

## NICKNAMES IN THE SPORT SOCIETY: LINGVOCULTURAL ASPECTS

<sup>a</sup>NATALIA N. BOBYREVA

<sup>a</sup>*Kazan Federal University, Institute of International Relations, History and Oriental Studies, 18 Kremlevskaya Street, Kazan, 420008, Russia*

*email: "Nathalienb@yandex.ru.*

**Abstract:** The interest in studying athlete's nicknames is determined by the fact that sport is a social institution possessing its own sublanguage and subculture, which are constantly evolving. Nicknames form a unique lexical layer which reflects and contribute into the lingvoculture of the sport society. The author of the article is aimed at describing the formal and semantic features of the sportspeople's nicknames. The main method used in the research is the descriptive analysis of structure and meaning with reference to the extralinguistic background. This material is not systematic, as it includes structurally, semantically and etymologically various words and phrases, and the mechanisms of nomination work differently in the process of nicknames creation. These language items, whose basic function is naming, are normally brief in form and expressive. The research of athletes' nicknames is of interest for LSP studies, sociolinguistics, translation studies, theory of nomination, and culture studies.

**Key words:** language, culture, society, sport, name, nickname, language for Specific Purposes, sublanguage of sport, special discourse

### 1 Introduction

In the modern linguistic paradigm the research of peculiarities of communication in sport proves to be interesting in terms of form, content and function. This is predetermined by both linguistic and extralinguistic reasons. Firstly, sport terminology, professional jargon and other linguistic items functioning in sport discourse have unique features and become materials for a complex analysis in works of researchers (Ismaeva et al, 2016; Abrosimova et al, 2015). Secondly, the modern world community's interest in sport is gradually increasing, sports values and heritage are being reappraised, sport related events attract more and more attention of mass media. Thus, various aspects of communication in sport have been exposed to detailed study: issues of sport discourse, including sports journalism (Stofer et al, 2010, Boyle, 2006); methods of teaching English for Specific Purposes (Kivihall, 2013), publication of special dictionaries (Russian-English-Latvian-German Dictionary of Sports, 2010).

The language of sports includes terminology, nomenclature and uncodified language items. The latter comprise sportspeople's nicknames, which convey subcultural information and their research is carried out within the anthropocentric approach. Different proper names have always been paid attention to in linguistics and are still within the focus of works (Shitova, 2013). Creating nicknames is a dynamic process and studying it may include different aspects: etymological, lexical and semantic, structural, stylistic, axiological, etc. (Vishnyakova et al, 2015). Thus, considering nicknames functioning in a specified sphere of communication involves not only merely linguistic analysis, but demands knowledge of general cultural background, as well as sports related factual information. At first glance, the world of sport and its unique culture do not seem complicated or unavailable for understanding, but within any serious research it appears to be a sophisticated and multisided phenomena.

### 2 Methodological Framework

#### 2.1 Objectives of the Research

The paper aims at describing the formal and semantic features of athletes' nicknames as part of special vocabulary used in this sphere of communication. The objective of the article is to identify the principles of nomination from two points of view: 1) means of creating nicknames; 2) the primary meaning of words and phrases which become nicknames.

#### 2.2 Factual Material of the Research

The paper presents the results of the study persuaded on the material of approximately 400 English nicknames of athletes

known for their results in different kind of sports: basketball, biathlon, cricket, cycling, darts, football, rugby, watersport, etc. Moreover, nearly 200 collective nicknames were considered as a separate semantic group. The materials of the research are taken from the online resources containing lists of nicknames (List of sportspeople by nickname, 2017; The Least Creative Nicknames in Sports History; 2017; The Worst Nicknames in NBA History, 2017; The 40 Best NBA Nicknames of All Time, 2013; Football Team Nicknames, 2017).

The nickname is viewed as an informal proper name given to a person in accordance with their unique characteristics and based on some analogy. Athletes' nicknames are nomination items of special language that have unique etymology, semantic meaning, and functional characteristics. The etymology of every item under study is explored with reference to online encyclopedic resources, dedicated to sportspeople and history of sports.

### 2.3 Methods of the Research

Within the research the following methods are applied:

- the method of data sampling presupposing studying lists of sportspeople's nicknames from online resources;
- the descriptive method involving identification, observation and classification of the studied language items;
- the component and structural analysis aimed at identifying the sources and means of nicknames formation;
- the semantic analysis aimed at studying the semantic change between the primary and secondary meanings of the investigated material.

### 3 Results

As well as any other sublanguage, that of sports keeps developing, creating different means of naming different realia related to this area. Every sport event gives popularity to new stars, who become recognized and supported not only by their teammates and competitors, but also by millions of sport fans all over the world. Creation of a nickname becomes a sign of an athlete's recognition, respect to results, success in career and popularity. Any national sport subculture becomes part of international sport subculture, which has a tendency to be reflected in the special language. Nicknames in sport also tend to be international, and that is normal if we take into consideration the nature and general linguistic peculiarities of proper names.

Names of legendary sportspeople become precedent and are used in the process of creation of nicknames for other athletes on the basis of comparison. For example, the surname of Diego Maradona serves the base to some nicknames referring to other football players: 1) As one of the most skilful players of his generation, Hagi earned the nickname "Maradona of the Carpathians" with worthy comparisons to the great Argentinean to be found both in playing style and temperament (Gheorghe Hagi, 2017); 2) Renowned for dribbling runs and playmaking ability, Karimi was often referred to as the Asian Maradona and The Magician (WikiVisually: 2004 AFC Asian Cup, 2017). These sentences represent nicknames as important elements of discourse, which reflect the athletes' professional life characterizing them in mass media and in other different forms of communication. Some athlete become really outstanding and unique, which is highlighted in their own nicknames: The King of Football (Pele); The King of Biathlon (Ole Einar Bjørndalen); The Princess of Diving (Guo Jingjing); The father of surfing (Duke Kahanamoku). Thus, a precedent name or a name of a kind of sport in the nickname composition indicates the referent's uniqueness, emphasizes their role in the sport history, positioning them as a cult figure in the modern society.

Names of fictional characters and people famous for their activity in other spheres can also be used as a base for athletes'

nicknames. For example, the name of the founder and Great Khan (Emperor) of the Mongol Empire Genghis Kahn became a nickname of Oliver Kahn, German football goalkeeper for two reasons: phonetic associations and dominating in the penalty area. Shaquille O'Neal was nicknamed The Big Aristotle for his belief in one of Aristotle quotes. James Franklin Edwards has a nickname Buddha for his appearance and stoic demeanor. The American basketball player Walt Frazier was nicknamed Clyde because of hats he wore that were similar to ones Warren Beatty wore as the stylish outlaw Clyde Barrow in the film *Bonnie & Clyde*. The name of a fictional character Mary Poppins was used as a nickname of Alan Shearer. It was given as an insult by two Newcastle United executives during an interview with a journalist in order to characterize this footballer. The phrases *The Baltimore Bullet* and *Action Jackson* are initially the names of American movies. Alongside this they are used as nicknames of the American swimmer Michael Phelps, who was born in Baltimore, and the American basketball player and coach Mark Jackson. Thus, proper names demonstrate their ability to participate in the secondary nomination in the process of nicknaming. Such instances definitely require a user's background knowledge for applying the nickname consciously, completely understanding its etymology and sense.

Sometimes athletes get several nicknames through their professional life. For instance, American basketball player Charles Wade Barkley was nicknamed Chuck, Sir Charles and The Round Mound of Rebound. On the other hand, the same nickname may refer to two athletes, such as The Black Panther for the Portuguese footballer Eusébio and the Soviet-Russian football goalkeeper Lev Yashin. Thus, such examples show that there is no universal principle or strict rules limiting the process of giving nicknames to the representatives of professional sports.

From the point of view of their structure, nicknames are quite short, normally consisting of one or two words. Longer examples as *Six Feet of Sunshine* (Kerri Walsh, American beach volleyball player) or *The Fastest man on no legs* (Oscar Pistorius, sprint runner whose legs were amputated below the knee when he was 11 months old) are exclusive. One-word nicknames are represented either by nouns (a), or by adjectives (b):

- a) Silk (Jamaal Wilkes); Smush (William Parker); Dirt (Brian Foster); Ace (Garnet Bailey);
- b) Sleepy (Eric Floyd); Speedy (Craig Claxton); Scrawny (Donald Robinson); Rusty (Rena Kanokogi).

Some of the nicknames still contain the surname of the athlete and another word or group of words tending to characterize the personality. For instance, *Super-Svendsen* (Emil Hegle Svendsen); *Durbo-Disl* (Uschi Disl); *Super Mario* (Mario Balotelli; Mario Basler); *Super Dan* (Lin Dan); *Crazy Eric* (Eric Steele); *Master Ishii* (Kazuyoshi Ishii); *Speeding Locomotive Charlie / Steam Engine Charlie* (Charles Townsend); *Tomac Attack* (John Tomac); *Mighty Mike* (Michael van Gerwen); *Golden Guus* (Guus Hiddink); *Lightning Bolt* (Usain Bolt).

The law of economy of linguistic means influences the process of abbreviation in nicknames formation. Some of items have the form of initialisms or alphabetisms, combining the first letters of names: *DJ* (Dennis Johnson); *BF* (Brian Foster); *T.I.* (Takashi Ito); *CR* (Christiano Ronaldo). Other abbreviations derive from surnames: *Nura* (Georgi Nurov); *Tisha* (Andrey Tikhonov); *Kovy* (Ilya Kovalchuk, Alexei Kovalev).

English honorifics Mr., Mrs. and Miss are also typical of nicknames: *Mr. Bill* (American basketball player Bill Cartwright); *Mr. Clutch* (American basketball player Jerry West); *Mr. Everything* (American basketball player Craig Ehlo); *Mr. Mean* (American basketball player Larry Smith); *Mr. Moves* (American tennis player Michael Russell); *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Scottish professional golfer Colin Montgomerie); *Miss Ping* (American table tennis player Leah Neuberger).

There are nicknames which have phonetic rhythm making them more expressive and easier to memorize. For example, *Action Jackson* (Mark Jackson); *Clyde the Glide* (Clyde Drexler); *Royce The Voice* (Simon Royce); *Stella the Fella* (Stella Walsh).

Usage of existing linguistic items in secondary nomination presupposes giving them a new semantic meaning and other functional peculiarities, such as new contexts, another sphere of communication, etc. The lexis metaphorically or metonymically used in the process of nickname creation belong to the following thematic range:

- a) animal names: *Cat* (Cuttino Mobley); *Kangaroo Kid* (Billy Cunningham); *Horse* (Dan Issel); *Spider* (John Salley); *Jerry Sloan*; *Big Dog* (Glenn Robinson); *Mighty Mouse* (Damon Stoudamire); *The Squid* (Sidney Moncrief); *The Snake* (Mike King); *The Bear* (Mark Smith).
- b) names of colours: *Blue* (Theo Edwards); *Red* (Johnny Kerr; Ephraim J. Rocha);
- c) combination of a colour name and an animalism: *Black Mamba* (Kobe Bryant);
- d) ethnonym: *The Flying Frenchmen* (Raphaël Poirée); *The Flying Dutchman* (Robert de Wilde; Robin van Persie); *The Flying Scotsman* (Gary Anderson); *the Welsh Wizard* (Ryan Giggs). These examples may convey information about an athlete's origin, the country they come from.

One more interesting example based on metonymy is *Cadillac* – a nickname of Gregory Wayne Anderson. He got it because when he was a freshman at university he had a 10-speed bicycle, which was called his Cadillac.

Nicknames may also use borrowed language items, thus sometimes emphasizing the referent's origin: *Enceradeira* comes from Portuguese for floor polisher and refers to Zinho, Brazilian midfielder; *Fideo* is Spanish for Noodle and refers to Angel Di Maria, Argentine midfielder; *Il Faraone* is Italian for The Pharaoh and refers to Stephan El Shaarawy, Italian striker. The nickname *Alexander the Great* referring to Alexander Mogilny and Alexander Ovechkin also seems culturally marked, because in its form it resembles the names of the Russian Tsar Peter the Great and Russian Empress Catherine the Great.

A separate place belongs to the collective nicknames created as alternative, informal names for teams or groups of athletes. For instance, the phrase *The golden couple* (of British disability swimming) refers to Sascha Kindred and Nyree Lewis. Another example is *The Three Degrees*, which serves as a name for Laurie Cunningham, Brendon Batson and Cyrille Regis, given to them in the late 1970s by then-manager of West Bromwich Albion, Ron Atkinson when they played under him. This nickname was given after the African American female soul group of the same name in reference to their Black heritage. A famous nickname *Dream Team* is used with reference to the 1992 United States men's Olympic basketball team. Moreover, many national football teams in different countries have other names by which they are more well-known. However, these are not applied as official names, and some teams have more than one nickname. For example, *les Bleus* is used for the French team meaning the blues in French; *La Furia Roja* is a name for the Spanish football team meaning *The Red Fury* and also *la Selección* which means the Selection in Spanish; the nickname *la Albiceleste* is applied for the team of Argentina meaning the White and Sky Blues in Spanish. The same tendency may be observed in the names of clubs, such as *The Red Devils* for Manchester United Football Club; *The Reds* for Liverpool Football Club; *Blancos* (Whites), *Merengues* (Meringues) and *Vikings* (Vikings) for Real Madrid Club de Fútbol, etc. Thus, we may conclude that nicknames may be used not only for a secondary nomination of an individual, but for naming groups, teams or clubs. This peculiarity is typical of team sports, where a team also has its image, traditions, history, and, consequently, causes definite associations when spoken about or mentioned in specialized contexts.

Nicknames of famous sportspeople become part of their image. Information about their unofficial names is given in encyclopedic resources describing their biography and career. The same may be fairly said about different groups of athletes, such as pairs, teams or clubs. Thus, verbally coding peculiar characteristics of members of the sport society, these names become elements of the sporting subculture and sublanguage. These means of nomination reflect the special character of the sport subculture, and studying them allows to penetrate deeper into the concepts, attitudes and values.

#### 4 Conclusion

Nicknames of sportspeople is a lexical set which forms part of a larger complicated system of sports language. It may be concluded that existence of nicknames in sport is a peculiar feature of this social sublanguage. Giving nicknames in sport does not follow any instructions or rules, but it is possible to observe some tendencies in this process. Nicknames may contain thematically various words and phrases; may consist of one, two or, rarely, more words; may use borrowed language items and genuinely English ones. Nicknames may be formed on the base of an athlete's or another person's or fictional character's name or surname, they may reduce to an abbreviation or combine with another word or phrase.

Reframing of meanings in the process of secondary nomination in sport involves background knowledge and ideas about the content of the language item in the consciousness of language speakers. Researching antroponymic nicknames within the problem of primary and secondary nomination gives insight into the new meanings in the existing linguistic items. It is supported by the associative thinking and multifunctional character of language signs.

#### 5 Discussion

As a component of the sport discourse, nicknames are professionally marked language items and require the same attention of linguists as the sport terminology and professional slang. It would be of interest to compare them with nicknames used in other spheres of professional communication from the point of view of their role and function.

The findings of this linguistic research of athletes' nicknames may be of interest and use for linguists who study languages for specific purposes (in particular, the sublanguage of sport), theory of proper names, sociolinguistics and cultural linguistics. The results of the study may also be applied for comparative analysis of nicknames in different languages thus contributing to translation studies.

#### Acknowledgement

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

#### References

1. Abrosimova, L.S., Borganova, M.A. (2015) *Jargon in Sport Discourse: Formation and Functioning*. Research Result. Issues on Theoretical and Applied Linguistics Series. Vol.1. #4(6). P. 12-17. (In English)
2. Boyle, R. (2006). *Sports Journalism: Context and Issues*. London – Thousand Oaks – New Delhi: Sage Publications. 198 p. (In English)
3. Football Team Nicknames. URL: <http://www.topendsports.com/sport/soccer/team-nicknames.htm>. (In English), Retrieved May 1, 2017
4. Gheorghe Hagi: *The Maradona of the Carpathians*. URL: <http://www.espnfc.us/blog/espn-fc-united-blog/68/post/2283023/gheorghe-hagi-maradona-of-the-carpathians>. (In English), Retrieved May 1, 2017
6. Ismaeva, F.H., Kornilova, L.A. (2016) *Synonymy and Antonymy in the Professional Uncodified Sport Language*. International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies. Special Issue. July 2016. P. 301-306. (In English)
7. Kivihall S., MA. (2013). *English for Specific Purposes: Students of Health Sciences and Sports*. Tallinn. 50 p. (In English)
8. List of sportspeople by nickname. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_sportspeople\\_by\\_nickname](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_sportspeople_by_nickname). (In English), Retrieved May 1, 2017
9. *Russian-English-Latvian-German Dictionary of Sports* / ed. by prof. U. Shvinks. (2010). Riga: Latvian Academy of Sport Education. 1000 p. (In Russian)
10. Stofer, K.T., Schaffer, J.R., Rosenthal, B.A. (2010). *Sports Journalism: an introduction to reporting and writing*. Lanham – Boulder – New York – Toronto – Plymouth, UK. Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc. 288 p. (In English)
11. Shitova, L.F. (2013). *Proper Name Idioms and Their Origins: Dictionary of Proper Names Idioms*. Saint Petersburg: Antology. 189 p. (In English)
12. *The Least Creative Nicknames in Sports History*. URL: <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/1980336-the-least-creative-nicknames-in-sports-history>. (In English), Retrieved May 1, 2017
13. *The Worst Nicknames in NBA History*. URL: <http://www.complex.com/sports/2013/11/worst-nicknames-in-nba-history/>. (In English), Retrieved May 1, 2017
14. The 40 Best NBA Nicknames of All Time. URL: <http://www.complex.com/sports/2013/11/best-nba-nicknames-all-time/> (In English), Retrieved May 1, 2017
15. Vishnyakova, O.D., Aleksandrova, V.A. (2015). *Nickname nomination as a process of interaction of linguistic semiotics and semiotic conceptology*. Scientific Journal of Belgorod State University. Series: Humanities. Vol. 28. # 24 (221). P. 51-60. (In Russian)
16. WikiVisually: 2004 AFC Asian Cup. URL: [http://wikivisually.com/wiki/Asian\\_Cup\\_2004](http://wikivisually.com/wiki/Asian_Cup_2004). (In English), Retrieved May 1, 2017