

# UNIVERSITY NICKNAMES: LANGUAGE, POWER AND EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study analyses nicknames as a linguistic and sociocultural phenomenon at the National University of San Cristóbal de Huamanga (UNSCH), with particular emphasis on their role in identity construction, power dynamics, and social relations.

**Theoretical framework:** The research draws upon linguistic, sociocultural and anthropological theories, incorporating Saussure's concept of the linguistic sign, Goffman's theory of social identity, and Bourdieu's insights on the social function of language.

**Method:** A qualitative approach was employed, combining ethnographic, hermeneutic and phenomenological methods. Data collection included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis. The study examined linguistic structures, usage contexts, and social perceptions surrounding nicknames within the university community.

**Results and discussion:** Nicknames reflect patterns of humour, criticism and sarcasm, and function as indicators of social and academic status. Their historical evolution, contextual variations, and effects on self-perception were identified. While they may strengthen social bonds, they also act as mechanisms of exclusion and stigmatisation.

**Keywords:** Nickname, communication, culture, higher education, language, symbolism

## Introduction

Language not only names; it creates, shapes and conditions our social relationships. In university settings, nicknames—though informal—express tensions, affections and power relations. This study explores how nicknames are used at the National University of San Cristóbal de

Huamanga, and what they reveal about identity, humour, and social hierarchies.

**Language, identity and power in social interaction.** Language is a fundamental tool for expressing thoughts, emotions and social relations. Chomsky (1957) defines it as an innate human faculty enabling the development of

complex communication. However, its power is ambivalent: as Lakoff (2002) observes, language can foster creativity and empathy, but also reproduce hierarchies, exclusions and stigma.

From mythological traditions, such as the Popol Vuh (2022), to the biblical Book of Genesis, language has been conceived as a divine and creative force. Over time, it has assumed concrete social functions: for instance, official institutions such as RENIEC in Peru use names and surnames for legal identification. Yet beyond official identity, there exists another domain of language that is equally powerful and socially relevant: the nickname.

**Nicknames as cultural and linguistic expressions.** Nicknames are informal linguistic constructions, often spontaneous, that assign new meanings to a person's identity. They may be affectionate, ironic, humorous or cruel. Although lacking legal recognition, they exert a strong influence on how individuals are perceived and how they perceive themselves.

Anthroponymy—the study of names—shows that unlike official names, nicknames are shaped by metaphor, memory and emotion. They reflect cultural norms, social hierarchies, and group dynamics. As Fischer (2002) and López (2018) argue, nicknames are not merely words: they are markers of symbolic power within social networks.

**Previous research.** Studies conducted in various contexts confirm the social relevance of nicknames. Moreira et al. (2020) and Bolaños (2021) analysed how adolescents use nicknames to explore autonomy and identity. Balanta (2020) examined how nicknames shape perceptions of university professors in Colombia. From a linguistic perspective, Lara (2023) studied the referential role of nicknames.

### Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative, ethnographic and descriptive approach aimed at understanding the use of nicknames at the National University of San Cristóbal de Huamanga from a linguistic, cultural and social perspective. Participant observation and in-depth interviews were conducted with students, lecturers and

administrative staff, enabling the collection of experiences, meanings, and evaluations associated with nickname usage in the university environment.

In addition, a specialised literature review was carried out focusing on studies related to language, identity and symbolic dynamics in educational contexts. Discourse analysis was also applied to interpret the semantic load, metaphors, and expressive resources found in nicknames. This methodology made it possible to explore how nicknames operate as mechanisms of identification, inclusion, exclusion and resistance within the academic community.

### Language, Imagination, and the Drivers of Communication

#### Language and Duality: Creativity and Power

Language, as an intrinsic manifestation of human nature, is the medium through which we express and symbolize thoughts, ideas, and emotions. Its essence is dual: it functions both as a tool for creativity and knowledge and as a vehicle for manipulation and power.

#### Humor, Parody, and Irony in Communication

Husserl (1995) distinguishes between positive humor—which balances emotions—and negative humor—which causes discomfort. In this context, irony and parody—rhetorical figures characteristic of dramatic art—reinforce the ambivalence of language. Jankélévitch (1986) emphasizes that irony must not be detached from its context or its playful dimension, as its meaning depends on the communicative process in which it is embedded.

#### Social Elements of Communication: Symbols and Voice

Beyond being a tool for expression, language incorporates elements such as mockery and dark humor, which influence social communication. Parody, defined as a burlesque imitation, is interwoven with irony and gestural demagoguery. Human communication is built upon:

- signals,
- signs,
- symbols.

Leach (1989) highlights that these elements confer a sacred character in their primordial forms, such as spoken language.

The voice, considered the first vehicle of vocal expression, is an essential feature of identity, integrating attributes such as tone and intonation.

### **Mediated Communication: Migration and Decoding**

García Canclini (1995) and Martín-Barbero (1987) point out that communication has shifted from traditional spaces to mass media, transforming both everyday interaction and cultural values. In this regard:

- Bourdieu (1996) argues that communication depends not only on message transmission but also on the receiver's ability to decode it.
- Hall (2005) highlights the importance of nonverbal elements—such as gestures and silences—in meaning-making.

### **Andean Tradition: Creative Word and Nicknames**

The Andean tradition recognizes a creative power in spoken language, evident in the academic culture of San Cristóbal, where professors and students have developed a rich tradition of nicknames. These names emerge to designate and confer identity upon individuals, evoking foundational myths in which the spoken word shapes reality—just as in Genesis with the divine proclamation “Let there be light.”

Thus, language not only reflects the Andean worldview but also serves as a means of interaction and belonging within the community. However, despite their social roots, nicknames lack legal validity, as identity recognition is governed by the formal norms of the Civil Registry. This contrast highlights the dual nature of language: while it serves as a vehicle for creativity and identification in cultural contexts, it is constrained in the legal realm by a set of formal rules that do not always capture its full symbolic richness.

### **Anthroponymy and the Study of Nicknames**

Anthroponymy is the branch of onomastics dedicated to the analysis of personal names, especially proper names. In this field, nicknames play a relevant role as forms of address, similar to given names, surnames, hypocoristics, and epithets.

The literature often associates nicknames with similar terms:

- monikers,
- aliases,
- sobriquets.

However, not all sobriquets are considered nicknames in the strict sense, as reflected in the definition provided by the Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy (DRAE).

### **From Nickname to Surname: Origins and Diversity of Last Names**

Surnames did not always arise from family lineage. Their emergence is tied to multiple factors associated with identifiable features of everyday life. Some reflect physical traits, such as Rubio (blond) or Moreno (dark-skinned); others evoke elements of nature, like Flores (flowers) or Pino (pine). Certain surnames come from the animal world, such as León (lion) or Gallo (rooster), while others originate from anecdotal circumstances, like Pescador (fisherman) or Piedra (stone).

There are also surnames linked to kinship or marital status, such as Sobrino (nephew) or Casado (married), and others that refer to occupations, positions, or religious titles, like Abad (abbot) or Obispo (bishop). It was also common for surnames to refer to places of origin—Del Valle (from the valley), De la Torre (from the tower)—or to geographical features, such as Lagos (lakes) or Fuentes (fountains). Some convey emotional or moral qualities—Alegre (joyful), Valiente (brave)—while others, like Concha or Verga, have prompted ironic or sarcastic interpretations, often causing mockery or even psychological distress in daily life.

Altogether, surnames serve as a testament to linguistic and cultural diversity, reflecting the complex relationship between people, nature, and their environment over time.

## **Perception and Meaning: Keys to Social Interaction**

Perception and meaning are fundamental elements in understanding human experience in contexts of social interaction, where meaning is built from accumulated experiences. According to Gibson (1979), perception is an active process through which individuals organize and interpret sensory information to make sense of the surrounding world. Meaning, on the other hand, refers to the attribution of value and significance to perceived stimuli, integrating both cognitive and cultural components.

From the perspective of cognitive psychology, Gestalt theory posits that perception is organized according to principles of grouping, proximity, similarity, and closure (Wertheimer, 1923). This perspective emphasizes the human tendency to identify meaningful patterns even when sensory information is ambiguous or incomplete. Complementarily, Vygotsky (1978), from a sociocultural approach, highlights the influence of the social environment in the construction of meaning. In his framework, the value of objects and events is shaped through social interaction and the use of language, revealing the close relationship between perception, meaning, and cultural context.

## **Nicknames and Pseudonyms: Social Masks and Stigmatization**

Pseudonyms and nicknames act as social masks that individuals adopt or receive in various contexts. While pseudonyms are imaginary identities voluntarily chosen, nicknames are usually imposed by others. Though sometimes intended to be playful or affectionate, they often carry a pejorative connotation. In many cases, they function as tools of stigmatization, allowing individuals to project their own insecurities through stereotypes or mechanisms of exclusion. For example, a person self-conscious about their height may channel that insecurity by mocking another with a nickname like *chato* (shorty), *sencillo* (simple), or *puksu* (Quechua slang for overweight or slow). In this way, the nickname becomes a mechanism of ridicule, especially when used in public settings or to reinforce social labels.

This phenomenon is closely tied to the reproduction of prejudice, as nicknames tend to

reduce a person's identity to a visible trait, such as skin color, speech pattern, or a physical feature. In his work *Stigma*, psychologist Erving Goffman (2006) analyzes how these negative labels affect both individual identity and interpersonal relationships.

Similarly, Heider's attribution theory (1958) suggests that people tend to interpret events by assigning them internal or external causes, which shapes the meaning they ascribe to them. This approach underscores the importance of cognitive processes and the sociocultural context in the construction of meaning. Thus, when a person succeeds in imposing a nickname that is socially shared, understood, and accepted, it is seen as an effective act of symbolic attribution. These nicknames can become so deeply embedded in daily use that they replace the person's given name and become part of their social identity. Why does this happen? Because the naming process has succeeded in establishing the nickname as a collective marker of identity.

## **The Identifying Nickname: More Than Just a Name**

Over time, many given names lose their distinctiveness due to frequent use, leading to ambiguity in personal identification. This situation is especially evident in contexts where multiple people share the same name. In such cases, nicknames play a crucial role by adding distinguishing features to an individual's identity, serving as a supplementary form of anthroponymy that provides a unique and distinctive meaning. Their use is particularly common in small communities—such as neighborhoods, workplaces, or recreational circles—where more precise identification is required. In this way, the nickname goes beyond functioning as a mere individual marker and becomes a sign laden with connotations and meaning.

Nicknames often arise from a specific situation or a distinctive trait of the individual. While they frequently take caricatured or exaggerated forms, they are rarely openly acknowledged by the person they are given to. However, once a nickname gains popularity and begins to circulate socially, its story and meaning can achieve collective recognition. The longevity of a nickname depends on its relevance and its ability to accurately represent the individual. In this

sense, nicknames act as a bridge between name and identity, offering an effective means of identification and revealing particular aspects of a person.

Nicknames are highly motivated signs that not only name but also define. By linking an individual to specific internal or external qualities, a nickname integrates those traits into their very designation, highlighting a distinctive feature. In this way, nicknames not only identify but also animate and give symbolic vitality to the person who bears them. From football fans to historical figures, nicknames are an integral part of culture and identity at all social levels. These examples illustrate how a nickname can capture the essence of a person, often in an affectionate or endearing manner, becoming a fundamental component of identity that transcends sociocultural boundaries.

Throughout history, many figures have been immortalized not only by their achievements but also by the nicknames that collective memory has assigned them, based on their traits, actions, or iconic feats. From great leaders to revolutionary artists, innovative thinkers, and visionary scientists, all have left a mark that helped shape the course of humanity. For instance, Pepin, father of Charlemagne, was known as the Short for his small stature; Alfonso X of Castile, famous for his contributions to science and literature, was called the Wise; Richard I of England became the Lionheart for his bravery in the Crusades; and Edward I, also an English king, was nicknamed Longshanks for his long limbs. Similarly, much debate has arisen over who the most influential figure of all time might be. Some argue it was Jesus Christ, for his impact on religion and Western culture; others highlight Muhammad for his foundational role in Islam; while still others point to figures like Albert Einstein for his theory of relativity or Isaac Newton for laying the foundations of modern physics. Even in recent times, names such as Mahatma Gandhi or Steve Jobs are cited as agents of change whose ideas transformed the world. These names—with or without nicknames—embody legacies that transcend their time and reflect the ways in which history remembers and re-signifies them.

### Uses and Contexts of Application

This section addresses the settings and modes in which nicknames are used within the university

environment, encompassing both formal and informal situations, as well as various spaces such as classrooms, student events, social media, and more. At the National University of San Cristóbal de Huamanga (UNSCH), nicknames are deeply rooted in academic and student life, reflecting complex social dynamics that intertwine with institutional cultural identity and the needs of its student community. Their use extends beyond classrooms, reaching hallways, administrative offices, and even recreational areas. According to an interview conducted, it was stated:

“Nicknames at the university increased progressively, especially with the arrival of young people from other regions and professors from different places, even from Lima.”

—Informant Taquiri (Interview, May 2023)

Given the sociogeographic diversity of the Andes, nicknames can function as mechanisms of inclusion or exclusion within student groups, influencing the perception of belonging and acceptance in the university community, depending on specific contextual conditions. This is clearly seen in examples such as the following:

“Nicknames also reflected localized adaptations and were assigned based on physical traits, certain imperfections, or place of origin. For example, Engineer Cruz, who was a rector, was called ‘the Chinchano’ because he was from Chinchu.”

—Informant Taquiri (Interview, May 2023)

Along similar lines, López (2020) notes that nicknames can serve as forms of resistance or critique directed at figures of authority, revealing power dynamics within the university context. In Ayacucho, this is especially evident during carnival festivities:

“We had an old acquaintance nicknamed ‘Tuto’, a name that came to be attributed to him for being very clever.”

—Informant Taquiri (Interview, May 2023)

It is essential to note that any ethical research must consider the possible psychological impacts of nicknames, especially when they carry negative or discriminatory connotations (García, 2019). In such cases, the study itself could be interpreted as discriminatory; however, this interpretation is subject to debate or may depend on individual perception, as suggested by the following testimony:

“There might be discrimination, but I believe that in the university context it wasn't really accepted. I don't think so; I didn't feel it happened because nicknames were given due to various situational circumstances. I didn't see signs of racism—something that might be more evident in universities in the capital.”

—Informant Taquiri (Interview, May 2023)

The analysis of the uses and contexts of nicknames at UNSCH reveals the complexity of social interactions and identity-building processes within the university setting. Moreira et al. (2020) emphasize that nicknames function as tools of renaming that allow for the exploration of identity and autonomy, while Balanta (2020) underscores that they reflect shared imaginaries about behavior and pedagogy. These findings highlight the need to approach nicknames not only as linguistic phenomena but also as indicators of broader social dynamics within educational institutions.

### **Nicknames in the Criminal Underworld: Labels Laden with Meaning**

In the criminal world, nicknames take on particular meaning within an environment characterized by a disparaging and offensive view of others. While they do not always reflect the truth, they fulfill a distinctive and evocative function, becoming an essential part of the socialization process. In drug trafficking, for example, nicknames may denote ferocity, power, or be inspired by specific actions. One such case is El Mochomo, attributed to Mexican drug lord Alfredo Beltrán Leyva, referring to a type of harmful ant in Mexico. Other nicknames may carry lighter connotations, such as El Alcalde (the Mayor), given to someone who solves problems,

or El Golosina (the Candy), referring to someone considered attractive or desirable.

These nicknames serve a pragmatic function and contribute to identity construction within these groups. They reflect how individuals are perceived and can influence their status. Their tone ranges from crude to humorous, such as La Gangrena (Gangrene) for someone deemed unattractive, or El Diario Mojado (the Wet Newspaper) for someone who struggles to express themselves. Some refer to external realities, such as La Villa Miseria (Shantytown), used pejoratively to describe a rundown neighborhood. At the National University of Huamanga, a collection of nicknames has been documented that showcases the sharp wit and creativity of both students and teaching staff. These nicknames, often exaggerated and satirical, introduce a comic dimension that contrasts with the harsh realities of prison life.

Nicknames in prison, in particular, stand out for their ingenuity and creativity, often employing irony, absurdity, paradox, and verbal wit. They connect elements of reality in unexpected and humorous ways. These highly conceptual nicknames help reinforce social cohesion in small groups. However, despite their humorous potential, they are often rooted in degradation, mockery, or humiliation, reflecting the rawness and aggressiveness of these contexts. Thus, nicknames in the criminal underworld are not merely products of verbal cleverness but also an exploration of the relationship between language and meaning. They frequently rely on metaphors or metonymy to attribute characteristics to individuals, associating elements from different semantic fields in surprising ways. These nicknames demonstrate how language can serve as a tool for humor, expression, and social interaction even in the most adverse environments.

### **Nicknames for Professors: Cultural Tradition, Ethnicity, and Power**

In Peruvian culture, nicknames are an integral part of everyday life, both in rural and urban settings, and are often imbued with familiarity, affection, and humor. In Peru, these nicknames may refer to physical traits, behaviors, or significant events in a person's life. However, they can also function as markers of social distinction, collective identity,

political power, racial discrimination, and mechanisms of self-identification. When asked whether the use of nicknames constitutes a form of racial discrimination, one interviewee offered a revealing reflection on how this phenomenon is perceived in contemporary society:

“Society externalizes its forms of negative social discrimination—including the construction of stereotypes and the stigmatization of certain groups and individuals—through labels that not only identify but also establish social distinctions. Calling someone chato (shorty) may, in some cases, be a show of affection or closeness, but it also carries an implicit discriminatory bias. These labels reinforce a separation between the one who names and the one being named, suggesting the latter possesses traits the former does not, thereby solidifying social differentiation.”  
(Informant CI, interview, June 2024)

In identity construction, as seen in Huamanga and many other Andean societies, it is a deeply rooted custom to assign nicknames in Quechua to people, whether due to particular circumstances or personal traits. This tradition is passed down from generation to generation—often from parents to children—and is closely tied to the social and geographic environment. Far from being a pejorative practice, the use of nicknames is generally accepted and well received within the community, where many people are better known by their nicknames than their given names. Although some may seem ironic or humorous, they are usually used with affection and respect, without causing offense. Common examples include Cheqo, and others that highlight specific physical features, such as Pinki for someone with bulging eyes, Ñawsa for a blind person, Qalas for someone without a beard, or Chapo for someone very hairy.

In a country as ethnically diverse as Peru—with Indigenous peoples, mestizos, Afro-Peruvians, and European descendants—nicknames reflect both cultural identities and social and racial tensions. Some have been used to mark ethnic differences, especially in urban contexts where hierarchical and colonial perspectives still persist.

Terms like indio have been used pejoratively to emphasize racial distinctions, while others directed at mestizos or Afro-Peruvians have also carried racist connotations. Historical discrimination has perpetuated expressions like cholo or negro for the purpose of exclusion or marginalization, reinforcing social hierarchies. In the university setting, nicknames reveal power dynamics and cultural clashes, illustrating how social and political relations influence the ways people are named and categorized. In this context, nicknames may acquire symbolic meanings that transcend the personal, becoming tools for collective identification and social expression. Through them, tensions between different social and ethnic groups are reflected and reinforced, as demonstrated by the interviews presented below, which highlight the affective character of this practice.

Among the cases documented are Mundolo, a nickname given to someone perceived as clumsy or unattractive; Gallina (Hen) for MJF, due to behaviors considered cowardly; Doctor Mondongo for PH, a Quechua speaker who struggles to express himself in Spanish and is said to “only speak corn stew”; Pumpu, a Quechua word meaning “drum”, assigned to B for his robust build; Puca, Quechua for “red”, referring to Esquivel because of his reddish complexion; and Chasqui for JCHM, due to his round, prominent, marble-like eyes. (Interview, June 2024)

Nicknames at UNSCH reflect social and linguistic dynamics that go beyond simple identification, expressing aspects of identity, humor, and, in some cases, discrimination. Moreira et al. (2020) argue that nicknames can influence the construction of subjectivity, while Cárdenas (2023) highlights their role in various sociocultural contexts, including their use to emphasize physical or linguistic traits. Examples like Doctor Mondongo or Pumpu illustrate the link between nicknames and ethnic or bodily characteristics, aligning with Balanta’s (2020) observations on how these names reflect collective perceptions within a group. Thus, their use in the university community reflects not only humor or mockery, but also broader processes of social and cultural categorization.

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of nicknames conducted in this study

demonstrates that their function goes beyond mere identification, as they play a central role in the construction of subjectivity and social identity (Moreira et al., 2020). In the educational sphere, Balanta (2020) points out that nicknames reflect collective perceptions of behavior and pedagogy, which explains their frequent use among university teachers and students. Likewise, their use may respond to dynamics of exclusion or resistance, especially in marginalized contexts, as highlighted by Cárdenas (2023), who underscores their role in prison settings, where nicknames function as mechanisms of identification and social stratification.

Moreover, nicknames fulfill a relevant social function during adolescence, a stage in which humor and laughter facilitate group integration and the formation of subjectivities (Bolaños, 2021). This playful and critical dimension is manifested in their linguistic structure, which, according to Lara (2023) and López (2018), incorporates metaphors, semantic intensifiers, and various expressive resources that enrich everyday speech. In cohesive communities, they also contribute to establishing internal distinctions within highly homogeneous groups, as described by Lončar (2021) in his study on nicknames in rural contexts, where such labels are passed down generationally.

Additionally, nicknames are influenced by cultural and linguistic diversity, as observed by Djandué (2021), who analyzes their role in processes of adaptation and integration during second-language acquisition. This linguistic flexibility is key to their persistence and vitality, as they often do not conform to conventional grammatical norms yet remain an essential part of social communication. In this sense, nicknames are not only expressions of wit and humor but also markers of identity that reflect power relations, social bonds, and cultural dynamics within different communities.

## CONCLUSIONS

Nicknames constitute a fundamental dimension of human communication, oscillating between humor and discrimination. Their origin lies in diverse cultural, social, and political contexts, which allows them to reflect the complexity of human interactions. They serve as tools to identify, label, and differentiate individuals,

whether for affectionate or pejorative purposes, and may express power, identity, or creativity. The meaning and use of nicknames vary significantly depending on the context and the intentions of those who use them.

Unlike proper names, nicknames are more adaptable to translation across different languages, as their transformation tends to be more fluid and natural. The creativity involved in their creation is practically unlimited, in contrast to anthroponyms, which tend to be more restricted in their symbolic forms. Nicknames may originate from nouns, verbs, complete phrases, modifications of other nicknames, or even gender and number alterations, which reveals their remarkable linguistic versatility. Thus, nicknames emerge as living expressions of language and social imagination, playing a fundamental role in the construction of both individual and collective identities.

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