerous connotations in a multi-religious society and definitely constitute hate-speech:

*mleccho* (Bangla) 'untouchable' for a Muslim  
*miya* (Assamese) for a Muslim  
*camaar* 'cobbler' for a lower caste person  
*bhangii* for a lower caste person  
 etc.

### 3.1.5 Regional Attribution

These are based on the name of the place or people the person is from, they too constitute hate-speech some of which may undergo amelioration through familiarity (see section XXX):

*meRo* (Bangla) for a Marwari  
*madraasi* for person from the south of India  
*cinkii* for a person from the north-east (including Nepal)  
*nepaali* for a person from the north-east (including Nepal)  
*mayang* (Manipuri) for a non-Tibeto-Burman person

Certain Indian English expression is common among the urban centres:

*Bong* for a Bengali  
*Mallu* for a Malayali  
*Gujju* for a Gujarati  
*Punj* for a Punjabi  
*Harry* for a person from Bihar  
*Bihari* for a person from Bihar

### 3.1.6 Sexual Ascription

These are meant to wrongly accentuate person's supposed sexual traits or attributes:

*Homo* (shortened form of *Homosexual*) for an effeminate male  
*HijRa* 'Eunuch' for a "harsh" looking female  
*ciknaa* for a smooth-skinned male  
*nimai* (Bangla) for a flat-chested female

The last expression is doubly hurtful as it uses a linguistic device (NEG+X) and a male name (though synonymous to the Vaishnavite leader Chaitanya) to refer to the perceived male attribute of a female. This slang word is similar to the expression *Manchester* in this respect.

### 3.2 Common Noun Ascription

These are different from the notion of nicknames that is commonly accepted as these are temporary ascriptions. However, although not attributional, the linguistic force has the same power to hurt as proper noun nicknames.

#### 3.2.1 Indexicals

Commonly employed accompanied with 'pointing' and has the effect of immediately establishing a power hierarchy between the namer and the named. These are formed by using the second person pronoun overtly and by using demonstratives:

*You!/ You there!/ You over there!/ Hey you!/ People like you!* etc.

*oye!* (Hindi)/ *Eyi chele!* (Bangla) 'Hey boy'/ etc. (Deictic)

*This guy/ that guy over there/ this guy here* etc.

Equivalent expressions with demonstratives in Hindi/ Bangla/ Assamese and other IA languages do not constitute hate-speech. This phenomenon is investigated in further detail in Bhattacharya and Barua (2006).

## 4 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Butler (1997):

a name tends to fix, to freeze, to delimit, to render substantial, indeed, it appears to recall a metaphysics of substance, of discrete and singular kinds of beings (p 35)

... jarring, even terrible power of naming ... (p 29)

Thus, by conferring singularity, a name becomes the individual's condition of subjecthood and makes possible her/ his social existence.

### 4.1 Interpellation

Althusser (1971): The notion *interpellation*

*It's a girl* is an interpellative performative statement

⇒ Discourse is thus always constitutive, interpellative and performative.

### 4.2 Speech Act

Austin (1955): Performative utterances (or Speech Acts) are successful if they are uttered within the constraints of the context and authorial intention. The act must:

- (i) be uttered by the person designated to do so in an appropriate context
- (ii) adhere to certain conventions
- (iii) take the intention(s) of the utterer into account

Derrida (1972) responds to this: It is a feature of *all* linguistic signs (not just speech acts) that are vulnerable to appropriation, reiteration and, *re-citation*.

⇒ Signs can be cited in unexpected ways which he calls *citational grafting*.

Thus, citation is social in Austin and structural in Derrida.

### 4.3 Performativity

Butler seizes the political promise of performativity in the structural notion of 'citational grafting' by rethinking performativity through citationality.

Repetition and resignification derive recontextualisation and subversive redeployments: for example, 'queer', 'black' and 'women' (Butler 1997: 158).

In this sense a name, by virtue of being a linguistic sign, also has the intrinsic citational and ritualistic quality of an utterance and it is also in Butler's (1990, 1997) sense a *performative*.

### 4.4 Radical Performativity of Interpellation

Interpellation can't be one-sided, and in order for it to be effective you have to recognise yourself as a subject who is 'hailed' by metaphorically turning around – Althusser's mere 'one 180° physical conversion.'

Unlike Althusser, for Butler, interpellation is not 'a simple performative', but holds the political promise of the performative making it a radical democratic instrument.

Personal nicknames become a performative in that they get subverted when they assume positive identification with the passage of time.

## 5 A RESPONSE TO THE MORAL CONUNDRUM?

For certain Nicknames that do not fall within any legal jurisdiction that terms them abusive, the recitation possibility is inherent, neutralising the wounding effect, if any, of such nicknames. Thus, for these, the answer to the question posed in section 2 lies in the inherent reiterability of nicknames which makes redundant any further law/ act to counter the subject-effects of nicknames.

For the majority of nicknames that hurt, radical performativity (section 4.4) that resignifies and recontextualises words deemed wounding, acknowledging and exploiting the fact that no word *inevitably* and always has the power to wound, constitutes a response to the moral dilemma (see section 2).

## REFERENCES

- Althusser, Louis. 1971. Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Monthly Review Press, New York: 131-187.
- Austin, J. L. 1955. *How to do things with words*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge: MA.
- Bhattacharya, Tanmoy and Suranjana Barua. 2006. Speech Act or Speech and Act? MS, University of Delhi.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*. Routledge: New York.
- 1993. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive limits of 'Sex'*. Routledge: New York.
- ..... 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. Routledge: New York.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1972 (1999). Signature Event Context. In Peggy Kamuf (ed.) *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. Columbia University Press: New York.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1887. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. OUP: Oxford.