

## NICKNAMES AND PETNAMES: LINGUISTIC FORMS AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS\*

## I

This paper is broadly concerned with variation in modern English personal naming and more specifically with the socio-linguistic analysis of those variations that are not normally in official use. We must first acknowledge that, with certain well defined exceptions, we do not name ourselves but are named by others. Our parents bequeath us our official names - our first or Christian names and our surnames - and our parents, our friends, and other acquaintances are chiefly responsible for various unofficial re-namings, whether they are derivatives of our official names or are coined from a totally different source. The social origins and functions of personal names are at the root of the matter. It is a sociological commonplace that our sense of our own identity is largely shaped and made real by the communities to which we belong, by the expectations and responses of those who form significant relationships with us. Names are symbols of identity, and variation in naming presumably indicates, however crudely, a matching variation in the perception of personal identity and in the social context in which the naming occurs.

The relationship between the choice of name or name-form and the context in which it is used is not fixed by an immutable law, and I make no claim to predict the one from the other with any degree of precision. Nevertheless, changes in social expectations are frequently accompanied by changes in styles of naming, which can respond to shifts in the attitudes of society at large, as well as to more local variation in social setting and social role. In the work situation, for example, social and onomastic conventions have altered greatly since the First World War. The change in tone is neatly illustrated by this reminiscence by Col. R. B. Oram of life as a ledger clerk for the Port of London Authority before 1914:

In spite of grim surroundings there was an old world charm about our relations one with another. The youngest clerk was addressed as 'Mister'. Slapdash abbreviations or nicknames were never used. A clerk's Christian name was, rightly, his personal property, not to be bandied about by 'the little friends of all the world' that infest modern publicity. <sup>1</sup>

Nowadays, the desire to minimise social distance in polite discourse is shown in a quite opposite way, emphasising the familiarity that belongs to informal social life by the pervasive use of first names, not just among colleagues of similar occupational rank, but also by those who are higher in formal status in addressing those who are lower (boss to secretary, teacher to pupil) and in some cases by those lower to those higher. In my own academic department only one or two members of staff maintain the former custom of directly addressing students by title-and-surname. Most of my colleagues call their students by their first names but in return are addressed by title-and-surname. A few lecturers, however, encourage their students to call them by their first name. These distinctions in practice amongst academic staff serve to some extent to mark off differences of age, social philosophy, and perhaps even social competence, but it is noticeable that the use of first names is gradually ousting that of title-and-surname as the normal mode of address in all but the most formal kinds of discourse.

Col. Oram's sardonic reference to "'the little friends of all the world" that infest modern publicity' reminds us, if reminder were needed, that the speed and the near-universality with which public address has become informalised in modern Britain is largely attributable to the influence of the media, where varying degrees of informality in naming (of the reporters, the interviewers, the presenters, the chat-show and phone-in professionals, and the public figures who are the subject of discussion) flatter us, the outsiders (readers, viewers, listeners), with the impression that we have personal access to the intimate social world of the insiders, and that they in turn belong to our own domestic world like members of an extended family or club of friends. Public and professional use of 'slapdash abbreviations and nicknames' (by 'nicknames', Oram probably means standard suffixed abbreviations like Johnny and Tommy) carries still further the penetration of informal social values into a world which was once much more formal. Popular journalism characteristically appropriates or coins petnames and nicknames for public figures whom they wish to patronise, lionise, or mock. Compare the derogatory Wedgy with the more approbatory Tony in reference to the left-wing Labour M. P., the Right Hon. Anthony (Wedgewood) Benn, the former Lord Stansgate. Egalitarian politicians are especially given to referring to each other by first names or abbreviations of them. Few Labour M. Ps allude to their current leader as Mr Foot but almost always as Michael. Socialists are obliged by their political beliefs to speak the language of working-class fraternity and comradeship, and are unlikely to bestow on their leaders any symbols of hierarchical ranking, but the practice is also spreading to politicians of other hues. It has become a way of asserting group loyalty, not least by group members when arguing against each other in public. I have recently heard the present Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, publicly referred to as Margaret by a dismissed but 'loyal' cabinet minister (but she is known as Maggie in the headlines of the popular press). All this contrasts strikingly (almost comically) with the punctilious avoidance of all personal names in the chamber of the House of Commons, where M. Ps are required to use periphrastic formulae such as 'the honourable member (for ---)', the vigilantly preserved relics of respectful forms of address that were natural to an earlier age.

Although pet-forms of first names might seem to signal most clearly the kind of free-and-easy relationship that young people, especially, would now regard as normal and desirable, they are by no means an automatic choice for all persons or all names. This is perhaps because each name-form (even a different spelling of the same name) carries its own undertow of social and psychological associations, which may be idiosyncratic to the individual or else conform to a more widely held stereotype.<sup>2</sup> Among students I have met several Richards who firmly dislike the standard pet-form Dick (and Dicky is abhorred); even Rick, Ricky, Rich, and Richie are not always welcomed. On the other hand, I have yet to meet a Deborah who does not insist that she is really called Debbie. It seems that Debbie corresponds to what she feels is her real identity, the informal, friendly, likable self that she wishes to project to the world at large. The irreducibly clipped form, Deb, is also sometimes preferred, though some Debbies I have met regard it as too familiar, too off-hand, for general use, and would tolerate it only amongst intimates. The full form, Deborah, apparently corresponds to an official and less sympathetic version of her identity; it is the name-form by which she finds herself called strictly to account by parents, teachers, and others in authority over her.

One can see from these examples that in some social contexts the named person may be allowed a degree of choice, for it is part of the good manners of consultative

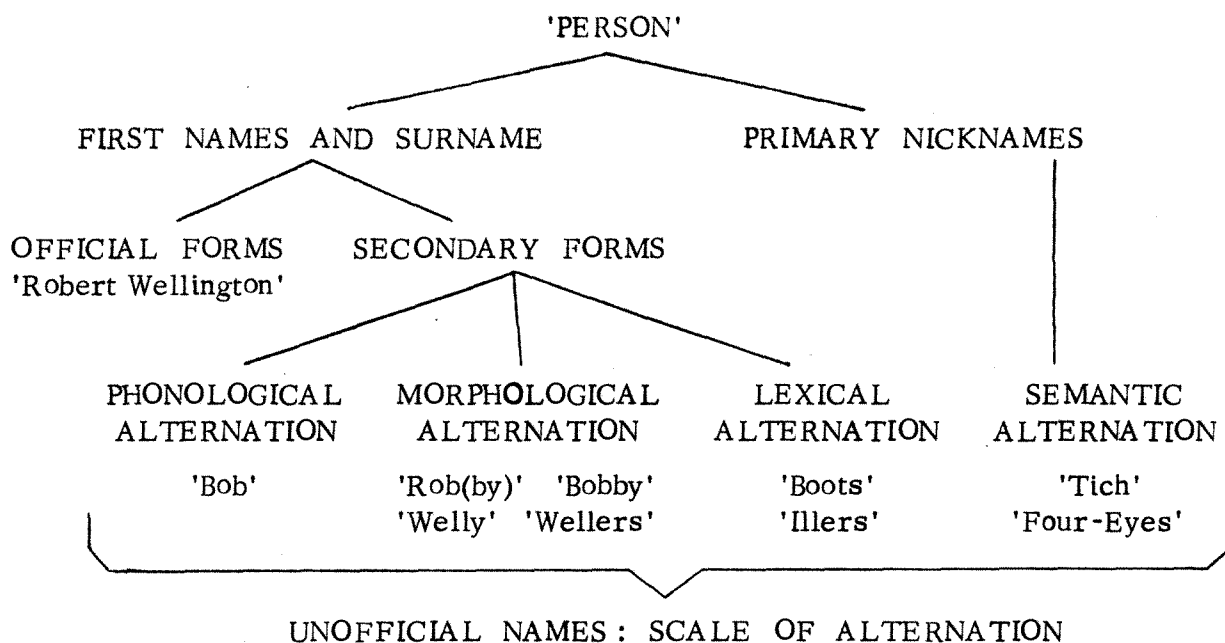
as well as casual relationships to address people by the names they prefer for themselves. But in many types of relationship the extent to which we may influence our acquaintances in calling us this way or that may be negligible. In managing to do it at all we have attained some small measure of control over the way other people relate to us - initially, at least, and perhaps only temporarily - and it most often shows itself in the substitution of first name for title-and-surname and in the choice of the form of the first name. In the case of nicknames, however, - by which I mean chiefly epithets and lexical perversions of first names and surnames - it would be unusual for the bearer of the name to have any say in the matter at all. More than any other type of personal name, the nickname reflects the social power that namers can exert over the named. If our Debbie is teasingly called Piggy by her classmates at school, there is little she can do but grin and bear it or assume the role of a social outcast. As we shall see, such nicknaming is usually found in unofficial, intimate, or covert social milieux; in its most prolific form it belongs naturally to a communal life-style that is socially closed and intensely competitive; only occasionally does it surface in the mainstream of normal public relations.

This, then, is the uncontentious starting point of my paper: that since personal naming is a social act, variation in personal naming reflects variation in social role, attitude, and context. But we cannot claim to understand the relationship between the forms of names and the contexts in which they are used unless we have a coherent framework of analysis, and that is something which, as far as I am aware, has not yet been constructed. Some of the necessary data, onomastic and social, is available in print, though scattered and in small quantities. Appropriate linguistic and sociological models also exist, but independently of each other, and requiring structural amalgamation. What follows in the rest of this paper is largely concerned with nicknaming in the relatively confined context of British school communities, for, as it happens, the most detailed information about unofficial naming is to be found in two books about the social life of schoolchildren: The Language and Lore of Schoolchildren by Peter and Iona Opie,<sup>3</sup> and a more recent work by Jane Morgan, Christopher O'Neill, and Rom Harré called Nicknames: Their Origins and Social Consequences.<sup>4</sup> The linguistic model is adapted from one designed for a different but related purpose by M. A. K. Halliday in a recent issue of The American Anthropologist.<sup>5</sup> First I shall set out a linguistic paradigm of unofficial name-forms, and then discuss some of the social aspects of nicknaming.

## II

Unofficial names fall into two major sub-types: secondary forms of official names, and primary nicknames, that is, names that allude to the character, appearance, or behaviour of the person, or to some incident with which the person is associated. The two types form a single category of familiar names that function as alternatives to our formal first names and surnames. That they are both familiar and alternative is what binds them together as a class. They are familiar in the sense that their use implies social relationships that are informal, personal, and in some cases intimate. They are alternative, not only socially (being used instead of other names for the same person), but also linguistically, in that their characteristic mode of formation is by alternation, or variation, at any one of four linguistic levels: (i) phonological, (ii) morphological, (iii) lexical, and (iv) semantic. Thus we might have a short, bespectacled person bearing the official names Robert Wellington and at different times and places the unofficial names (i) Bob;

(ii) Rob(by), Bobby; Welly, Wellers; (iii) Boots, Illers; (iv) Tich, Four-Eyes. See the accompanying diagram.



At the PHONOLOGICAL LEVEL we have vowel and consonant alternation. As far as I know, this is no longer a living method of formation.<sup>6</sup> Extant phonological variations of first names, such as Madge, Meg, and Mog for Margaret, Dick for Richard, or Bob for Robert, are fossilized survivals of earlier (mainly medieval) vowel and consonant alternation. It frequently occurs in combination with abbreviation and suffixation (Maggy, Dicky, Bobby), which brings us to the MORPHOLOGICAL LEVEL. Abbreviation and suffixation are not restricted to pet-forms of first names but are also applied to surnames in those social circles where the surname on its own is a traditional form of address, as in schools, clubs, and other institutions. In The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren (pp. 158-59), the Opies list examples of surname abbreviation (Sedge for Sedgewick, Nick for Nixon), suffixation (Brownie for Brown, Jonesy for Jones), and combinations of the two (Polly for Poulton). More exotic instances are given by Morgan, O'Neill, and Harré in Nicknames (pp. 36, 41): Hannarat (for Hannah), Timboh (for Timothy), Thomscrap (for Thomson), and Smithoh, Smithbug, Smithikins, and Smithikinsbug (for Smith). These two books provide most of the illustrations that follow.

At the LEXICAL LEVEL there is a particularly rich variety of onomastic invention among schoolchildren. Lexical alternation is word-play or punning in which the existing name is transmuted into another recognisable word (or name) by means of phonological, morphological, or lexical substitutions. Phonological (including syllabic) substitutions turn Fred Maddox into Fresh Haddocks, Leigh into Flea, Tibbets into Titbits, Hackett into Bracket, Mills into Pills, Keith into Beef, Loretta into Larry, Amos into Mosquito, the initials R.P. into Harpy, and by anagram the initials A.J.W.S. into Jaws. Morphological substitutions turn Britchford into Britches (or rather Breeches), Day into Monday, Underwood into

Underwear, and, by antonymy, Sharples into Bluntles, and Wellers into Illers.

Most lexical substitution falls into one of the following four categories:

(i) collocational substitutions through partial homonymy; (ii) synonyms, (iii) antonyms, and (iv) metonyms. (i) Substitution of one element in a familiar collocation is a favourite schoolchild method of nicknaming, as illustrated by Duck for someone called Donald, Isaac for a boy surnamed Newton, Tin for Cantwell, Boots for Wellington, Bean for Broad, Wondercrisp for Goulden, Divan for Myers, and Red for Barrell, the last three examples being adopted from names of commercial products. Existing nicknames sometimes undergo transformation in this way, as when Beef (from Keith) becomes Broth. Here too belong collocational substitutes derived from traditional occupational nicknames: Tug Wilson, Nobby (i.e. 'knobby') Clark, Dusty Miller. (ii) Examples of synonyms are: Coat for Parker (punning on Parka), Chic for Smart, Splinter (synecdoche of Wood), Dinger for Bell, Flea for Mosquito (from Amos), Y-Front for Underwear (from Underwood), and Bed (subsequently turned into Bedbug by suffixation or metonymy) for Divan (from Myers). Several of these might alternatively be regarded as metonyms. (iii) Antonyms include Queen and Queeny for King, and Summerdrought for the rare surname Winterflood. Eastbed for Southcott combines an antonym and a synonym. (iv) Metonyms are clearly instanced in Shotgun for Sheriff (and subsequently modified to Shotty), in Weed for Gardener, and in a nickname reported recently from the secondary school in my present neighbourhood: a new teacher, Mr N. Oakes has been re-named Shep, the sequence of change being phonological (N. Oakes becomes Noakes, then lexical, via a homonym (John Noakes of the children's T.V. programme 'Blue Peter'), which then induces a metonym (Shep is the name of the programme's mascot, a sheepdog).<sup>7</sup>

Last of all we reach the SEMANTIC LEVEL of alternation. In order to understand how this works it is necessary to recognise that the official first name and surname form an essential element in this paradigm, just as they do at all the other linguistic levels. Any substitute for an official name which is not a secondary form of that name may be said to be in semantic alternation with it, because both names refer to the same person. As can be seen from the diagram, my basic division of unofficial or familiar alternative names into primary nicknames and secondary forms of official names corresponds precisely with a distinction between semantic alternation on the one hand and phonological and lexico-grammatical alternation on the other. It is a distinction between alternative names derived from the 'person' and alternative names derived from the person's official name. Semantic alternations, i.e. primary nicknames, appear to fall into three main groups, the first two of which include ironic applications. First there are literal epithets such as Lofty, Longshanks, Shorty, Tich (for the short or the tall), or Fatty, Tubby, Tubs (for the corpulent). Second, metaphoric epithets such as Carrots, Ginger, Rusty (for the red-haired); Skyscraper, Maypole, Goliath, Tiny Tim, Long John Silver (for the short or the tall); Rabbit (for someone with protruding teeth); Concorde (for someone with a big nose); Oxfam (for a skinny person, especially if coloured); Four-Eyes (for someone with glasses). Third, metonymic epithets, chiefly names that allude to incidents, sayings, and so on. Morgan, O'Neill, and Harré (op.cit. p.38) cite a couple of incident names that arose in French lessons at school. One girl, who by chance repeatedly had to read out the word jamais from the text book, was nicknamed Jam, and an adolescent boy whose voice broke embarrassingly on the word coupable was thereafter nicknamed Coop. A combination of metonymy and homonymy is recorded in the nickname Wednesday for a girl with thin legs ('When's dey gonna break?' - op.cit. p.113).

## III

If one were to make a socio-linguistic study of the whole range of official and unofficial personal naming in a single community, the scale of alternation proposed in the previous section would provide one measure, albeit a rough and ready one, of socio-linguistic differentiation. The scale descends in socio-linguistic strength from primary nicknames, through lexical alternations of official names, to the weakest level, where official names are subjected to standard phonological and morphological adaptations. However, the detail of the pattern is bound to be affected by a number of variables, particularly by differences in social role between official first name and surname.

Unfortunately, the vagueness of English anthroponymic terminology is an obstacle to the clear definition of research goals. The terms petname and nickname together probably cover the whole range of unofficial name types, which is why I have used them in the title of this paper, but in normal usage the distinction between the two is imprecise, with some overlapping and confusion. For my present purpose it is necessary to suggest an ad hoc definition of nickname that will cover the material classed as such in Morgan, O'Neill, and Harré's Nicknames, viz. all primary nicknames, all secondary forms of surnames, and those secondary forms of first names that involve lexical alternation or a non-standard morphological alternation like -o(h) or -rat. Use of the remaining categories of unofficial name forms (standard phonological and morphological alternations of first names) was not investigated by Morgan and her colleagues, who thereby do not give a complete picture of unofficial naming practices in the sorts of community that were studied. Nor do they employ satisfactory linguistic categories in their analyses of name types. Nevertheless, their study of schoolchild nicknames is an important contribution to socio-linguistics.

In Chapter Five, the authors present some instructive findings on the proliferation of nicknaming in different sorts of school. In one public boarding school they studied, there was not a single boy (or teacher) who did not have a nickname. Moreover, it was normal for a boy to be known by several nicknames, the average ranging from between 4.2 nicknames per boy to 7.0 per boy. The highest number of names for a single boy was twenty. In this public boarding school, therefore, nicknaming was both totally extensive and extremely intensive. This situation is contrasted with that in British and American state day schools. In the British day schools that were studied, there appeared to be about twenty per cent of children in each class who by general consensus did not have a nickname, although in one class of quite intelligent boys, who had developed a vigorous communal classroom life of organised physical games, teasing, ragging, and general social and verbal competitiveness - much like that in a boarding school - everyone bore a nickname. In these schools as a whole, the average number of nicknames per child was about 1.0. The form with the highest average had only 2.0 names per person, which, as the authors point out, is not even half the lowest name density in the boarding school (op.cit. p.92). From studies of American schools, however, it is asserted that 'at least in the north-east, mid-west and west, nicknames were rare or even unknown in the state school system, at all ages' (op.cit. p.48).

The explanation offered by Morgan et al. for these striking differences in name usage is that the naming systems correlate with the social structures of the different

types of school. The public boarding school is a relatively closed institution, whose characteristics can be compared with those of a total institution as defined by Erving Goffman in his book, Asylums:

A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life. Prisons serve as a clear example, providing we appreciate that what is prison-like about prisons is found in institutions whose members have broken no laws. <sup>8</sup>

The feature which most clearly differentiates the inmates of a public boarding school from those of a total institution is the recurrence of substantial periods of time away from the institution, when the pupils are on holiday. Even so, the social reality of the public boarding school is totally dominated by the institutional environment for large parts of each year.

By contrast, 'the approximation of the average [British] state day school of a Goffmanian total institution is so minimal that there is little opportunity for a rich underlife to develop with its own social classes and with nicknaming as one of the means of maintaining them' (Nicknames, p.49). The main reason for this is obvious: the day school is a place of work and play, but not of residence. Most eating, sleeping, some schoolwork, and a good deal of play occur at home, and therefore the school administration extends over only part of the daily routines and social relationships of the children. The social structure is accordingly more open, but by no means fully so, for the typical British day school tries its hardest to maintain an institutional separateness from other areas of local life. It uses various means to do so: school uniforms, walls and railings enclosing the school grounds (symbolising the normal limits of its jurisdiction over pupil behaviour), school rituals (such as morning assembly), school rules (such as those governing dress, length of hair, the wearing of ornaments), the organisation of pupils into forms and houses (within which to promote individual and group competitiveness), and the denial to parents of any control over how their children should be treated in school, by teachers or by other pupils.

In such a school, both formal and social activities are considerably more closed off from home life and parental influence than is the typical North American state school, which is much more integrated into the local community and consequently socially less inward looking, less rule-bound, less cohesive, less intense. A colleague of mine, who has recently returned from a sabbatical year in Canada with his family, confirms that the school his own boys went to near Ottawa had little sense of identity as an institution and the pupils no sense of belonging to their school in the way that British schoolchildren are encouraged to do.

Given, then, that in the almost totally enclosed school, nicknames were applied to everyone, without exception and in some profusion, that in the more open school, although nicknaming was common, it was less prolific and normally did not apply to every member of a class, and that in the almost totally open school, it was rare for any pupil to have a nickname, Morgan, O'Neill, and Harré seem to be fully justified in concluding that 'the intensity of the nicknaming system is related to the intensity of the social structure' (op. cit. p.50).

The authors investigated in some detail the social behaviour and attitudes that were found to obtain in the schools where nicknaming was common. Often it was found that one person performed the role of name-giver for the whole of his class, almost as if it were a social slot to be filled along with the leader, the toughie, the joker, and so on (op.cit. pp.115-16). Sometimes the name-giver was also the leader. In one form, a single boy had successfully nicknamed over forty other fellow pupils. In some forms it was the teacher who gave nicknames. Nicknaming is, in all cases, an exercising of real, or pretended, social power. When the name-giver is one of the pupils, it can be predicted that he or she occupies a high place in the social hierarchy and belongs to the dominant clique in the group or form, for the social and physical norms in the classroom or playground community are dictated by the dominant clique and are singled out by the use of primary nicknames which stigmatise any obvious deviation of behaviour or appearance (op.cit. pp.78, 119). As one might expect, given the close connection between names and socially received identities, there is a strong tendency for children to comply with the roles that their nicknames allot to them (op.cit. p.65).

The social norms of schoolchildren can vary in many particulars from form to form and from school to school. In the public school that was studied - an all-male preserve - 32 per cent of primary nicknames referred to sexual matters, 26 per cent to smoking, 24 per cent to race, and only 18 per cent to physical appearance. In one of the state day secondary schools, however, nicknames referring to physical appearance far outnumbered the rest, varying from form to form from anywhere between 50 per cent and over 75 per cent of all types of nickname (another 20 per cent being derivatives of official names). Nor were there any references to sex, smoking, or race, even though non-white children attended the school (op.cit. pp.94-5). In contrast with the names in the senior (secondary) school, with their overwhelming concern with physical appearance, are those in the typical junior school, where at least half were derivatives of official names involving word-play (op.cit. p.42). Evidently, preferences in types of alternative name-forming among children vary according to their age as well as the institutional character of their school.

An analysis of the social relationships in a class of fourteen-year-old girls in a state day school revealed further patterns of nicknaming. The dominant girl in the form reciprocated as many relations as she received (op.cit. pp.61-2). She was also known by the most number of nicknames, apparently an onomastic manifestation of her accessibility to a large number of different children or groups within the form. (This should not be taken to mean that numerosness of nicknames always implies social dominance or popularity.) Another girl in the form who sent out a large number of relations but received very few in return, was not known by any nicknames (idem). Perhaps there was some consolation for this anxious-to-be-friendly but somewhat friendless person in not being stigmatised by a name; but not necessarily so, for in such a community, to be named, even derogatively, is to be noticed, to have a social identity. This, at least, is how some West Indian children saw the matter (op.cit. p.52).

Nicknaming is obviously central to the unofficial rituals of abuse and mockery, whether the object of derision is present and addressed directly, or whether absent and 'called' only in the third person. (One would like more information on the social and linguistic differentiation of first, second, and third person naming.) But not all



nicknaming is hostile; it may be deferential, friendly, or loving, even in the competitive world of the schoolchild. Some naming explicitly signals membership of a friendship group, and is thus partly or wholly welcomed and acknowledged by those who are named. One very isolated fourteen-year-old girl was called Dear Heart by her one and only close friend; as far as the rest of her class-mates were concerned, she was an outsider with no nickname (op.cit. pp.60, 63). Another small friendship group centred on a girl known as Caz (a secondary form of her first name) by her two best friends, but as Pru (a secondary form of her surname, Purdy) by most other girls (op.cit. p.61). Caz called her two best friends Diz and Saz, employing a similar secondary formation and producing an assonance that consciously expressed the mutual intimacy of her relationship with them. Notably, Diz and Saz, who were not close friends, did not use these special names for each other, but Saz was also known as such by her one other best friend. The sensitivity of name usage to what Morgan et al. call 'the fine structure of the social order' is well illustrated here. The most remarkable instance of a nickname being used as a 'tie-sign' in a friendship group is of two girls who called each other Puss, as if to signal so close a friendship that in some respects the two identities had merged into one (op.cit. p.52).

To conclude, Morgan, O'Neill, and Harré argue that the nicknaming systems of the schools they studied mark out three main social categories: (i) 'People and non-people. It marks those who are rejected altogether from the social order prevailing in a particular children's group, the untouchables or non-persons. They have no nicknames, or where nicknaming is not the rule they are the only ones with nicknames' (op.cit. p.46). (ii) 'The well-knit groups who have some kind of privileged position in the society by the simple device of a set of names used and usable (and sometimes only known) by members of that group. . . . Expulsion, even temporarily, from the group [may be] marked by a return to given name', i.e. to official name (idem). (iii) The scapegoats who are 'abused, teased and generally humiliated, but are often kept quite close to the most powerful group in the society' (ibid. p.47).

#### IV

I want now to place the linguistic and social features of schoolchild nicknaming in a wider framework. Anyone who reads the Opies' chapter on 'Nicknames and Epithets' should not fail to notice that schoolchild nicknaming patterns belong to a much more extensive pattern of socially-marked language, in which similar linguistic principles apply. A recent article by M. A. K. Halliday called 'Anti-Languages' provides a convenient analytical model (see note 5). Halliday defines an anti-language as one that is generated by some kind of anti-society, such as the social world of the prison or criminal underworld. His source material is from three works: Thomas Harman's Caveat for Common Cursitors (1567), a dictionary of the pelting speech or cant of the Elizabethan criminal classes; Bhaktiprasad Mallik's Language of the Underworld of West Bengal (1972); and Adam Podgórecki's 'Second Life' and Its Implications (1973), a study of the subculture of Polish prisons and reform schools and its anti-language called grypserka. Halliday argues that, as with all languages, an anti-language serves to create and maintain the social reality of its parent society through discourse (or conversation). But this social reality is an alternative reality or 'second life', with an enclosed social structure of insiders who are set off against outsiders and who are internally distinguished by a social hierarchy that reflects the hierarchies of authority and submission between outsiders and insiders.

The anti-language, which supports and expresses an alternative reality, is accordingly an alternative language, whose relation to the normal language of normal society is one of derivation by means of alternation (variation or substitution) at all levels: phonological, lexico-grammatical, and semantic. In any anti-language we should therefore expect a special prominence of features such as consonantal and vowel alternation, metathesis, syllabic insertion, shortening, suffixing, compounding, puns, kennings, metaphors, and synonyms. It is by these means that it achieves two important characteristics: massive re-lexicalisation (i.e. new or altered vocabulary) and substantial over-lexicalisation (i.e. an abundance of terms for the same identity). The motivation for this often rapid process of lexical renewal is, it seems, partly the keen value placed on verbal competitiveness and display in the criminal underworld (linguistic competitiveness, of course, reflects social competitiveness), and partly the need to maintain a secret reality that is constantly under threat. The re-lexicalisation and over-lexicalisation by which the anti-language continually renews itself, naturally focuses on those areas central to the obsessions and activities of the anti-society. In the underworld of Calcutta, Mallik records twenty-four synonyms for 'girl', but this over-production of synonyms is not without semantic differentiation, for though they are denotatively identical they are attitudinally distinct, covering the entire range of connotations predictable in a male-dominated society. This is not to suggest that 'normal' society in West Bengal is not male-dominated, too. The difference, as Halliday points out, is that in an anti-language social values are much more clearly foregrounded than they are in the normal language from which the anti-language is derived.

Having got thus far it may be surprising to learn that Halliday has nothing to say about nicknames, although they are a well-known feature of criminal societies. But if we apply his observations to what we understand about nicknaming in British schools we can see some striking parallels. To take the extreme case, we know that the social conditions of a public boarding school are highly institutionalised, with an intense, enclosed social hierarchy of insiders set off against outsiders in authority. The social values of the pupil community studied by Morgan, O'Neill, and Harré were sharply foregrounded in three ways: first, every boy was re-named (the equivalent of re-lexicalisation); second, the average boy was given no less than four alternative new names and an exceptional boy had as many as twenty (the equivalent of over-lexicalisation); third, the primary nicknames focused most attention on sex, smoking, and racial characteristics, all of them social obsessions officially suppressed, forbidden, or excluded by the school authorities.

However, to single out nicknames in this way is almost to miss the fundamental point. Alternative personal names are only one element in the whole alternative language that exists in a public school. As a browse through J.S. Farmer's Public School Word-Book (London, 1900) will show, public school language entails extensive re-lexicalisation, and surely over-lexicalisation, too, though the Word-Book is not designed to illustrate synonymy. Farmer, like Halliday, has not a word to say about nicknaming; but then Morgan and her colleagues make no mention of (and made no study of) public school vocabulary. It is time that the two types of substantive, common nouns and proper nouns, were considered together as related phenomena within a single socio-linguistic framework. The point is implicit (but not expressed) in Chapter Nine of The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren, where observations on nicknames are placed in the same context as those on children's

vocabulary, which, as one may guess, is both re-lexicalised and over-lexicalised in certain predictable areas. For example, six words are listed for 'head' (nob, nut, loaf, bonce, block, dome), and eight for 'nose' (conk, beak, snitch, snout, snot-box, snorer, snozzle, boko). Unfortunately the Opies offer no information on how many of these were in use in the same speech community. I do recall four of those for 'head' and two of those for 'nose' as items in my own vocabulary as a child. The social world of the child, separate from, but embedded within, the adult world, is marked by that love of verbal display and competition that Halliday reports as characteristic of other socially enclosed sub-cultures. These are a love of puns; of kennings (beetle crushers for 'large feet', breadbasket or porridge-bag for 'stomach'); new or altered compounds involving special suffixes (to produce words like creep-ass, swank-pot, blubber-puss, goosegog 'gooseberry', welligogs 'wellingtons', copycat, starecat, funny-dick, rasbug 'raspberry', strawbug 'strawberry', and so on, some of these suffixes also occurring in nicknames); and a love of secret language using rhyming slang, back slang, and syllabic insertion,<sup>9</sup> in a similar fashion to Halliday's anti-languages and their many near-relations, such as the language of the old London costermongers, among whom nicknaming was also common.<sup>10</sup>

Now the schools from which the Opies drew their material were not private, fee-paying boarding schools but primary and secondary day schools within the state system. Although alternative modes of speech and naming flourish most vigorously in those communities that approximate most closely to an anti-society, they can also be found in varying degrees of development in any close-knit sub-culture or in-group where personal relationships are dominated by social and verbal competitiveness. Halliday himself argues that the concept of the anti-society and its anti-language represents the limiting case, the extreme by which we may come to understand better the function of similar social and linguistic features in more benign forms of sub-culture.

## V

In conclusion I would like to make two points regarding future research. The first is that naming must be studied, in so far as the appropriate data is available, in its full social and linguistic context. This means (amongst other things) that, where possible, names should not be collected and analysed in isolation from the rest of the vocabulary of the particular speech community. Nor should studies of dialects ignore naming. The second point is that many kinds of social group in Britain and Ireland offer rich opportunities for the study of unofficial naming. In addition to those already mentioned (members of prisons, borstals, the criminal underworld generally, certain types of long-stay hospital wards, schools), the following come readily to mind: the armed services; sporting fraternities (especially male sports teams whose members spend much time in close and prolonged contact with each other outside the performance of the game, drinking or travelling); occupational groups in the world of entertainment (orchestras, theatrical companies, T.V. camera crews); communities belonging to socially cohesive industries like ship-building, steel-making, mining, slate-quarrying, road and rail building, fishing, cloth-making, and so on; households where there are possessive, competitive relationships between members of the family; and all rural and urban communities where social life is close-knit, inward-looking, and gossipy.<sup>11</sup>

From a historian's point of view, it is also likely that the study of modern petnaming and nicknaming and of the social conditions that produce them will help us to interpret the anthroponymy of the past.<sup>12</sup> The chief obstacle in the investigation of medieval nicknaming is ignorance of the social and linguistic contexts that determined the precise meaning and use of the names. That problem will always be with us, but the socio-linguistic implications of nicknaming patterns are not altogether out of our reach, as some essays by Cecily Clark have shown.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, there seems every hope that by comparing the semantic patterns of medieval surnames in different communities we will find evidence for differences in the social preoccupations of villages and towns in different geographical and economic situations. The more close-knit and socially-competitive the community, the more likely we would find a larger proportion of names alluding to physique, character, or behaviour. I have noticed in my exploration of surnames in late-thirteenth-century London that the fishermen and fishmongers, a closely integrated social and economic group, seem to bear an unusually large number of names of this type, often as aliases. The medieval church was responsible for producing many kinds of closed, ritualised communities. Were the laxer monasteries, nunneries, colleges of priests, and fraternal convents, seed-beds of unofficial re-naming, as they undoubtedly were of gossip?<sup>14</sup> (A strictly-run religious community would not, of course, produce a socially competitive underlife.) It would be hard to believe, too, that the polyglot, pranking students at the universities did not develop their own ways of naming each other, as well as their own argot. As a final example I mention the well-known observation that the Vikings seem to have had a more pronounced liking for nicknames than the Anglo-Saxons. Given the nature of a Viking community - close-knit, mobile, largely male, violently competitive, with its own language and customs, and forming a minority enclave within the host community - it is perhaps exactly what we would expect.

There is obviously a prodigious amount of work to be done in the study of past and present person-naming, and some of it is urgent. The individual mobility provided by motorised transport, and the standardising effects of the media (together with almost universal literacy) combine in such a way that all village communities in the developed industrial world are becoming more open, less integrated, and less inward-looking. The distinctive sub-cultures of rural communities, and the linguistic expression of them, have inevitably faded, and such nicknaming as formerly existed has diminished very rapidly during the present century. Many of the traditional industries are also in decline; ship-building, steel-making, fishing, cloth-manufacture, and some mining have all contracted in recent years, in some cases drastically, with severe disruption of the communities that grew up around them. Unfortunately the kind of rescue onomatology that is required is hardly practicable except on the small scale and in a haphazard fashion, partly because of the difficulty of finding enough people able and willing to do it, and partly because, by the very nature of these communities and the function of nicknaming within them, outsiders would find it extremely difficult to obtain full and reliable information. We should urge anyone with access to any of these declining, socially cohesive communities to do whatever is possible to encourage the recording of communal naming practices before they completely disappear.

#### NOTES

- \* This is a revised version of the paper given at the Thirteenth Conference of the Council for Name Studies on March 28th 1981.

1. Col. R. B. Oram, The Dockers' Tragedy (London, 1970), p.7.
2. This is borne out by some studies of first name stereotyping in the U.S.A. See E. D. Lawson, 'Semantic Differential Analysis of Men's First Names', Journal of Psychology 78 (1971), 229-40, 'Men's First Names, Nicknames, and Short Names : a Semantic Differential Analysis', Names 21 (1973), 22-7, 'Women's First Names : a Semantic Differential Analysis', Names 22 (1974), 52-8, and 'First Names on the Campus : a Semantic Differential Analysis', Names 28 (1980), 69-83; A. B. Buchanan and J. L. Bruning, 'Connotative Meanings of First Names and Nicknames on Three Dimensions', Journal of Social Psychology 85 (1971), 143-4; J. L. Bruning and F. T. Husa, 'Given Names and Stereotyping', Developmental Psychology 7 (1972), 91.
3. Iona and Peter Opie, The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren (Oxford, 1959).
4. Jane Morgan, Christopher O'Neill, and Rom Harré, Nicknames: Their Origins and Social Consequences (London and Henley-on-Thames, 1979). A review of this book appears in the present issue of NOMINA.
5. M. A. K. Halliday, 'Anti-Languages', The American Anthropologist 78 (1976), 570-84.
6. Cf. the comments by Barbara M. H. Strang on the waning of word coinage by vowel variation in A History of English (London, 1970), p.91.
7. I record my thanks for this information to William Woodward, a pupil at Cottingham County Secondary School, North Humberside.
8. E. Goffman, Asylums (New York and Harmondsworth, 1968), p.11.
9. See I. and P. Opie, op. cit. pp.320-2. Reverse formation, as found in back slang, is sometimes used as a method of alternating a personal name. Leslie Dunkling, in Scottish Christian Names (London and Edinburgh, 1978), p.124, records that in Scotland Senga is a traditional back-form of Agnes, and occurs 36 times in the 1958 listings of births. Its employment as an official name leads Dunkling to the surely mistaken conclusion that 'the name probably has a literary source but it has not yet come to light'. I am told by Prof. Jack Flint that Senga is the commonplace form of Agnes among working-class children in Glasgow. Dunkling (loc. cit.) also cites Azile, Cire, and Adnil from the Scottish birth listings as reverse forms of Eliza, Eric, and Linda. For further information on syllabic insertion (producing a secret language called Ziph) see Eric Partridge, Slang To-Day and Yesterday (London, 1933), pp.278-9.
10. See Henry Mayhew, London Labour and the London Poor (London, 1860-1, repr. 1967), I, p.24, and Peter Wright, Cockney Dialect and Slang (London, 1981), pp.30-1.
11. Since this paper was originally prepared I have been collecting evidence that nicknaming is endemic to such social groups. The material is large, and still growing, and I hope to publish something on it at a future date.

12. On this point see also Cecily Clark, 'Some Early-Twentieth Century Aberdeen Nicknames', Aberdeen University Review 162 (Autumn 1979), 195-9, and 'Nickname Creation: Some Sources of Evidence, 'Nalve' Memoirs Especially', in the present issue of NOMINA, pp.83-94.
13. Cecily Clark, 'People and Languages in post-Conquest England', Journal of Medieval History II (1976), 1-33, and 'Thoughts on the French Connections of Middle English Nicknames', NOMINA 2 (1978), 38-44.
14. One gets a flavour of what was possible from the witty nicknames invented by Nicholas Bozon (a late-thirteenth- and early-fourteenth-century Franciscan friar of the north Midlands) for four types of religious hypocrite:  

Roungemesere e Kokenplu,  
Siflevent e Cheftondu.

Friar William Herbert showed a matching deftness in translating the Anglo-Norman into Middle English as:

Vreteboede, Byrinekoc,  
Whystlebone and Shorelok

- that is, 'chew prayer', 'bedraggled cock' (byrine means 'rained upon, soaked'), 'hiss prayer' (for Bozon's 'Whistle wind'), and 'shorn lock' (alluding to the tonsured head). See Brian J. Levy, Nine Verse Sermons by Nicholas Bozon, Medium Aevum Monographs, N. S. XI (Oxford, 1981), pp.90-6.

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