

The Morpho-Syntactic Patterns and Semantic Uses of Student Nicknames in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Nicknaming is a pervasive linguistic practice that indexes intimacy, identity, and social boundaries, yet it remains relatively underexplored in African sociolinguistic scholarship. This study presents an empirical analysis of 200 nicknames collected from students at a tertiary institution and a senior high school in Cape Coast, Ghana. Drawing on focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, the paper examines the morpho-syntactic processes underlying nickname formation, including clipping, blending, compounding, reduplication, suffixation, and phonological manipulation. To account for meaning and social positioning, an adapted Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework is combined with Appraisal theory to analyse the evaluative, affective, and stance dimensions encoded in the nicknames.

The findings identify three dominant morphological categories, derivative, descriptive, and associative, each associated with distinct semantic and interactional functions. Nicknames are shown to enact identity work through affiliation, teasing, role ascription, boundary marking, and stigmatisation. From an Appraisal perspective, they function as condensed evaluative texts that mobilise Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation to position individuals within peer hierarchies and social networks. Distributional patterns further reveal gendered tendencies in the assignment and interpretation of nicknames, reflecting broader sociocultural ideologies and normative expectations. The study argues that nicknaming practices both reflect and actively construct social relations in Ghanaian educational contexts, contributing to African morpho-syntactic scholarship and sociolinguistic research on language, evaluation, and identity construction.

Keywords: nicknames; NSM; morpho-syntax; Appraisal; Ghana; student identity; naming practices

BACKGROUND

Names are fundamental to human social life. They permit reference, convey identity, and encode social roles. Beyond official given names, there are informal labels, nicknames, pet names, and sobriquets, which also add to some of the resources that function as potent tools for interpersonal meaning-making. In educational settings, young people routinely invent and circulate nicknames. These labels reveal attitudes, group structures, and shifting identity performances. This paper investigates the morpho-syntactic forms and semantic uses of student nicknames in two Ghanaian educational sites. It combines a descriptive analysis of nickname patterns with explanations of the emotive and evaluative meanings of nicknames, using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach and the Appraisal system. By situating nickname practices in the sociolinguistic ecology of Ghanaian youth, the study contributes to onomastics, sociolinguistics, and the study of language and identity.

Despite the growing body of research on personal naming practices, systematic linguistic analyses of informal nicknaming in African educational contexts remain limited. Existing studies tend to prioritise anthroponymy, cultural interpretation, or descriptive sociolinguistic accounts, often without detailed attention to morpho-syntactic structure or to the explicit modelling of evaluative meaning. This study addresses that gap by integrating structural linguistic analysis with semantic explication and evaluative stance theory to examine student nicknames. By combining morpho-syntactic categorisation with an adapted Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework and an Appraisal-informed perspective on stance, the paper offers a multi-

layered account of how nickname patterns and meanings interact to construct social identities. In doing so, it extends African onomastic research beyond descriptive documentation toward a theoretically grounded explanation of how nicknames function as resources for identity positioning, affiliation, and social regulation within youth communities. This integrative approach represents a novel contribution to African sociolinguistics and broadens the analytical toolkit available for the study of informal naming practices.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the dataset comprises 200 nicknames collected from two educational institutions in Cape Coast, Ghana. While the sample permits in-depth qualitative and structural analysis, it does not claim statistical representativeness of all Ghanaian educational contexts. Nicknaming practices may vary across regions, linguistic backgrounds, institutional types, and age groups, and broader sampling would be required to establish nationwide generalisations.

Second, the data were elicited through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Although these methods enabled rich metalinguistic reflection, they rely partly on participants' retrospective accounts and self-reporting. Naturally occurring interactional data might reveal additional pragmatic nuances in the deployment of nicknames in real-time discourse.

Third, while the study integrates morpho-syntactic analysis with Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) explication and an Appraisal-informed perspective on evaluative stance, the interpretive nature of semantic and evaluative analysis entails a degree of analytical subjectivity. Although efforts were made to ensure systematic coding and theoretical consistency, alternative interpretations of evaluative stance may be possible.

Finally, the study foregrounds linguistic structure and meaning, and therefore does not provide a fully ethnographic account of the broader institutional histories or socio-economic dynamics shaping nickname practices. Future research could incorporate longitudinal or ethnographic approaches to capture the evolving social life of nicknames across time and contexts.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a systematic and theoretically grounded account of nickname formation and evaluative meaning in Ghanaian educational settings, offering a foundation for further comparative and cross-cultural research.

Related Literature

Research on nicknaming spans disciplines such as sociolinguistics, anthropology, and psychology, with both classic and contemporary studies demonstrating that nicknames perform important social functions, including indexing intimacy, managing face, enforcing group norms, and staging humour or hostility (Alford, 1988; Hough, 2016). Studies in Anglophone contexts further describe formal processes such as clipping (e.g., *Alexander* → *Alex*), hypocorism (e.g., *Nick* → *Nicky*), semantic transfer (e.g., *Tiger* → *a fierce person*), and associative naming linked to popular culture figures or icons (Hough, 2016).

African scholarship on naming and nicknaming, although comparatively limited, is steadily expanding. In the Ghanaian context, the Sociolinguistics of Akan Personal Names demonstrates that names function as sociocultural tags that encode kinship, social roles, status, and cultural values, underscoring that naming practices are deeply embedded in social meaning systems, ethnic identity, or social judgment; they may be affiliative or pejorative and can become stable identifiers across life stages (Obeng, 1997; Agyekum, 2006). Similarly, research on address and naming practices in Ghanaian educational settings shows that nicknames and other address terms serve as key resources for negotiating social relationships, reflecting variables such as power, familiarity, age, and social status (Afful, 2006; Vifah, 2023). In more recent empirical work on digital naming practices, studies of Ghanaian university students' usernames reveal that nicknames and related naming forms are actively used to construct identity, signal group affiliation, and reference popular culture or personal characteristics (Ampofo, 2023).

African scholarship on nicknames is more limited but growing. Research in Ghana and neighbouring contexts documents rich nickname cultures that often mobilise local languages, English, and hybrid forms. Studies

emphasise that nicknames may encode kinship, status, ethnic identity, or social judgment; they can be affiliative or pejorative and sometimes become stable identifiers across life stages. Work on student nicknaming in Ghanaian schools highlights high prevalence, male-dominated coinage practices, and effects on learning and self-esteem. Recent localised studies also document students' playful creativity and the use of nicknames to comment on socio-economic circumstances (e.g., references to wealthy lifestyles or foreign-retained parents).

The NSM framework (Wierzbicka; Goddard, 1994, 2002) provides a cross-linguistically grounded method for explicating meaning in minimal semantic primes and molecules. NSM has been successfully applied to emotion vocabulary, evaluative language, and culturally specific terms. Its use in nickname analysis permits the systematic unpacking of evaluative content (affection, mockery, respect) in culturally neutral primitives, facilitating cross-cultural comparison.

Building on this semantic grounding, Martin and White (2005) offer a complementary interpersonal lens for analysing how nicknames encode stance, emotion, and social positioning. Within the systemic functional framework, the Appraisal system, particularly the subsystems of Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation, enables a nuanced account of how speakers evaluate individuals and construct identities through naming practices. By integrating Appraisal Theory, the study captures the emotive force and evaluative orientations embedded in nicknames, revealing how they function as resources for negotiating affiliation, social alignment, and identity within specific cultural contexts.

Contemporary sociolinguistics debates relevant to this study include the role of language in identity performance, the organisation of peer-group interaction, and the interplay between global popular culture and local linguistic creativity. Recent reviews of sociolinguistics also stress multimodality and the changing dynamics of language contact, both of which are relevant to hybrid nicknaming on multilingual Ghanaian campuses.

Naming practices have attracted sustained scholarly attention across disciplines, with research addressing their linguistic structures, cultural embeddedness, and social meanings (Alford, 2020; Van Langendonck, 2007). While the demarcation between *proper names*, *nicknames*, and *pet names* often appears self-evident in lay understanding, academic discourse reveals more fluid boundaries. In many societies, personal names are typically assigned by parents or guardians in accordance with the community's cultural conventions, and the bearer exercises little or no agency over their designation or early use (Starks & Taylor-Leech, n.d.; Agyekum, 2006). In contrast, nicknames tend to emerge as alternative identifiers, often bestowed informally at various stages of an individual's life, and shaped by interpersonal dynamics, situational contexts, and linguistic creativity (Mashiri, 2004; De Klerk & Bosch, 1999).

The distinction between *pet names* and *nicknames* has been approached from different analytical angles. Wong (1997) notes that pet names are typically coined by close kin or intimate partners and carry predominantly endearing connotations, whereas nicknames may be self-selected or imposed by others such as friends, peers, or even adversaries, and can range from affectionate to humorous, ironic, or pejorative. More recent studies (e.g., Morgan, 2022; Zhang, 2018) have confirmed that nicknames can operate as instruments of both social bonding and subtle social control, reflecting the interplay between language, power, and identity.

Research on nicknames in Euro-American contexts is relatively extensive. Shankle's (1955) pioneering catalogue of American nicknames remains a key reference, documenting their pervasive use across family, friendship, and public domains. Gladkova (2002), examining the nicknames of American presidents, demonstrates how such forms can encode public perceptions, political branding, and broader cultural narratives. Similarly, studies by Goitein (1970) on the evolution of nicknames into family names, Kiesling (1997) on verbal play in U.S. college fraternities, and Adams (2009) on the pragmatics of nickname interaction collectively highlight the intricate pragmatic and affective dimensions of nickname practices.

By contrast, African contexts, despite the cultural richness of their naming traditions, remain underrepresented in the global literature (Mashiri, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2012). The *Guide to Names and Naming Practices* (2006) includes only brief overviews of Nigerian and Somali naming systems, underscoring the need for more in-

depth, context-specific research. African naming practices often encode detailed social information, including gender, marital status, ethnic affiliation, religion, birth circumstances, and social rank (Agyekum, 2006; Dzameshie, 1998). In the Akan context, nicknames, locally referred to as “*efe*” or “*mmrane*”, are frequently playful or satirical, sometimes bordering on the derogatory, and are often used in peer-group interactions (Agyekum, 2006:224–225). Examples include *ohui* (‘blower’ → ‘liar’) and *ɔweee* (‘chewer’ → ‘drunkard’), which draw on metaphorical or metonymic associations to produce evaluative meaning.

It is notable, however, that such derogatory functions do not exhaust the range of nickname uses. Persson (2013) proposes that in many peer-group contexts, nicknames function as “reciprocanyms”, that is, circulating labels that strengthen in-group solidarity, especially among youth and sub-cultural networks. This observation that such naming practices strengthen friendships resonates with De Klerk and Bosch’s (1999) research in South Africa, which links the formation and use of nicknames to gendered conventions and social expectations. Their findings suggest that male and female nickname practices often differ in semantic range, form, and situational deployment, reflecting broader societal gender ideologies.

In Ghana, Afful’s (2006, 2007a, 2007b) corpus-based studies of address and reference terms among university students offer valuable insight into the structural and semantic dimensions of nickname usage. His approach demonstrates that nicknames, as a subcategory of appellatives, merit analysis in terms of syntactic form, pragmatic function, and sociocultural significance. Similarly, Kuranchie (2012) examines the educational implications of nickname usage among Senior High School students, highlighting both their potential to foster peer bonding and their capacity to stigmatise or distract.

Alongside established scholarship, recent empirical studies from Africa further attest to the multifaceted sociolinguistic roles of nicknames. Khetoa and Mokala (2022) show that, among the Basotho, nicknames contribute to social regulation by warning or satirising individuals whose behaviour is socially problematic. Research on Internet nicknames (Olajimbiti, E. O., 2024) reveals how online handles function as identity badges, facilitating emotional engagement, user bonding, and impression formation in virtual communities. In this research, what stands out is that these nicknames shape digital impressions and enhance interpersonal communication, serving as analogues of offline identity construction practices (e.g., “Superman Lee, who cannot fly” as an identity cue). Another study of Nigerian street children (2021) highlights how nicknames operate as identity frames and resilience markers, allowing bearers to navigate social hierarchies and express solidarity within marginalised contexts.

These new findings complement studies by Afful (2006, 2007) and Kuranchie (2012), reinforcing the notion that nicknames are powerful linguistic forms embedded within diverse communicative ecosystems, from virtual environments to urban street settings.

This body of work confirms that nicknames, far from being trivial or marginal linguistic curiosities, are socially meaningful, culturally regulated, and pragmatically versatile. In contexts where official naming conventions coexist with fluid, interaction-driven naming practices, nicknames operate as linguistic resources for identity construction, group boundary marking, and interpersonal negotiation (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich & Bou-Franch, 2019; McDowell, 2021). The present study builds on this understanding, contributing a dual-site Ghanaian perspective that examines both the morphosyntactic and semantic patterns of nicknames and the sociocultural conditions that shape their creation, circulation, and endurance.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative-ethnographic design, which corroborated data collection and analysis. The two research sites, a large public university and a mixed-sex secondary school, were selected to capture variation across educational levels. Participants were recruited through purposive and convenience sampling from naturally occurring settings, such as in- and out-of-class and in social groups. Data collection combined focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews, both conducted in English.

FGDs promoted recall and mutual elicitation of nicknames. Selected participants were put in small groups of four or five for the discussions. These participants had consented to part of the discussion in advance, and each

person had been briefed on the expectations for the group discussion. These people are from the same institutions and could be friends or acquaintances. In this regard, there is warmth and a free flow of ideas during the discussions. It was common practice to have one person come up with a description of a nickname experience, and soon have some of the others, and if not all of them, come up with similar experiences. There were also interviews after the FGDs, which allowed for in-depth discussion of origins, connotations, and social consequences. Data collection yielded 200 nicknames with associated metadata (reported meaning, origin, typical users, referent gender, context of use). Ethical procedures included obtaining informed consent, maintaining anonymity, and being sensitive to potentially harmful content.

Analysis proceeded in two stages. First, nicknames were categorised morpho-syntactically. Derivative (formed from given names), descriptive (based on physical/behavioural traits or situations), and associative (linked to public figures or objects) were sourced from here. Processes such as clipping, blending, compounding, and suffixation were documented. Second, using NSM-inspired explications, each nickname's evaluative meaning was paraphrased in simple semantic primitives (e.g., I think about X like this: X is like this; I feel something about X) to capture the affective stance of users.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive research design grounded in socio-onomastic and ethnolinguistic perspectives. Such an approach is well-suited for uncovering not only the morpho-syntactic and semantic features of nicknames but also their cultural, social, and identity-related functions. Similar methodological frameworks have been employed in recent studies, such as Khetoa and Mokala's (2022) analysis of Basotho nicknaming practices, which combined linguistic form analysis with cultural interpretation, and Filani, Ibukun, and O. M. Melefa. (2014) exploration of nicknames among Nigerian students. These works demonstrate the value of qualitative inquiry in linking nickname structures to broader processes of identity construction.

Research Sites

The study is conducted in two purposively selected educational settings:

1. A Ghanaian university, representing a tertiary, multi-ethnic, and multilingual environment where nicknames may function as markers of personality, academic identity, or peer status.
2. A Senior High School (SHS), representing a younger, adolescent-driven context where nicknames often reflect emerging identities, group affiliations, or humour-based regulation.

This dual-site approach follows the comparative tradition of studies such as Obi and Ogunleye (2021), which contrasted urban and rural contexts to reveal variation in nicknames.

Population and Sampling

The target population consists of students from the two selected institutions. Using purposive sampling, 50 participants were selected: 25 from the university and 25 from the SHS, to ensure diversity in age, gender, ethnic background, and social roles.

Selection criteria included:

- being a current student in one of the selected institutions,
- either bearing a nickname or being familiar with the nickname culture in their setting,
- willingness to participate in interviews and share contextual meanings of nicknames.

The emphasis on participants' familiarity with the social dynamics of nicknames echoes the sampling considerations in Tien and Hoang's (2023) work on online nickname use, which prioritised individuals actively engaging in nickname practices.

Participant Demographics

The study draws on a purposive sample of students from a tertiary institution and a senior high school in Cape Coast, Ghana, to capture variation across educational levels and peer-group cultures. A total of 50 participants took part in the study, comprising 64% males and 36% females, with ages ranging from approximately 15–25 years. Participants were recruited through voluntary participation following classroom and student group announcements. The sample included students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, reflecting the multilingual ecology of Ghanaian educational settings, with Akan, English, and other Ghanaian languages commonly used in daily interactions. This demographic spread enabled the study to capture a broad range of nickname practices across gender, age, and institutional contexts.

Coding Procedure

Data analysis proceeded in three stages, combining morpho-syntactic, semantic, and evaluative coding. First, all collected nicknames were compiled into a dataset and categorised according to morphological processes, including clipping, blending, reduplication, suffixation, compounding, and phonological manipulation. Second, semantic explications were developed using an adapted Natural Semantic Metalanguage framework to identify recurring meaning components and evaluative orientations. Third, an Appraisal-based coding scheme was applied to identify patterns of Attitude (Affect, Judgement, Appreciation), Engagement, and Graduation, enabling the analysis to capture how nicknames function as evaluative resources in identity construction.

Coding was iterative and inductive, with categories refined through repeated reading of the data to ensure that classifications accurately reflected usage contexts described in interviews and focus group discussions. A coding manual was developed to ensure consistency in category definitions and analytical decisions.

Intercoder Reliability and Validation

To enhance analytical reliability, a subset of the dataset, approximately 20–25% of nicknames, was independently coded by a second trained coder with background knowledge in linguistics. The two coders compared classifications across morphological categories and evaluative coding, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. This process resulted in high agreement across categories, indicating strong coding consistency.

In addition to intercoder agreement, analytic validity was strengthened through methodological triangulation by drawing on multiple data sources (focus group discussions and interviews) to corroborate interpretations of nickname meanings and usage contexts. Reflexive memoing was also employed throughout the analysis to document analytic decisions and ensure transparency in category development.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were gathered through:

1. Semi-structured interviews. These were one-on-one interview sections with a few guiding questions, followed by leading questions, to elicit detailed narratives from participants about the origins, meanings, and contexts of nicknames.
2. Focus group discussions (FGDs). This was conducted particularly in the SHS context to capture peer-group dynamics in nickname assignment.
3. Documentary evidence. Some items, such as school publications, social media groups, and event flyers featuring nicknames, were studied to gain further insight into the nicknaming phenomenon.
4. Participant observation. Lastly, noting the frequency, tone, and pragmatic use of nicknames in natural settings (classrooms, recreational spaces, online chats).

The integration of interviews, FGDs, and observation parallels Khetoa and Mokala's (2022) triangulated approach, which combined direct elicitation with real-life usage contexts to enhance validity.

Data Size

The total size of data collected after field work was two hundred (200) nicknames. There are tables and figures in the analysis and discussion section to show the linguistic elements used to source the data in the focus group sessions and some of the nicknames, meaning, referent etc. that came with them.

Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted in three stages. First, there is Morphosyntactic analysis. Here, structural forms (e.g., compounding, truncation, blending, affixation) were identified and mapped against Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) primitives to ensure cross-linguistic comparability.

I also performed a semantic analysis by categorising nicknames by meaning domains such as physical traits, personality, achievements, humour, irony, and social commentary.

And then the sociolinguistic interpretation, linking nicknames to identity construction processes, is examined. The sociolinguistic interpretation draws on the Appraisal framework to examine how nicknames function as resources for identity construction

This coding strategy draws inspiration from Obi and Ogunleye's (2021) semantic categorisation and from Tien and Hoang's (2023) thematic coding of social media nicknames, both of which illustrate how structural analysis and social interpretation can be integrated.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was sought from the relevant institutional review boards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with additional parental consent for SHS participants under 18. Nicknames and any identifying details were anonymised unless participants explicitly gave permission for their use.

RESULTS

Morphosyntactic Patterns. Three dominant morphological categories emerged:

a) Derivative forms: Nicknames formed from proper names via clipping (*Appiah* → *Appiatus*), reduplication (*Dorothy* → *DorDor/Doroo*), suffixation (*Olivia* → *Olidade*), or phonological play (*Alex* → *Xela*). Blending with lexical material (*Yorke* + *-enstein* → *Yorkeinstein*) was also attested.

b) Descriptive forms: These highlight physical traits (*Slimzy*, *Bottles*), behaviours (Apostle, Tasty, for one who styles themselves as pious, and one who likes to look good respectively), or situational characteristics (*Sasakawa* for someone who eats at expensive joints; the name evolves from an expensive joint on campus). Descriptive nicknames can be neutral, affectionate, or derogatory depending on context.

c) Associative forms: References to celebrities, fictional characters, or public archetypes (*CR7*, *James Bond*, *Socrates*) perform evaluative comparison, either praising or ironising the referent.

Morphological innovation included hybrid compounds that mix English and Ghanaian lexical items (*Obaa Mafia*, *Sexy Gogome*) and pure compounds drawn from the same lexicon.

Semantic and Evaluative Patterns: NSM explications reveal recurring evaluative templates. Affirmative nicknames typically encoded intimacy and positive stance: I know X well; I feel something good towards X; X is someone like me. Pejorative nicknames carried a negative stance: I know something bad about X; I feel something bad towards X; people think X is this kind of person.

Functional patterns included:

Affiliation and play: nicknames signalling group membership and camaraderie:

This category includes nicknames used playfully to signal friendship, solidarity, and shared identity within peer groups. Examples are Dordor, Appiatus etc. Such names function as markers of affiliation, strengthening interpersonal bonds and reinforcing a sense of belonging among group members.

Boundary marking: terms that distinguish insiders from outsiders, sometimes with opaque origins;

These nicknames serve as social boundary markers (Sasakawa, CR7) that distinguish group members from non-members. Their meanings or origins may be opaque to outsiders, thereby reinforcing in-group cohesion while simultaneously signalling exclusion.

Stigmatisation: nicknames that mark deviation (e.g., perceived promiscuity, poverty) and can have long-term reputational effects:

Nicknames in this category serve an evaluative function, highlighting perceived social or behavioural deviations (e.g., Auntie Mansa, Slim Macho, etc.). Such labels may stigmatise individuals and can shape how they are viewed within the community, sometimes producing enduring reputational consequences.

Gendered Distributions: There were labels which showed gendered tendencies such that male referents more frequently had associative and role-oriented nicknames (e.g., CR7, Apostle), while female referents more frequently bore descriptive and appearance-based nicknames (e.g., Juicy Lips, Black Panther). Users' gender also affected assignment patterns: certain pejoratives circulated primarily among same-gender groups.

Identity interpretations of nicknames through Appraisal + Coupling

The identity interpretations presented below adopt an Appraisal-Coupling analytical logic to demonstrate how nicknames function as condensed evaluative texts that position individuals socially. Drawing on the Appraisal framework (Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation), each nickname is first interpreted in terms of the type of evaluation it encodes (e.g., Judgement, Appreciation, Affect). The analysis then identifies Coupling, understood as the co-patterning of experiential meanings (e.g., behaviour, appearance, status) with evaluative stance, to show how particular social qualities become linked with value. Finally, the identity effect is articulated to explain how these evaluative pairings construct, reinforce, or contest social personae within the peer group, including processes of affiliation, individuation, boundary marking, and stigmatisation. This structured approach ensures analytic transparency by making explicit how linguistic evaluation translates into identity work in everyday nickname practices.

a) Nickname: Apostle

- **Evaluation:** Positive Judgement (propriety); may carry ironic stance depending on context
- **Coupling:** Moral behaviour + religiosity
- **Identity effect:** Constructs a morally positioned identity, marking the bearer as pious or morally distinctive while potentially allowing peers to negotiate sincerity versus humour

•b) Nickname: Slimzy

- **Evaluation:** Positive Appreciation (appearance) with affiliative Affect
- **Coupling:** Physical slimness + attractiveness norm
- **Identity effect:** Constructs an aesthetically valued identity and signals intimacy through playful morphology, reinforcing peer acceptance

c) Nickname: CR7

- **Evaluation:** Positive Judgement (capacity, excellence)
- **Coupling:** Athletic success + prestige

• **Identity effect:** Constructs an aspirational and high-status identity through intertextual comparison with a globally recognised figure

d) Nickname: Sasakawa

- **Evaluation:** Appreciation (social valuation) with implicit Judgement of status
- **Coupling:** Wealth display + elite lifestyle practices
- **Identity effect:** Constructs a socially differentiated identity, marking the bearer as affluent or “high-life,” thereby creating subtle boundary distinctions

e) Nickname: Yorkenstein

- **Evaluation:** Positive Appreciation (playfulness, creativity)
- **Coupling:** Personal name + humorous exaggeration
- **Identity effect:** Constructs a socially memorable identity and indexes closeness through linguistic creativity and exaggerative force

f) Nickname: Juicy Lips

- **Evaluation:** Appreciation (aesthetic reaction) with gendered Affect
- **Coupling:** Physical feature + attractiveness discourse
- **Identity effect:** Constructs an appearance-centred identity that foregrounds femininity and bodily visibility, potentially oscillating between admiration and objectification

g) Nickname: Antie Mansa

- **Evaluation:** Negative Judgement (normality/propriety)
- **Coupling:** Gendered behaviour + deviation from masculine norms
- **Identity effect:** Constructs a stigmatised identity by positioning the bearer as gender nonconforming, reinforcing normative gender expectations within the group

h) Nickname: James Bond

- **Evaluation:** Positive Judgement (capacity, charisma) and Appreciation (valuation)
- **Coupling:** Intelligence + sophistication + popularity
- **Identity effect:** Constructs a socially admired and charismatic identity, positioning the bearer as competent and socially successful

Overall, the identity interpretations show that nicknames operate as powerful evaluative resources through which speakers position themselves and others within social hierarchies, relationships, and norms. By coupling social meanings with affective and judgmental stances, nickname practices reveal how everyday language actively constructs affiliation, distinction, and social identities within the peer community.

The next stage of the analysis examines the tables to identify distributional patterns and quantitative tendencies that support the qualitative interpretations of nickname formation and identity construction.

Table 1: Source of Nicknames

Source	Male	Female	Total	Percentage (%)
Friends	142	13	155	77.5
Family	3	12	15	7.5
Teacher	4	—	4	2.0
Self	7	—	7	3.5
Other*	19	—	19	9.5
Total	—	—	200	100

*Other signifies: enemy, unknown, or just a word culled or coined out of the dictionary.

Table 2: Derivative Forms

Nickname	Referent	Root Name	Type
Appiatus	Male	Appiah (SN)	SN
Derbie	Female	Deborah (FN)	FN
Easybobo	Female	Isabella (FN)	FN
Olidade	Female	Olivia (FN)	FN
Xela	Male	Alex (FN)	FN
Yorckenstein	Male	Yorke (SN)	SN
Lizlily	Female	Elizabeth (FN)	FN
DorDor	Female	Dorothy/Doris (FN)	FN

FN = First Name; SN = Surname.

Table 3: Descriptive Physical Traits

Nickname	Meaning	Referent
Sconzy	Short guy, compressed like a scone	Male
Basky	Heavy lips (like “basket mouth”)	Both
Slimzy	Very slim girl	Female
Skinny	Very slim boy	Male

Table 4: Behavioural Traits

Nickname	Meaning	Referent
Antie Mansa	Male who behaves like a female	Male
Black Panther	Very dark-coloured and energetic girl	Female
Apostle	Behaves like a pastor	Male
Tasty	Likes tasting other people’s food	Male

Table 5: Situational Descriptions

Nickname	Meaning	Referent
Sasakawa	Often eats at expensive joints like “Sasakawa”	Both
Diddy	Uses expensive items due to parents living abroad	Male
Stranded	Lost all contacts due to having no phone	Male

Table 6: Associative Nicknames

Nickname	Link/Meaning	Referent
CR 7	Cristiano Ronaldo – football superstar, No. 7	Male
Socrates	Ancient philosopher – brilliant in science	Male
Suarez	“Devil” or nuisance (Ghana World Cup reference)	Male

Table 7: Pure Compounds

Nickname	Meaning	Referent
Alomo Gyata	“Old tiger” – fearful woman	Female
Chacha Ba	Offspring of a chess (gambling) player	Male
James Bond	Smart and popular person	Male
Juicy Lips	Has attractively red lips	Female

Table 8: Hybrid Compounds

Nickname	Meaning/Description	Referent
Obaa Mafia	Shows off – a combination of Twi and Italian words	Female
Azaato Miller	Skinny and ruffian person	Male
Alomo Gyata	"Old tiger" – fearful woman	Female
Chacha Ba	Offspring of a chess (gambling) player	Male
James Bond	Smart and popular person	Male
Juicy Lips	Has attractively red lips	Female

The tables collectively illustrate the breadth of morphosyntactic strategies employed in nickname formation, demonstrating that derivation, compounding, and semantic extension are the dominant processes. Tables 2, 7, and 8 show that derivative forms largely arise through clipping, reduplication, suffixation, and phonological manipulation of personal names (e.g., *Appiah* → *Appiatus*, *Dorothy* → *DorDor*, *Alex* → *Xela*), indicating a strong tendency toward morphological creativity grounded in existing anthroponyms. These processes often preserve recognisability while signalling intimacy or playfulness. Compounding, both pure and hybrid, is also highly productive, as seen in forms such as *James Bond*, *Juicy Lips*, and *Obaa Mafia*, where lexical items combine to create semantically transparent or metaphorical meanings. Hybrid compounds further demonstrate contact-induced morphology, blending English with Ghanaian lexical items, which reflects the multilingual ecology of the speech community and the permeability of lexical boundaries in nickname formation.

Tables 3–6 further reveal that descriptive and associative nicknames rely heavily on nominal and adjectival constructions that encode salient physical, behavioural, and situational attributes (e.g., *Slimzy*, *Apostle*, *Sasakawa*), often functioning as compressed descriptive phrases. These forms show a preference for simple morphological structures with high semantic load, enabling quick social indexing. Associative nicknames such as *CR7* and *Socrates* illustrate borrowing and referential mapping, where proper nouns are repurposed to construct evaluative identities through analogy. Overall, the morphosyntactic patterns across the tables demonstrate that nickname formation operates through a continuum from structurally modified personal names to semantically motivated lexical constructions, with compounding and derivation serving as key mechanisms for encoding social meaning, evaluation, and group knowledge.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of nicknames collected from Ghanaian universities and senior high schools reveals both structural regularities and creative deviations. The morphological analysis showed a rich use of compounding, clipping, blending, and affixation, as well as reduplication and semantic shifts. This suggests that nickname formation in these settings is a socially embedded and linguistically dynamic process.

Table 1: Morphological Patterns in Nicknames

Morphological Process	Example	Source/Explanation
Compounding	<i>Stoneface</i>	Combines metaphor (<i>stone</i>) + physical trait (<i>face</i>).
Clipping	<i>Lexis</i>	Shortened from a longer personal name (e.g., <i>Alexander</i>).
Blending	<i>Benry</i>	Blend of <i>Benedict</i> + <i>Henry</i> .
Reduplication	<i>Kofi-Kofi</i>	Emphasises identity or personality trait.
Affixation	<i>Teacher-man</i>	Uses occupational base with suffix-like addition.

Syntactically, many nicknames functioned as **noun phrases**, e.g., *Black Star*, while others appeared as verbless clauses (*Too Known*), adjectives (*Slim*), or metaphorical expressions (*Lion Heart*). These forms often carried implicit evaluative stances, signalling admiration, mockery, or affectionate teasing.

Table 2: Semantic Categorisation of Nicknames

Semantic Category	Example	Meaning/Context
Physical Traits	<i>Long John</i>	Very tall male.
Personality	<i>Cool Ruler</i>	Calm, authoritative demeanor.
Achievement-based	<i>First Class</i>	Top academic performer.
Event-based	<i>Fireman</i>	Nickname after a rescue incident.
Irony/Sarcasm	<i>Professor</i>	Used for someone who often boasts about knowledge.

The **Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)** model was applied to explicate the core meanings in culturally universal terms. For instance, *Long John* could be rendered in NSM as:

"People can see this person's body is very long. People know his name is John. People sometimes call him this name."

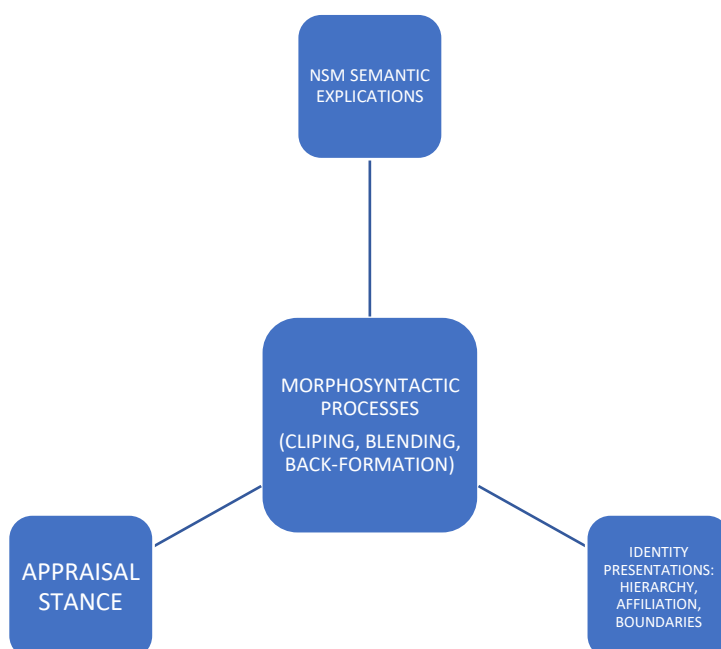
This method allowed meanings to be captured without loss in translation, making them comprehensible across cultural boundaries.

Table 3: Pragmatic Functions of Nicknames

Function	Example	Explanation
Solidarity/Group Bond	<i>Charlie Boy</i>	Signals friendship within peer group.
Teasing	<i>Bookworm</i>	Friendly mockery for a studious peer.
Identity Reinforcement	<i>Captain</i>	Reinforces leadership role.
Social Commentary	<i>Dollar Man</i>	Critiques display of wealth.

The data also revealed that nicknames are not static; they evolve as individuals change roles, experiences, or physical traits. In some cases, old nicknames faded while new ones emerged, marking shifts in social positioning. Because nicknames can be affiliative.

Figure 1: A diagram of the synthesis of the frameworks and the major patterns evolving in the study:



The diagram above presents the study as a four layered, integrated model of interpretation, moving from linguistic form to social meaning. At Level 1, morpho-syntactic analysis establishes how nicknames are structurally constructed through processes such as clipping, blending, compounding, and back-formation. Level 2 shifts from form to meaning, using NSM to unpack the culturally grounded semantic and affective content embedded in these forms. Level 3 deepens the analysis by applying Appraisal theory to identify how evaluative stance (Affect, Judgement, Appreciation) positions individuals interpersonally. Finally, Level 4 situates these evaluative patterns within broader sociolinguistic processes of identity construction, including affiliation, teasing, role ascription, and stigmatisation. The diagram, therefore, visualises the study's central claim: nickname practices move systematically from structural creativity to semantic evaluation and ultimately to social identity regulation.

Figure 2: A Table presentation of the synthesis of the frameworks for the study

Analytical Level	Theoretical Framework	Analytical Focus	Tools/Key Categories	Guiding Research Questions
Level 1: Structural Focus	Morpho-syntactic Analysis	Linguistic Construction of Nicknames	Clipping, Compounding, blending, backformation, etc	How nicknames are linguistically formed
Level 2: Semantic Meaning	Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)	Semantic evaluations with semantic primes	Explication of evaluative and affective meanings	The meaning of the nicknames at the cultural semantic level.
Level 3: Evaluative Stance	Appraisal Theory (SFL)	Interpersonal positioning through evaluation	Affect, Judgement, Appreciation	How do nicknames encode evaluation and stance
Level 4: Identity Presentation	Sociolinguistics of identity	Social positioning and identity construction	Affiliation, teasing, role ascription, stigmatisation, etc.	How do nicknames construct and regulate social forms?

The table synthesises the study's four analytical levels by aligning each theoretical framework with its specific analytical focus, tools, and guiding research questions. It demonstrates methodological coherence by showing how each level addresses a distinct but interconnected dimension of nickname practices: linguistic formation (morpho-syntax), semantic interpretation (NSM), evaluative stance (Appraisal), and identity construction (sociolinguistics of identity). Together, the levels illustrate a progressive analytical trajectory, from how nicknames are formed, to what they mean, to how they evaluate, and finally to how they function socially. As a concluding framework, the table underscores the study's integrative contribution: it bridges structural linguistics, semantic theory, discourse evaluation, and identity studies to provide a comprehensive account of nickname practices in Ghanaian educational contexts.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study set out to investigate the morpho-syntactic and semantic features of nicknames in a Ghanaian university and senior high school context, with the aim of uncovering their structural patterns, cultural underpinnings, and social functions. The analysis revealed that nicknames, far from being random or trivial labels, exhibit systematic forms, identifiable morpho-syntactic structures, and meaningful semantic content when subjected to rigorous linguistic analysis. Using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) model as a guiding analytical framework, the study demonstrated that the semantic explication of nicknames is not only possible but also highly illuminating, as it captures the shared cultural scripts and universal human concepts embedded within these forms.

From a structural standpoint, the nicknames exhibited a range of morphological processes, including compounding, clipping, blending, reduplication, and affixation, reflecting both creativity and linguistic economy in nickname formation. Syntactically, many nicknames took the form of noun phrases, while others appeared as verbless clauses, descriptive epithets, or metaphorical expressions. These forms were often

context-sensitive, evolving over time and adapting to shifts in the bearer's social role, physical appearance, personality traits, or notable life events.

Semantically, nicknames in the study carried expressive, referential, and evaluative functions. They frequently encoded humour, irony, affection, or mild mockery, thereby functioning as markers of in-group solidarity, playful teasing, or social commentary. The meanings, while deeply embedded in local sociocultural contexts, often relied on shared experiential knowledge, cultural values, and sometimes multilingual wordplay that drew on English, Akan, Pidgin, and other local languages. This multilingual interplay not only enriched the nicknames but also reflected the linguistic hybridity of the Ghanaian sociolinguistic landscape

The findings underscore several important implications:

Cultural Mirror: Nicknames act as cultural signifiers, encapsulating community values, norms, and worldviews. They can serve as a lens for understanding societal attitudes towards physical appearance, social behaviour, gender roles, and achievement.

Language Creativity and Identity Construction: Nicknaming practices showcase the dynamic creativity of speakers, illustrating how individuals manipulate linguistic resources to construct, negotiate, and sometimes contest identities. In educational contexts, the evolution of nicknames often mirrors shifts in social relationships and self-presentation.

Interplay of Universality and Locality: While the NSM model ensures that semantic explications are cross-culturally understandable, the local flavour of nickname meanings highlights the importance of context in interpreting personal labels. This duality offers a methodological model for cross-cultural nickname research.

Sociolinguistic Documentation: Recording and analysing nickname practices is an important part of preserving linguistic heritage, especially in contexts where orality dominates and linguistic playfulness risks being overlooked in formal documentation. The scholarship on nicknaming patterns, including this study, suggests that nicknames are neither unfruitful nor harmful; they matter for student well-being and school climate. Empirical work on name calling and disliked nicknames shows clear links between derogatory labels and negative psychosocial outcomes for children and adolescents; conversely, affectionate nicknames can strengthen peer bonds. Schools and educational policy-makers should therefore recognise local onomastic practices in anti-bullying programmes, teacher training, and pastoral care, explicitly addressing how nicknaming circulates in face-to-face and digital spaces and providing students with strategies to resist or reframe hurtful labels. Additionally, in multilingual and multicultural settings, nicknames encode ethnic and cultural identifications; curricula and school naming practices that recognise these local practices can support cultural literacy and inclusive identity affirmation.

Language policy and cultural recognition: In multilingual settings (like Ghana), nicknames often encode ethnic, linguistic, or cultural identities. Educational policy that ignores local naming practices risks erasing important identity resources. Curriculum and school naming practices should recognise local onomastics practices as part of cultural literacy.

Recommendation: Encourage classroom activities that explore local naming traditions and the sociocultural meanings of names/nicknames as part of civic/heritage education.

Methodological and ethical notes. Analytically, combining Appraisal-based coding of interpersonal evaluation with socio-onomastic categories (originator, context, valence, linguistic process, trajectory) strengthens interpretive claims. Tools such as the UAM CorpusTool facilitate layered annotation for this mixed scheme, but researchers must ensure inter-annotator reliability and include an explicit "nicknaming ethics" protocol: obtain consent before publicising potentially stigmatising nicknames, and anonymise or paraphrase where there is a risk to participants. Such safeguards respect participants' dignity while allowing rich empirical analysis.

Educational and Social Policy: Finally, scholarship on nicknames has significant implications for education and social policy. Understanding the social functions of nicknames can help educators, counsellors, and policy-

makers address cases in which nicknames shift from playful bonding to harmful labelling, thereby influencing social cohesion and student well-being.

When designing interventions (anti-bullying, identity-affirming curricula), use local nickname data to tailor programs; one-size-fits-all approaches do not work because nicknaming practices are culture- and context-specific. Ethically, researchers should treat nicknames as sensitive data (they can index vulnerability) and obtain consent for publicising potentially stigmatising labels.

Together, these implications argue that nicknames are analytically fertile: they illuminate micro-level identity work, exemplify language play's social functions, and carry actionable lessons for educational policy and practice. Future interventions and scholarship should therefore treat nicknaming as a culturally situated, ethically sensitive object of study with clear implications for wellbeing and social inclusion.

Final Reflection

In sum, nicknames in the Ghanaian university and senior high school contexts emerge as rich linguistic artefacts that combine structural ingenuity with deep cultural resonance. They function as tools of expression, social navigation, and identity construction. This study not only adds to the growing body of sociolinguistic literature on anthroponyms but also reaffirms the analytical value of NSM and Appraisal in explicating culturally situated meaning. By integrating structural, semantic, and cultural analyses, future research can further illuminate how naming practices both reflect and shape communities' lived experiences.

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