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## NICKNAMES

Naming, a crucial aspect of identity, is an important aspect of the exercise of dominance, notably evident in the naming of conquered territories by colonial powers. It is also significant that nations that undergo colonization generally acquire a great number of nicknames for their indigenous populations. The giving of nicknames to individuals, groups, and nations springs from mixed motives. Although the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry notes that nicknames are “usually given in ridicule or pleasantry,” modern sociolinguistic research indicates that the attribution of group nicknames derives more from ridicule, belittlement, and prejudicial motives. They are commonly manifestations of martial and religious rivalry, competition in business or employment, or generalized xenophobia. Many of the terms in the discussion have their own entries. Because *nickname* is not a precise critical word, some scholars have taken up the term *ethnophaulism* for “ethnic slur,” coined by A.A. Roback in 1944. However, because of its opaqueness, it has not achieved general currency.

*Nickname* itself has an interesting etymology, being originally in Middle English *an eke name*, meaning “an extra name.” Through the process known as misdivision, the form was misunderstood as *a neke name* (understandable in an oral situation when the bulk of the population was illiterate) before becoming the modern form *nickname*. In one of the earliest uses of the old form, Robert Brunne wrote in his moralistic text *Handlyng Synne* (1303): “he is to blame þat 3eveþ a man an yvle ekename” (“the person who gives someone a bad nickname is to blame”). This anticipates the general modern critical attitude, especially in the regime of political correctness. The English essayist William Hazlitt commented that “A nickname is the heaviest stone the Devil can throw at a man” (“On Nicknames,” *Sketches and Essays*, 1839). Dr. Johnson (1755) erroneously but understandably derived the word from French *nom de nique*, meaning “a name of contempt,” so that his definition matches that meaning: “A name given in scoff or contempt; a term of derision; an opprobrious or contemptuous appellation.” His contemporary Francis Grose, in his *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785) accepted the etymology, explaining that “Nique is a movement of the head to mark contempt for any person or thing.” However, this attribution is erroneous, a notable example of **folk etymology**.

Historically, nicknames were given to distinguished individuals long before the actual

term *nickname* became current. Thus Ethelred the Unready (died 1016) was styled in Anglo-Saxon Æthelred Unræd, properly meaning “ill-advised,” while William II (1087–1100) was known as Rufus, that is, “red-complexioned” and Edward I (1272–1307) was termed Longshanks, that is “tall.” These might be called *soubriquets*, the term for neutral or favorable nicknames, such as Edward the Confessor. However, in the course of the Hundred Years’ War the English troops were so notorious for their profanity that they were nicknamed *les goddems* by their French opponents. This is seemingly the first instance of a national nickname given on the basis of unpleasant behavior.

The nicknaming of religious out-groups is a major feature of English ecclesiastical history from the Reformation onward. However, even prior to the break with Rome the followers of the reformer John Wycliffe (ca. 1330–1380) were called *Lolleres* or *Lollards*, from Middle Dutch *lollaerd*, meaning a “mumbler” or “stutterer.” In a spirited exchange in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (1386–1400), the Host of the Tabard Inn says of the Parson, who clearly has Wycliffite tendencies, “I smell a Lollere in the wind” (Epilogue to the *Man of Law’s Tale*, l. 1171). Hostile nicknames for **Catholics** became so numerous that they have their own entry.

As sectarian strife intensified, so did the volume of derisive nicknames. Thomas Hall wrote in *The Pulpit Guarded* (1651): “We have many Sects now abroad, Ranters, Seekers, Shakers, Quakers, and now Creepers” (15). **Quaker** (ca. 1647) and **Shaker** (ca. 1648) have their own entries. In the comparative religious tolerance of the United States, especially in Maryland, founded by the Catholic Lord Baltimore as a refuge for persecuted English Catholics, a blasphemy law was passed in 1649. This was directed against “persons reproaching any other by the name or denomination of Heretic, Schismatic, Idolator, Puritan, Independent, Presbyterian, Popish priest, Lutheran, Calvinist, Anabaptist, Brownist, Antinomian, Round-Head, Separatist, or by any other name or term, in a reproachful manner relating to the subject of religion.” It ordered fining, whipping, or imprisonment for offenders who did not publicly supplicate for forgiveness (Myers 1943, 46).

There are two striking features in this list of offending terms. First, it is an indiscriminate mixture of general condemnatory terms like *heretic*, *schismatic*, and *idolater* and names of particular sects, such as *Puritan*, *Lutheran*, and *Calvinist*. Second, with the passage of time, many of the names have become neutral or obsolete. *Presbyterian* and *Lutheran* are now simply denotative terms, whereas labels like *Anabaptist*, *Brownist*, *Antinomian*, *Roundhead*, and *Separatist* are either historical or obsolete. Only *Puritan* and *Calvinist* have retained the critical senses of being “unreasonably austere” or “extremely strict in morality and religious observance” to the point that they can still be used in an insulting fashion.

Extremists generally attract the greatest number of nicknames. In the religious fanaticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, even the term *enthusiasm*, and especially the adjective *enthusiastic*, underwent marked semantic deterioration, so that *enthusiast* came to mean a religious maniac or, in the wry definition of the *OED*, “one who believes himself to be the recipient of special divine communication.” Zealotry generated ironic forms like *Bible-bigot*, used by John Wesley of himself in 1766, followed by *bible-moth* (1789) and *craw-thumpers* (defined by Grose in 1785 as “Roman Catholics, so called

from their beating their breasts in the confession of their sins"). The Bible proved a potent symbol of stigmatization, found in *bible-banger* (1885), *bible-pounder*, found in both slang dictionaries of Barrère & Leland (1889) and Farmer & Henley (1890), and many variations, such as *Bible-bashing* and *bible-thumper*. *The Bible Belt*, coined about 1926, was greatly popularized by H.L. Mencken. An early reference in *The American Mercury* located Jackson, Mississippi, at "the Heart of the Bible and Lynching Belt" (February 1926, 141–42).

Political crises have the semantic effect of generating labels, and the entry for **war** shows how martial conflicts expand and accelerate the process. The origins of *Cavalier*, *Roundhead*, *Whig*, and *Tory* are covered under the entry for **political names**. Nicknames for those in power range from the serious, such as *Bloody Mary* (Mary Tudor) and *The Iron Lady* (Margaret Thatcher) to the comic and ironic, such as *Slick Willy* (Bill Clinton), *Phony Tony* (Tony Blair), and *Dubya* (George W. Bush). *Roundhead* and *Tory* were listed by Grose in 1785, as were *Taffy* for a Welshman, *Paddy* for an Irishman, and *Froglander* for a Dutchman. He defined *shit sack* as "dastardly fellow; also a non-conformist" and *Yankey*, or *Yankey Doodle*, as "A booby, or country lout: a name given to the New England men in North America." Dr. Johnson, whose *Dictionary* (1755) was generally more concerned with polite or "proper" use, was understandably less inclusive. The major subsequent lexicographers of slang and the underworld, namely Farmer and Henley (1890–1904) and Eric Partridge, notably in his *Slang* (1933), included a great number of terms, as have all subsequent slang dictionaries. Although many nicknames for foreigners have developed, such as *chink*, *coolie*, *coon*, *dago*, *wog*, and *wop*, there have generally been little research and specialized interest in the topic in Britain until recently.

As has partly been shown, in the United States there is far greater sensitivity to and awareness of nicknames. Furthermore, the notion of national identity is complicated by the facts of diversity, economic competition, multiculturalism, and numerous minorities. For these and other reasons an astonishing number of nicknames have evolved, both regional and ethnic, leading to comment, research, and analysis by many scholars, including H.L. Mencken, A.A. Roback, Stuart Berg Flexner, and Irving Lewis Allen. In his study *The Language of Ethnic Conflict* (1983), Allen accumulates 1,078 nicknames for more than 50 specific ethnic groups and analyzes them as markers of inter-group conflict, as part of ethnic and urban folklore, stereotyping of stigmatized subcultures and marginalized groups. He notes that they focus on group features like appearance, as in *darkey* and *thicklips*; diet, as in *frog* and *sauerkraut*; occupation, such as *cotton-picking* and *grape-stomper*; negative stereotyping, such as *wetback* and *mafia*; and mispronunciation of group names, such as *eyetie* and *ayrab*. Furthermore, names of groups change into derisive adjectives, such as *russki*, or verbs, such as *to dutch*; also into stereotypes, like *pole* for a stupid person, or metaphors, like *Irish spoon* for shovel, often extended to proverbs or ethnic jokes. Allen concludes: "All ethnic name-calling is at bottom, status-disparagement" (1983, 113).

Regional nicknames abound: among them are *Dixielander*, for a Southerner generally; *Arky* for a person from Arkansas; *Okie* for one from Oklahoma, particularly a migrant worker during the Great Depression. This period of economic hardship had the semantic

consequence of generating great numbers of terms for poor whites and rustics in the South. **Yankee** has a complex history, expanding from a derogatory term referring to Hollanders, then to the Dutch of New York, then to all New Englanders, then to Northerners in the Civil War. Allen (1983) shows that by far the greatest number of nicknames focus on African-Americans (233), Jews (64), Irish (55), Italians (45), and Mexicans (42). However, in the category of names used by Blacks for Whites, Allen finds no less than 111 terms, although many are regional, mild, or jocular, such as *ghost*, *marshmallow*, *thin people*, and *eel*. A possible problem with Allen's methodology is that it emphasizes volume of names rather than intensity. Obviously *gook* and *nigger* have greater individual impact than a whole range of *bonkey*, *cracker*, *ofay*, and so on.

In the other global varieties of English, ethnic nicknames are very common and have generally been used with colonial insensitivity and local xenophobia. Thus Australian English has *chows*, *chinks*, *slit-eyes*, *quangs*, *slants*, and *yellow bastards* for the Chinese and Asians generally, *abos* and *boongs* for the indigenous population, while *pom* has become the enduring term for the English. In South African English, the English were termed *rooineks* (red necks) and *khakis* from the period of the Boer War (1899–1902), the Indians were called *coolies* and *curry-munchers*, the Africans *kaffirs* and *munts*, and the Afrikaners *jaaps*, *hairy-backs*, and *rock-spiders*. These tended to thrive during the era of apartheid (1948–1994), when race and group differences were greatly emphasized, but have steadily lost currency during the period of democracy.

*See also:* Blason Populaire; Catholics; Coolie; Coon; Ethnic Slurs; Gook; Mencken, H.L.; Nigger; Partridge, Eric; Quakers and Shakers; Wog; Yankee.

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## NIGGER

The history of the term is largely, but not exclusively, confined to American English and to insulting references to blacks. In detail it is more complex, as are the semantic nuances, which in American English vary from extreme offensiveness when used of blacks by whites, to affectionate expressions of solidarity when used in black English. The history of the term shows three basic stages. The first is as a descriptive term not always intended to offend, recorded from ca. 1574 to 1840. However, many of the early instances derive from the practice of slavery: “One nigger Boy” comes from an inventory of slaves dated 1689, while John Anderson styled himself as “Governor over the niegors in Connecticut” in