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Nicknames as Tools for Managing Face

Contemporary philosophical orthodoxy treats names as universally accessible, arbitrary tags that track referents across space, time and possibility. I argue that paradigmatic nicknames, like 'Shrimpy', 'Crooked Hillary' and 'Bubblegum', do track referents, but are marked by contrast with proper names by enforcing restrictions on who they can be used by and with, and when they can be used; and by framing their referents under affectively valenced social identities. While proper names can also carry social information, it is part of nicknames' characteristic function to manage face, in ways that an adequate overall theory of meaning needs to explain.

I

Introduction. Contemporary analytic philosophy has paid scant attention to nicknames. They are not particularly germane to debates between referentialists and predicativists, or between Fregeans and Millians: they function like ordinary proper names in being modally rigid referential devices without substantial descriptive conditions; and competent users are typically aware that co-referring nicknames and proper names do co-refer. However, the contemporary model renders the ubiquity of nicknames mysterious: why should so many people invest so much energy in inventing and deploying nicknames, if they're just redundant referential tags? I claim that nicknames perform a social function: they manage face by imposing restrictions on their scope of acceptable users and uses, and by projecting social identities for their referents. Moreover, they accomplish this precisely through redundancy: by being known alternatives to a more widely established referential option.

In §II, I propose that nicknames locate speaker, addressee and referent at relative distances within a social structure defined by an in-group boundary. In §III, I argue that such positioning is part of nicknames' characteristic communicative function—in contrast to proper names, which merely carry social information. In §IV, I argue

that nicknames also frame their referents, by projecting a social identity that imputes features and affective attitudes as fitting for them. I conclude in §v by suggesting that nicknames manage social status or face by 'hailing' participants into social places. An adequate theory of meaning needs to explain how speakers exploit marked alternatives to perform social actions, in a way that a traditional, purely compositional, truth-conditional semantics is not well-equipped to do.

II

Managing Social Distance: 'We', 'They', 'Now'. Contemporary analytic theorizing about names is founded on the intuitions that names are (relatively) rigid devices for tracking individuals across wide swaths of space, time and possibility, and that they accomplish this by imposing only minimal satisfaction conditions.[1] A closely connected intuition is that extremely weak interaction with a name—for instance, eavesdropping on a conversation in which it is used—puts one in a position to use it to think and talk about its referent. It follows that names are universally accessible referential devices: anybody who understands how names work and knows that 'N' is a name can use 'N' to talk about the individual it denotes.

In stark contrast, empirical studies of nicknames emphasize their role as 'boundary-defining and boundary-maintaining mechanisms for groups to whom separateness, difference, and distinctiveness are of particular value and importance' (Cohen 1977, p. 103). They also consistently note that 'there is a close relation of the social structure of the [group] to its nicknaming system …; nicknames can actively mark out groups or individuals and indeed are often consciously used for this purpose' (Morgan, O'Neill and Harré 1979, p. 63). Competence in knowing when and which nicknames to use thus requires 'an understanding and acute comprehension of the [group's] complicated and shifting set of social relations' (Cohen 1977, p. 109), with the result that 'managing a nickname is one of the most fateful of social skills' (Morgan, O'Neill and Harré 1979, p. 5).[2]

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[1] I take my discussion to be largely neutral between referentialist and predicativist analyses, in so far as both impose at most a broad sortal satisfaction condition (for example, 'being a person who is called N').

[2] Notable empirical studies of nicknaming include the Amish (Enninger 1985), villages in the Mediterranean and Latin America (Cohen 1977), the Scottish Highlands (Dorian 1970), American coal miners (Skipper 1986), and Jewish émigrés in Indianapolis (Glazier 1987). Carranza-Pinedo (2024) offers an insightful discussion of the conversational effects

Empirical studies focus on how particular nicknaming practices manage particular social structures, from which we can abstract a common overarching structure. First, use of a nickname locates the *speaker* within an in-group of users. Across cultures, nickname use by outsiders constitutes a significant breach—even when that outsider is well known to the group, and even when they have heard the referent referred to primarily or exclusively by that nickname (Dorian 1970). Most communities also register more fine-grained restrictions on which in-group individuals can use which nicknames, with some nicknames reserved for speakers who are especially close to the referent or otherwise high-status.[3] We observe these restrictions on inclusion and familiarity in contemporary academia: thus, new graduate students often find it challenging to know when to use professors' nicknames (let alone to actually utter them); and even many well-established academics find it presumptuous to use certain well-known nicknames for certain highly familiar people.

Second, analogous restrictions apply to the *addressee*: nicknames are paradigmatically restricted to conversations with in-group interlocutors. In many communities, like the Amish, nicknames can only be tokened in the presence of outsiders under exceptional circumstances (Enninger 1985). This restriction is also observed in contemporary academia: most professors avoid using nicknames for colleagues in conversations with or before undergraduates; when they do use them, the typical effect is to highlight the in-group boundary, either by inviting the student into the community or flaunting their exclusion from it.

Third, nicknames locate the *referent* in relation to the group. Not just anybody rates a nickname; being assigned a nickname marks the referent as familiar, and as sufficiently salient to merit a distinctive, in-group mode of reference. Typically, this is a status that one must earn and cannot control: referents generally have nicknames 'thrust upon [them]', 'represent[ing them] as others see [them]' (Morgan, O'Neill and Harré 1979, p. 5). Partly for this reason, nicknames often function as emblems of belonging; for instance, Deaf people

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of pejorative nicknames that draws on many of these empirical studies. Jeshion (2021) discusses pejorative nicknames as an instance of pejoratives more generally. Kennedy (2015) provides an overview of nicknames as a linguistic phenomenon.

[3] The power to coin a nickname reflects an even higher in-group status.

sometimes describe being given an ASL name sign as a kind of 'baptism' or 'initiation' (Mindess 1990, Mindess 1990, p. 9).

However, not everyone who earns a nickname belongs to the group. Thus, fans and haters coin nicknames for celebrities (for example, 'Queen Bee' for Beyoncé) and notorious figures (for example, 'The Butcher of Baghdad' for Saddam Hussein), while students coin nicknames for teachers (for example, 'Chickenlegs', McGeachy 1978). In these cases, part of the nickname's function is to mark the referent as 'other', where this otherness may arise for either positive or negative reasons. Notably, these nicknames cannot usually be used in direct address (Kennedy 2015). Politics offers an especially fertile and enduring domain for 'othering' nicknames, especially negative ones (for example, 'Tricky Dick' for Richard Nixon, 'Slick Willie' for Bill Clinton), with Donald Trump being an exceptionally adept purveyor (for example, 'Crooked Hillary', 'Ron DeSanctimonious', 'Meatball Ron', 'Pocahontas').

Drawing broadly on formal work on politeness and honorifics by linguists like Elin McCready (McCready and Asher 2014; McCready 2018) and Paul Portner (Portner, Pak and Zanuttini 2019, 2022), we might characterize the social structure that nicknames navigate as a relational space within which the three pronominal 'persons' of speaker, addressee and referent (who may also be the addressee) are located. The measure of 'distance' relating those persons will vary depending on how hierarchical, cohesive, and robustly bounded the group is, in ways that affect not just which uses of nicknames are licensed but what those licensing conditions are. In particular, for some groups distance might be modelled as proximity to a notional centre of group identity, while for others the relations among speaker, addressee and referent may be more piecemeal.

Finally, even if these social relations among the relevant 'persons' are satisfied, it doesn't follow that a speaker can felicitously use a nickname on a particular occasion. Nicknames are not generally appropriate, for instance, in formal settings like church and school (Enninger 1985, p. 255), or when parents reprimand their children. The current conversation must also be *informal*, in a way that makes it appropriate to activate those social relations and the social identities associated with them. Drawing on Irvine (1979), we can think of formal situations as involving high conversational stakes, which motivate careful interpretative coordination and a 'prevailing affective tone' of 'seriousness, politeness, and respect' (Irvine 1979,

p. 774). A formal discourse style supports interpretative coordination by being topically focused and informationally redundant, and by employing a rule-governed, consistent, literal code. Together with non-linguistic markers like dress, specific formalized discourse styles activate 'positional identities' (Irvine 1979, p. 778) like *waiter* or *professor*. Positional identities streamline interpretative coordination by treating participants as 'just' instantiations of their public social positions, thereby eliminating the relevance of participants' features that fall outside the scope of those positions and restricting the common ground to information that is publicly accessible in virtue of those positions.

This quick characterization of formality affords an elegant contrastive explanation for both nicknames' restriction to informal contexts and their typical communicative effects. Informal situations are low-stakes, and often light-hearted; and they activate personal identities that depend on 'the particular history of an individual's interactions' with other participants (Irvine 1979, p. 778). Because informal discourse serves a low-stakes context, it is topically flexible and expressively playful, often involving code-switching among topics and social identities. Nicknames in particular are intimate, personal modes of reference because they evoke local, historically rich identities for all three 'persons' of speaker, addressee and referent.

III

Nicknames as Marked Alternatives. In §II, I argued that nicknames mark social status by locating speaker and addressee within a bounded group of users, and the referent on one or the other side of that boundary. A sincere, literal utterance activates presupposed social relations—though often, speakers use utterances of nicknames to attempt to create those relations through accomodation. Here, I argue that nicknames have the characteristic function of regulating social status. More specifically, I claim that paradigmatic proper names are default modes of reference and address appropriate for formal contexts that activate public identities, while paradigmatic nicknames are marked options for informal, in-group contexts.

Like formality, markedness is an intuitive but theoretically fraught notion. I take unmarked expressions to be mutually recognized default ways of performing some linguistic action *A* (for example,

referring, conjugating, asking), which are appropriate for use in default contexts: contexts in which there are no antecedently recognized, relevant deviations from interlocutors' mutual expectations.[4] Marked expressions are mutually recognized *non*-default ways of performing that same linguistic action, where avoiding the default indicates that the context also deviates from mutual baseline expectations in some way. An expression *e* is more marked, and its use sends a stronger signal, the more established its unmarked alternate *a* is as a default way of performing *A,* and the more closely *e* approximates to *a* in achieving the core action *A*.[5] My proposal is that proper names are default options available for anyone to use in default conversational contexts; a name functions as a nickname in so far as it is mutually recognized among a collection of speakers as an alternate means of referring to an individual *X*, appropriate only for informal, in-group uses.

A natural objection, very much in the spirit of Nowak and Michaelson (2025), is that there are no default contexts; and that my proposed contrast is an artifact of focusing on an idealized subset of nicknames while embracing an idealized ideology of proper names. On the one hand, one might object that my 'paradigmatic' nicknames are marginal relics of pre-modern society. The studies I cited in §11 concerned small, stable communities formed and maintained under conditions that foster robust group identities, often involving the sort of collective response to adversity that entrenches a dichotomy between 'us' and 'them': religious and ethnic minorities, sports teams, coal miners. It should be no surprise that under such conditions

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[4] The notion of a default context is also intuitive but theoretically fraught. Some such notion is essential for any theory of meaning, not least to explain how speakers exploit shared prior expectations to communicate multi-layered meanings, as with metaphor, sarcasm and jokes (Camp 2008, 2012, 2022). Beaver and Stanley (2023) criticize the notion of 'neutral' meanings and contexts but lean heavily on a statistical notion of baseline expectations. Rational Speech Act models like Degen (2023) focus on probabilistic reasoning over coordinated expectations, while hyperlocalist semanticists like Davidson (1986) and Ludlow (2014) reject stable semantic conventions but appeal to coordinated, mutually known assumptions.

[5] In canonical cases, the unmarked expression (for example, 'lion') is statistically dominant; phonologically shorter and morphologically simpler; developmentally prior; and has a simpler, more inclusive meaning (Andersen 1989; Bybee 2011). Often, the unmarked expression (for example, 'lion') is then ambiguous between that wide reading and a restrictive one (for example, 'man' can mean either 'human' or 'male human'). I claim that the alternation between proper names and nicknames is an extension of the canonical, phonologically-grounded case, in so far as proper names have wider circulation, are often learned first, and have a simpler meaning. Thanks to Jessica Rett for discussion.

nicknames function as 'mnemonic[s] of community' (Glazier 1987, p. 74) and consolidate the group's status 'as being privy to secrets, privileged in its use of nicknames for its own members, and unified in terms of its consensually validated perceptions of outsiders' (Kehl 1971, p. 164, quoted in Holland 1990, p. 262). In the wider world, however, many expressions that we routinely call nicknames, like 'Bob', are derived by conventional shortening and not proprietary to particular communities. In cosmopolitan cultures that valorize mobility, and equality and informality, these may be the initially acquired, statistically dominant referential option. Thus, they would seem to be the unmarked alternative, while proper names are marked.

On the other hand, one might worry that the notion of a 'proper name' ignores important variations among names, none of which are universally accessible defaults. Thus, some traditional cultures assign new names at major life junctures. Especially for immigrants, birth names may be retained within the family for life but dropped outside the family at adulthood. More generally, many people have legal names which are tokened only rarely in their daily lives. We can partially circumvent the threat that these complexities pose to the notion of a universally accessible default by pivoting to names that people 'go by': roughly, how they would answer if asked 'What's your name?' in a neutral context like filling out an online survey or at a neighbourhood meeting. This is what I'll mean by 'proper name' going forward. However, there is still no guarantee that a single expression plays this role for all people at any given time or over time. More fundamentally, it does not yet justify the analytical intuition that proper names are available for anyone to use at any time.

Indeed, one might take cross-contextual variability in the distribution of proper names to reveal a deeper truth: that all names, like all words, are locally restricted and socially inflected. In support of this view, three generations of sociolinguists have studied how variations in phonology, syntax and lexicon carry information about speakers' demographics, personalities and ideologies, in ways that are often highly localized (Labov 1962; Eckert 2000, 2012). Similarly, Herb Clark (1998) invokes the limited circulation of vocabularies within restricted populations like miners and waiters to argue that speakers lexically encode social information; he points specifically to the restricted distribution of proper names like 'Jimmy Carter' and 'Safeway' as 'evidence that the populations we are looking at are genuine cultural communities' (Clark 1998, p. 78). More recently,

Geoff Nunberg (2018) has argued that speakers exploit such lexical 'metadata' to pragmatically affiliate with ideological communities, for instance through slurs.[6] Such analyses in terms of lexical metadata offer an attractive null hypothesis for nicknames: they're nothing special. Using any name presupposes familiarity with the referent (Roberts MS), and thereby signals membership in a knowledge community. My paradigmatic 'nicknames' are just names with localized distributions, but so are many birth and legal names; while other nicknames, like 'Bob', are more widely distributed.

I agree that local distributional variations in general are theoretically important, and that nicknames and proper names in particular can display similar statistical profiles. I also think there are other linguistic phenomena that warrant a metadata analysis. However, I don't think the null hypothesis is fully adequate to this case. Rather, I think paradigmatic cases of proper names and nicknames reveal distinct functional roles, which can be performed by all names to different degrees. Although many proper names happen to carry social information because they circulate locally, it is not part of their function to mark social boundaries, while it is for nicknames.

The local circulation of even proper names has been occluded by the fact that philosophers like Frege ([1892] 1948), Kripke (1972), and Evans (1973) treat the notion of a proper name as a unified natural category and frequently illustrate their arguments with names of famous people. We need to acknowledge local variation. Nonetheless, they are still correct that anyone *can* refer to Richard Feynman as 'Richard Feynman'; it's just that most speakers don't know or care to do so. Likewise, the social implications of using proper names has been occluded by the fact that these philosophers focus on epistemic agents in relative isolation: ignorant eavesdroppers, detectives hunting for spies, astronomers plotting stars. We need to acknowledge that these are not the only sorts of conversations people have. But it is still true that people need referential tools that reach across contexts to compile disparate bits of information. This need is especially acute in modern societies; indeed, James C. Scott (1998), p. 65) argues that the invention of the proper name as a device for tracking and transmitting information is 'the last step in establishing the necessary preconditions of modern statecraft'. And

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[6] Other views that invoke 'metadata' include Bolinger (2017) on slurs, Damirjian (2024) on slang, Keiser (2023) on social coordination, and Nowak (2022) on social performance.

for names to fulfil these epistemic and communicative purposes, they need to impose low bars to entry. This is the sense in which it is proper names' characteristic function to be universally accessible: anyone *can* use a name *N*, supposing they care to talk about the referent and know how names in general work.

Nicknames, qua names, also anchor information compilation. But in addition, they perform the social function of marking local identities. Nicknames' users are not just a speech community in the weak sense of a limited population deploying common patterns of speech. Rather, they form a 'community of practice' engaged in joint activity through which 'ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, [and] power relations' emerge (Eckert and McGonnell-Ginet 1992, p. 464). These shared practices, assumptions, and values constitute a substantive group identity and establish a boundary from non-participants. Moreover, nicknames don't just happen to be used within a community of practice; they are appropriate only for conversations in which it is appropriate to activate that identity. Proper names can generate social effects by indicating that the speaker possesses knowledge that happens to be locally distributed. But nicknames achieve their social effects through more robust means: by being mutually recognized by competent users as excluding use by outsiders—even a well-informed, well-established outsider sitting in on an informal village gossip session (Dorian 1970), or a well-informed undergraduate sitting in office hours.

While nicknames' status-marking function may be most vividly instantiated with tight-knit groups like the Amish, Deaf communities, and sports teams, it is not restricted to them. At one extreme, pet names for romantic partners and family members enforce even more robust, intimate boundaries (McConnell-Ginet 2003). At the other, political nicknames like 'Mayor Pete' circulate in large, porous populations; but a sincere use still marks one as belonging to an ideological team in a way that its counterpart 'Pete Buttigeg' does not.[7] Locally distributed proper names are ripe for conversion into nicknames; and in practice the distinction between proper names and nicknames is often blurry. But there is still a functional difference. To the extent that conversational participants are mutually aware of alternate naming options, where one is strongly associated with a

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[7] Thanks to Paolo Santorio for the challenge.

strongly differentiated community of practice and the other is much more widely accessible, a sincere use of the former constitutes a robust signal that the speaker takes both themselves and the addressee to belong to that community and to endorse its presupposed relationship to the referent. Conversely, choosing to use a proper name in those circumstances signals that the conversation is formal. But this effect arises precisely *because* proper names are suitable for general use and activate public identities: the effect of formality is a product of, rather than a restriction on, universal accessibility.

IV

Frame and Fit. My analysis in §ɪɪ focused on the sheer fact *that* a referent has a nickname which a speaker uses in a conversation. In this section, I argue that—again, in paradigmatic cases—referents' particular nicknames manage their social identities in more fine-grained ways. Much as ethnographic studies consistently emphasize nicknames' boundary- and status-marking function, so do they emphasize how nicknames 'thrust' identities upon their referents, representing them 'as others see [them]' (Morgan, O'Neill and Harré 1979, p. 5) and how they feel about them.

   To start, note that nicknames typically encode affect. Once again, pet names and political nicknames offer vivid illustrations. On the positive side, pet names like 'Bubblegum' convey tender affection, and fan names like 'Queen Bee' convey awed admiration. On the negative side, schoolyard taunts like 'Pisspants' and political nicknames like 'Crooked Hillary' function as 'vehicles of displacement' for hostile feelings (Gilmore 1982, p. 698). Note that we cannot reduce a nickname's expression of affection or hostility to the transparent expression of a speaker's or in-group's affective attitudes, given that different nicknames for the same referent circulating within the same group often carry distinct affective forces. For instance, nicknames conventionally derived from given names, like 'Bob', are often relatively neutral; but they are then often supplemented with diminutives (for example, 'Bobby') or reduplications (for example, 'DanDan') to express higher intimacy. Often, the affective effect of adding a diminutive is pragmatic: thus, a token utterance of 'Danny' may be an amiable gesture or a demeaning putdown, depending on the speaker's social status relative to the referent. But affect can also be conventionally encoded: thus, in Russian, where nearly all

given names have conventional derivatives, eight additional suffixes express distinct attitudes ranging from 'caressing' to 'contemptuous' (Wierzbicka 1992, p. 238).

The affective effects of nicknames are very real. At the positive end of the affective spectrum, the coining and deployment of pet names are key moves in forming and maintaining intimate romantic and familial relationships (McConnell-Ginet 2003). At the negative end, schoolyard or political taunting with a pejorative nickname can constitute social violence and legitimate physical violence much as genocidal speech does (Tirrell 2012; Carranza-Pinedo 2024). Indeed, the use of negative nicknames by adult men to 'damage rivals' and 'achieve mastery' across Mediterranean and Latin American villages is claimed to constitute a form of 'symbolic castration' that provokes physical violence in retaliation (Gilmore 1982, p. 698). Some nicknames are so toxic that uttering them in the presence of the referent's friends or family ruptures relationships (Dorian 1970, p. 313).

Less intensely valenced negative nicknames are regularly deployed as tools for managing fraught social dynamics by acknowledging sublimated hostile attitudes, often producing mixed or overall positive effects. Thus, casual address with a pejorative nickname can consolidate the group's embrace of the referent as belonging to and warranting attention from the group, leading the referent to feel, as one Deaf speaker put it, that 'it would have been much worse not to have been given any name sign at all' (Mindess 1990, p. 7). Reciprocal address with pejorative nicknames can promote solidarity by keeping referents from 'putting on airs' (Glazier 1987, p. 80) and 'defin[ing] each man as a member of the community and, hence, subject to its norms' (Antoun 1968, p. 166). Even negative nicknames for 'others' help to manage fear and loathing by familiarizing their referents and promoting solidarity, affirming that the group has collectively 'taken their measure', as when death is called 'Magere Hein' (Dutch for 'Skinny Henry').

Conventionally derived nicknames with conventionally affective diminutives lie at the extreme end of pure affect. Most nicknames ground affect in a more substantive projected identity; in my terms, they *frame* their referents, much like metaphors, slurs, stories, and social kind terms (Camp 2019). Frames as a genus encapsulate principles for parsing, selecting and prioritizing information about their targets; for synthesizing that information into holistic explanatory structures; and for responding with fitting evaluations and actions.

Frames are intuitive: they regulate actual cognitive processes unless actively inhibited. And they are schematic: they offer stable, accessible heuristics for tracking, explaining and responding to 'what really matters' about the target.

The framing mechanism for some nicknames is obvious. *Monikers* like 'Sultan of Swat' or 'Sleepy Joe Biden' explicitly present a lexically encoded feature as worthy of attention and explanatorily central relative to a presupposed perspective. Across cultures, many nicknames like 'Captain Keister' or 'Shrimpy' are derived from physical, psychological or occupational attributes (Dorian 1970; Glazier 1987). Likewise, *evocative* nicknames like 'Pants Candy' (for Tennessee legislator and serial harasser Jeremy Durham) or 'Pocahontas' (for Senator Elizabeth Warren) present a feature—often 'a humorous happening or otherwise minor but memorable event' (Enninger 1985, p. 245)—as salient and explanatorily central. Where monikers wear descriptive contents on their sleeves, evocatives impute their features via allusion—thereby further consolidating users' status as insiders who 'had to be there'.

The imputation of affectively loaded features can set up a self-fulfilling prophecy, in much the way that social kind terms like 'woman' and 'professor' carve out social niches which both observers and target use to parse, explain, predict and evaluate behaviour (Hacking 1995; Camp and Flores 2024). Self-fulfilling framing can be pernicious, for instance, when someone with a stutter is called 'Lockjaw' or the same behaviour is classified as 'fidgety' in white girls but 'disruptive' in Black boys (Duncan 1976). But by the same token, positive framing can have salutary effects: thus the rapper Destin Choice Route's stage name 'JID' derives from his grandmother's nickname for him as 'jittery', embracing a potentially negative feature as central, in a way that aptly reflects his fast-paced, tricky lyrical style. However, while the self-fulfilling powers of niche-carving are real, imputation alone rarely constitutes possession: thus, relentlessly referring to Hillary Clinton as 'Crooked Hillary' does not actually make her corrupt. Nor does failed imputation undermine reference, even when it is known to be false. As such, nicknames' framing content occupies a truth-conditional status even weaker that of quasi-names and 'descriptions which have grown capitals' such as 'the Holy Roman Empire' (Strawson 1950; Rabern 2015).

Beyond 'DanDan', 'Shrimpy' and 'Pocahontas', many nicknames, like 'K.Dot' or 'Shaz', are neither conventionally derived nor directly

descriptive. Explaining how 'nonsense' nicknames can frame requires expanding our toolkit to include the 'phonaesthetics' of synesthetic iconicity. Thus, across cultures and modalities, words that have or are produced with a rounded sound or shape, like 'bouba', are experienced as *fitting* for objects and features that are perceived as large, round or soft, while words with hard, sharp profiles, like 'kiki', fit small, angular or spiky objects (Dingemanse et al. 2015; Ćwiek et al. 2022). Similarly, sounds like /uː/ and 'unk' evoke unpleasantness, while vowels, voiceless consonants, and hissing sibilants evoke harshness (Aryani et al. 2018). Unsurprisingly, nicknames conform to these acoustic patterns: for instance, among preferred English nicknames, /iː/ and ⟨i⟩ strongly dominate in general, especially for females, and especially as a final syllable; while /uː/ vowels are the rarest (de Klerk and Bosch 1997, p. 296). More generally, people across cultures regularly report nonsense nicknames as being coined and sticking because their sound 'fits' or 'feels right'.

Phonaesthetic fit performs the same basic function as descriptive imputation: a nickname is presented as fitting its referent because it evokes putative feature(s), which *should* be salient in so far as they conform to or violate the community's presupposed expectations and norms. Intuitions of phonaesthetic fit for nicknames vividly display the kind of 'ongoing enjoyment that human beings find in playing with language' (de Klerk and Bosch 1997, p. 293) that is also evinced by puns. Similar intuitions of 'fit' also drive jokes and metaphor, as well as non-linguistic expressions of identity like clothes and hair. Conversely, they also drive visceral discomfort at violations of those identity-based norms (Camp and Flores 2024). While such intuitions may be intellectually murky and normatively questionable, they are more than idiosyncratic associations. Advertisers and propagandists exploit them systematically. Moreover, ordinary speakers regularly take them to be answerable to intersubjective reasons, on topics ranging from movie casting and dinner party menus to the suitability of friends' romantic partners.

So, paradigmatic nicknames frame their referents by projecting affectively loaded identities as fitting, through a variety of mechanisms. An initial step toward modelling these effects would be to add a parameter for *valence* in the style of Potts (2005) to the measure of social distance from §II, reflecting the direction and intensity of affect that a nickname imputes as fitting to feel for its referent. As Potts admits for expressive meaning, any such one-dimensional model is

a placeholder. The case of Russian diminutives already shows that even conventionally encoded affect can be more nuanced than direction plus intensity; and most idiosyncratic nicknames project more substantive and nuanced social identities. To model these effects, we might supplement valence with the sorts of Bayesian game-theoretic tools developed by Burnett (2019, 2023) and Henderson and McCready (2021) for persona construction and ideological signalling.[8]

If we grant that nicknames do characteristically frame their referents, what implications follow for proper names? Much as in §III, it is natural to object that any putative contrast rests on dubious idealization. After all, conventionally derived nicknames like 'Bob' are affectively fairly flat. More importantly, proper names also generate framing effects. Thus, the sheer fact of assigning a referent any name at all already frames it as a particular individual, worthy of sustained cognitive and social attention (Jeshion 2009). Many proper names carry rich historical, religious or ethnic associations. And even novel names typically project sociocultural information by way of their phonetic profiles (Cassidy, Kelly and Sharoni 1999). For instance, in the United States popular male given names, like 'Robert', tend to reflect English phonology: bisyllabic, with initial stress and a final hard consonant; while popular female names, like 'Amanda', are marked by contrast: more likely to have three syllables, a weak initial syllable and a final, soft vowel (Cutler, McQueen and Robinson 1990).[9] More generally, proper names elicit intuitions of phoneaesthetic fit (Barton and Halberstadt 2018), which drive predictions about referents' personalities and likeability (Sidhu and Pexman 2015) and can affect intentional actions like voting (Lea et al. 2007).

Ordinary speakers are acutely aware of these framing effects. Parents take name choice to be a significant factor in 'determining the personhood of their child' (Finch 2008, p. 718), by projecting both a cultural and familial '"we" identity' and a differentiating "I" identity' (Elias 1991, p. 184). Different parents and cultures balance

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[8] Carranza-Pinedo (2024) develops a Burnettian-model of the conversational effects of utterances of pejorative nicknames that models affective attitudes in terms of three dimensions: valence, arousal and control.

[9] Notably, positive, chosen nicknames for females reverse the trend of gendered differentiation away from the prosodic baseline, in what may be an attempt to accrue social status by appropriating features associated with maleness as the unmarked category (Slater and Feinman 1985, p. 439).

these projected identities differently: for instance, Amish parents prioritize biblical and familial history (Enninger 1985, p. 254), while African-American parents are more likely to prioritize uniqueness (Pharr 1993). Given names can also sculpt their referents in potentially self-fulfilling prophecies.[10] Among other things, empirical investigation confirms Johnny Cash's claim that boys with feminine names like 'Sue' are more likely to be described as disruptive (Figlio 2007). Adults with canonically African-American names like 'Kesha' or 'Darnell' are more likely to be subjected to discrimination (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). When immigrants choose new names, they identify projected social identity as a significant factor (Edwards 2006; Chen 2016) and correctly anticipate differential earning potentials (Arai and Thoursie 2009). And people sometimes renounce given names for failure of fit, whether because of a change in gender, marital or religious status or a rejection of historical associations as with 'slave names' (Koles 2024).

The fact that even proper names carry interpretative baggage is an empirical reality which an adequate theory of names must address. I also want to acknowledge that the empirical contrast between nicknames' and proper names' framing effects is considerably blurrier than that for boundary- and status-marking. Even so, I don't think it reveals the distinction between proper names and nicknames to be an ungrounded idealization. Much as in §III, I want to acknowledge the messy reality while maintaining a functional distinction as manifested in paradigmatic cases.

On the one hand, I agree with analytic orthodoxy that, much as concepts need to be cognitively lean in order to contribute a stable atomic core across multiple thoughts (Camp 2015), so proper names need to encode only minimal conditions on reference and use in order to underwrite easy communicative and epistemic access and to track referents through change. In this respect, Frege ([1918] 1956, p. 297) is correct that proper names lack senses in the standard sense, and that 'knowledge of the language is a separate thing

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[10] Laurence Sterne's 1759 novel *Tristram Shandy* attributes to the title character's father the opinion 'That there was a strange kind of magic bias, which good or bad names, as he called them, irresistibly impressed upon our characters and conduct … How many Caesars and Pompeys, he would say, by mere inspiration of the name, have been rendered worthy of them! And, how many, he would add, are there, who might have done exceeding well in the world, had not their characters and spirits been totally depressed and Nicodemus'd into nothing!' (Sterne 1759, p. 53).

when it is a matter of proper names'.[11] On the other hand, the fact that proper names are so lexically lean limits their ability to perform other communicative and cognitive tasks. Communicatively, many proper names fail to individuate their referents by surface form alone—especially in insular communities where names are strongly constrained by religious and ancestral history. Cognitively, proper names are doubly dissociated from general lexical competence in selective aphasias (Semenza and Zettin 1988; Van Lancker and Klein 1990), and are more difficult to recall than other information about the referent (Cohen and Burke 1993; Bredart and Valentine 1998). Given this, we need additional interpretative heuristics to coordinate referential attention on and synthesize information about individuals who are especially significant for us. Nicknames fill this gap.

Names' compact format and tracking function makes them generally suitable vehicles for framing—apt talismans of identity, as we might put it. Paradigmatic nicknames amplify and recruit this general potential into a characteristic function. Thus, specific nicknames are mutually known by competent users to be affectionate or pejorative—whether in virtue of a conventionalized diminutive or through in-group knowledge of the nickname's history of coining and use—in ways that can exploit and depart from phonaesthetic fit; while by contrast, proper names merely carry affective associations via general, culturally accessible phonaesthetic or historical associations. Likewise, all nicknaming practices make ample use of monikers and evocatives; while by contrast, modern proper names rarely encode or evoke descriptively substantive contents.[12] The upshot is that most nicknames are considerably more affectively and substantively loaded than most proper names, and that the ceiling for nicknames' framing effects is dramatically higher.

Further, even when nicknames and proper names are associated with equally substantive, affectively loaded frames, the nickname imputes significantly greater relevance and appropriateness to its frame. Precisely in so far as nicknames are optional, alternative

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[11] Likewise, Kent Bach (2002, p. 82), echoing Paul Ziff (1960), says that 'Proper names are not lexical items in a language. Dictionaries are not incomplete for not including them, and your vocabulary is not deficient because of all the proper names you don't know'.

[12] Note that the descriptive content of proper names that are derived from general terms, like 'Christian Baker' or 'Prudence Weaver', is typically less relevant than their historical and phonaesthetic associations.

modes of reference, their use signals an assumption that something about that particular name justifies that use. More specifically, nicknames are typically assigned well after birth, in light of the referent's actually constructed social identity rather than as a hopeful projection. Nickname assignment is much less culturally constrained, leaving more room for creative play and for being tweaked or replaced. And nicknames typically highlight the referent's distinctive personalized identity against the background expectations and values of the local community's 'we' identity. All of these factors strengthen the imputation that *if* a nickname has a robust in-group circulation, then the referent must fit the particularized social identity that the group projects for them.[13] By contrast, the demurral that a proper name is 'just a name' is considerably more plausible.

V

Hailing into Face. I have argued that nicknames manage face: they carve out local 'places' for referents, speakers and addressees by situating them within a structure defined by social distance and projecting personalized identities that impute features as fitting, salient and central relative to the in-group's perspective. I have also argued that proper names and nicknames paradigmatically implement distinct functional roles: proper names are minimal, universally accessible 'tags' for tracking referents across communicative, epistemic and metaphysical contexts, while nicknames situate referents and interlocutors within rich, local social contexts bounded by robust collective identities. Nicknames do also contribute their referents to compositional contents; and utterances of proper names do often display local knowledge, signal formality, and engender framing effects. Moreover, the difference between nicknames and local 'go by' names is itself a matter of degree. In all these ways, the distinction is blurry. Nonetheless, I have argued that it is nicknames' job to manage face, while this is something that proper names just happen to do.

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[13] As I noted in §III, conventionally derived nicknames like 'Bob' may be the referent's default 'go by' name and project minimal affect or personal identity. In this sense they are marginal cases of nicknames as I understand them. At the same time, the sheer fact that one's nickname is conventionally derived from a canonically 'normal' given name itself projects a 'normal' identity—which may itself be ripe for interpretative play, as with the memefication of 'Karen' and 'Chad'.

My primary aim has been to showcase nicknames' social dynamics. Constructing a formal model using tools from theorists like Potts, Portner, Burnett and McCready is a task for another day. So is adjudicating the most appropriate theoretical status for those social dynamics. I conclude by just sketching how that story might go. Even those who reject any distinction between nicknames and proper names must still include names' social dynamics somewhere in their theory of meaning. Status-marking and framing affect larger conversations in systematic, predictable ways. Among other things, speakers regularly exploit mutual expectations about names' social meaning to manage relationships, coordinate information, and achieve higher-order communicative effects like irony and insinuation. Moreover, as the weaponization of political nicknames palpably demonstrates, speakers' choices among naming options can be ethically loaded.

Despite its theoretical and practical importance, social meaning has been largely neglected by analytic philosophers.[14] There are many varieties of social meaning, plausibly warranting different theoretical statuses. Nicknames constitute an interesting case study because their social dynamics are so manifestly something agents *do*, by using particular words. Indeed, the empirical studies I have cited report striking levels of reflective awareness about the skill, knowledge and motivations involved in using nicknames.

I have suggested that nicknames perform face work by managing social identities. Following Erving Goffman (1967), I use 'face' to describe social status constructed through interpreted behaviour.[15] An agent attempts to claim a certain social status by taking a 'line': a pattern of actions that express their interpretation of themselves in relation to others. At a minimum, this involves projecting some degree of relative social status, and typically a more specific persona. One's own actual face is the status one gets others to assume one has claimed via the line one has taken. The line one takes also projects a face for others: as the sorts of persons who should be treated in the way the line does. Goffman assumes that agents act to maintain as much face as they can across situations; in particular, they often

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[14] See Beaver and Stanley (2023) for an ambitious foundational account, focusing on political language; see Camp (2024) for a review.

[15] See Berstler (forthcoming) for a book-length philosophical articulation of Goffman's analysis of social interaction.

avoid claiming more face to avoid the risk of threatening others' face and provoking a threat to their own.

The basic structure of Goffmanian face work is deeply Gricean (Grice 1957): an agent performs a line in order to be recognized by their interactants as bidding for a certain social status, where that recognition is produced at least in part by the interactants' recognition of the agent's intention to be so recognized. However, the mechanisms for performing lines span an extremely wide range of behaviours, which can be more or less culturally widespread or local, and more or less iconic or arbitrary. Many have nothing to do with language, including how one organizes key aspects of one's life (for example, job, sports), how one styles one's body and environment (for example, dress, hair, home), and how one physically interacts with others (for example, distance standing, gaze matching). Many are deeply intuitive, largely tacit, and only marginally under direct voluntary control. But as Judith Butler (1988, 2023) argues, it is precisely through such piecemeal, habitual micro-actions that we continually constitute our particularized social identities.

Putting the claim that nicknames' face work is a form of broadly Gricean agential meaning together with the claim that nicknames qua names have the core function of contributing their referents to compositional contents suggests that their social meaning is a species of implicature. More specifically, if nicknames are communally recognized alternative options to default 'go by' names, their face contributions would seem to be *conventionalized Manner implicatures*. I find this proposal intriguing. However, I also think that nicknames' face contributions display a more nuanced compositional profile than can be explained by the simple segregationist model standardly invoked for conventional implicatures like 'but'.[16] In particular, nicknames' status and framing effects are typically isolated from core composition, just as an implicature view would predict. But they also permit a productive class of exceptions, along the lines of:

(1) He treats me as/considers me Lizzie.
(2) She'd never have been Pocahontas if she'd stuck to teaching law at Rutgers Newark.

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[16] See Bach (1999), Potts (2005) and Horn (2007) for early discussion of conventional Manner implicatures; see Rett (2021) for more recent discussion, including diagnostics, markedness, and a sketch of a game-theoretic formalization.

I think slurs display a notably similar—though not identical—projective profile (Camp 2018). This similarity should not be surprising, given that both slurs and nicknames make both a straightforward truth-conditional contribution and a social contribution of affiliating the speaker with a group of like-minded people who share an affectively loaded perspective on the target (Camp 2013; Nunberg 2018).[17]

Nicknames and slurs also share another key point of contrast with canonical conventional implicatures like 'but'. Quill Kukla (2018) argues that slurs are essentially *performative*, because they 'hail' individuals into ideologically constituted social locations by way of Althusserian 'interpellation': they 'call out to a subject' 'to recognize herself as (already) the self … with the social identity and position she is recognized as having' (Kukla 2018, p. 13). In effect, Althusserian 'hailing' is a form of Goffmanian line-taking: constituting someone *else*'s social status by treating them as having that status. One reason slurring is so pernicious is that the visceral experience of comprehension reveals that the target recognizes themselves as the kind of person to whom the slur applies—even as the slur's lexical currency also manifests a cultural presupposition that persons of that kind deserve to be derogated (Camp 2013).

Nicknames enact a remarkably similar dynamic. Literally hailing someone by addressing them by their nickname displays the in-group's assumption that they belong in the social place the nickname projects, and actively positions them in that place. Correlatively, recognizing oneself as the nickname's bearer constitutes an acknowledgement that one does indeed occupy that place. Vocatives like 'Honey', 'Bro' and 'Boy' offer an even tighter link in the analogy between slurs and names,[18] as the following anecdote from Alvin Poussaint (1967) demonstrates:

> As I was leaving my office [in Jackson, Mississippi] … a white policeman yelled, 'Hey, boy! Come here!' Somewhat bothered, I retorted: 'I'm no boy!' He then rushed at me, inflamed, and stood towering over me, snorting, 'What d'ja say, boy?' Quickly he frisked me and demanded,

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[17] Carter (1944) analogizes slurs to pejorative generic nicknames, while Carranza-Pinedo (2024) analogizes pejorative nicknames to slurs, and Koles (2024) analogizes deadnames to slurs.

[18] Indeed, as Jeshion (forthcoming) points out, slurs can be used vocatively while their neutral counterparts cannot.

'What's your name, boy?' Frightened, I replied, 'Dr Poussaint. I'm a physician'. He angrily chuckled and hissed, 'What's your first name, boy?' … As my heart palpitated, I muttered in profound humiliation, 'Alvin'. … 'Alvin, the next time I call you, you come right away, you hear? ... You hear me, boy?' … This had occurred on a public street for all the local black people to witness, reminding them that no black man was as good as any white man. All of us—doctor, lawyer, postman, field hand and shoeshine boy—had been psychologically 'put in our place'. (Poussaint 1967)

Here, the policeman subordinates Poussaint by refusing to address him by his proper name or professional title, instead insisting on a generic vocative that denies his status as an individual adult male, and on a birth name that is asymmetrically informal and coercively intimate. The anecdote also demonstrates how addressing hails not just Poussaint, but the policeman and the onlookers, both Black and white, into their own commensurate social places. Their intuitive, visceral competence in tracking what is happening constitutes a self-confirming complicity in the social structure—*this is how things work*—which is then amplified by their subsequent compliance in performing the lines which it elicits from them, even if this is just the 'line' of standing by and looking away.

   Many nicknames and many vocatives are unlike slurs in that they can hail affectionately, depending on who uses them and when.[19] Nicknames also differ from slurs in putting people into 'places' that are highly local. The existence of local places is a significant fact in its own right. We need social identities: ways of being that make our selves legible to others and ourselves (Dembroff and Saint-Croix 2019). Social positionality can seem, and be, oppressive when all of the candidate identities are drawn from a fixed menu of coarse-grained options like 'Black', 'male' or 'waiter'. In this respect, nicknames are more similar to fine-grained labels like 'cat lady' or 'anarcho-collectivist', which can help us to recognize and construct ourselves in potentially liberatory ways (Camp and Flores 2024). However, where fine-grained social kind labels are often self-applied, nicknames are typically 'thrust upon' the referent by the group. When a nickname's projected identity diverges from the referent's self-conception—especially when it demeans them for violating the

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[19] 'Hailing' into an in-group may also explain affectionate appropriated uses of slurs (Anderson 2018).

norms of a group to which they care to belong—its hail can be all the more oppressive because it is so intimate.

Articulating the appropriate theoretical status, formal analysis, and ethical implications of nicknames' face work are future tasks. Nicknames are used in highly diverse ways: sincerely and ironically, with affection and hostility, to bond and demean. Explaining this diversity requires recognizing a characteristic communicative function, which is implemented through mutually recognized interpretative assumptions for specific nicknames. Analytic orthodoxy has focused on language as a set of conventions for exchanging information in a cooperative project of inquiry after truth. We do have such conventions—though people being who they are, we often violate or exploit them for strategic purposes. Language also includes conventions for coordinating social relations—which people likewise violate and exploit. While these two functions often operate in parallel streams, they are intertwined. At a minimum, our theory must accommodate both.[20]

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