

## What's in a Nickname? Nicknames and Identity in the 2010 Football World Cup in South Africa

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### Abstract

This study is an analysis of the nicknames of the football teams that participated in the 2010 football World Cup which took place in South Africa. The objective is to explore how countries and nations emphasize and substantiate their identity using nicknames. Concepts like audience design and mask theory are employed to account for how nicknames are formed. The Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a theoretical as well as empirical basis for the analysis of the data.

**Key words:** Nicknames; Sports language; Audience design; CDA

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### INTRODUCTION

“Quelle est la nation?” (*What's a nation?*). This is a question asked by Ernest Renan (1882) in a lecture in 1882, invoking a plethora of responses since then. Among these is a response that is rather mocking; a nation consists of a land, population, *and* a football team! I would go even further and add: and a nickname for that football team! The sports tournaments are increasingly becoming an opportunity for nations to emphasize and substantiate their identities, and the presence in the sports events is used by national governments for “legitimizing their presence in the international *communitas*” (Torres, 2011). When the French football team won the 1998

world Cup for the first time ever, the French ex-President Jacques Chirac found it a valuable opportunity to crack down on some hard line parties who were against his immigration policies. He said this victory was achieved by the football team of a unified country with a multitude of races. The ex-President of South Africa Nelson Mandela, when promoting the South African bidding profile for the 2010 World Cup Championship, said something like, “Give a new nation an opportunity for a new start”. Some countries emphasize their identities by breaking records and winning championships. Another way is by celebrating their national anthems, flags, and costumes. Yet, a third way is by using nicknames that reflect their aspirations and ambitions (Pederson, 2011).

### 1. LITERATURE

Shakespeare's famous question in *Romeo and Juliet*, “*What's in a name? That which we call a rose. By any other name would smell as sweet*” poses a debate over the arbitrariness of the name and the named, the signifier and the signified, using de Saussure's terms (1959, p. 66, p. 102; see also *concept* and *sound-image* dichotomy); However some scholars have a different view. Smith (as cited in Eid 1994) believes that “a name is not just a label. It is a symbol that defines us ... and a short-hand for the self-concept”. Whether the relationship between the sound and the meaning, the signifier the signified, is arbitrary or not is a controversial issue as far as proper and personal names are concerned (Abd-el-Jawad 1986; Suleiman 2011). But when it comes to the nicknames used for the football teams, they are by no means arbitrary. They are an intentional way of introducing the team and the country it represents with a distinct identity, adding humor and liveliness to the football matches, and contributing to the richness of the football terminology in the media.

Regarding the source of these nicknames and how they are formed, Bell's (1984) audience design is a helpful

framework in this regard. Bell assumes that the linguistic features chosen by speakers are adopted and adjusted to be compatible with those of their audience. Qasim (2009) uses this concept in inferring the target group from the newspaper advertisements, and therefore identifying the relationship between advertisement code choice and the target audience.

Koller (2004) assumes that using the war metaphor in describing women managers in U.S. and U.K. business magazines reflects the hegemonic masculinity determining business discourse. Koller's study is significant at the methodological as well as the theoretical levels as it benefits from the critical discourse analysis (CDA). It's an approach that "regards the socio-economic sphere ... as the highest level of analysis, incorporating various discourses, and defined by their topic". Different terms are used by linguists to refer to equivalent concepts; for example, topic, domain, field, sphere, and frame are just a few examples. Koller also introduces the term *conceptual metaphor*, which is the underlying metaphor upon which all the actual metaphors are based on. For example, by giving the Algerian team the actual nickname the *Desert Warrior*, you assume that the PLAYERS ARE WARRIORS, or THE MATCH IS A WAR, the latter two being the underlying conceptual metaphors.

Upon the previous studies, the following proposal will be formed: the nicknames used to describe the football teams are conscious ways of forming a national identity for each team. In order to achieve this objective, different terms from different domains such as war, animal, and color were employed. Despite the multiplicity of nicknames and the domains from which they are taken, there are common traits upon which the analysis will be based: First, metaphorical expressions; second, masculinity and humor; third, differences between Arabic, African and global identities.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study investigates the nicknames of the football teams that participated in the 2010 world cup in South Africa. These nicknames are taken from the website

(worldcupblog.org) and the Arabic-speaking Aljazeera sports channels. The number of countries participating in the world cup tournament is 32; however, the number of the nicknames used is 43. This is because some teams are given more than one nickname, such as the Brazilian team; they are the *Samba team* (after their national dancing), the *Green and Yellow* (after the color of their shirts) and the *Canary*. Some nicknames are peculiar to the Arabic speaking media, such as Algerian's *Desert Warriors*, instead of the *Desert Foxes*. The German team are described as the *Machine*, and the *Mannschaft* (the German word for *team*). The data are classified into six conceptual metaphors: war, animals, color, dancing, masculinity, and others. This method of classifying the nicknames is based on the Critical Discourse Analysis in the sense that the socio-economic sphere is seen as the highest level of analysis that incorporates different discourses (see Koller 2004 above).

## 3. RESULTS

What is really astonishing is how the linguistic behavior which is expected to be generally sporadic and not rule-governed is in fact systematic and follows certain patterns. Based on the different countries from which these nicknames are taken, and by considering the influence of the audience and the spectators in forming and reforming these nicknames (see Bell 1984), the results were expected to be sporadic. It is evident from the list below that the results are by no means sporadic. The Animals and Color classes constitute 57% of the data. The animals add to the theme of strength that is necessary in combats. Colors are also essential for distinguishing the two armies in the battle field, and the two teams in the football field. Masculinity is an indispensable feature of warfare. In football, it was only recently that females showed interest in the game. Moreover, dancing used to be a tradition associated with wars. Even the Danish *Dynamitic* and the Portuguese *Shields* are also associated with war gear. The objective of this argument is to show that the nicknames eventually demonstrate one common theme, that of combat.

**Table 1**  
**Distribution of Nicknames of Countries into Conceptual Metaphors**

Country	War	Animals/birds	Color	Dancing	Masculine	Other
Algeria	Desert Warriors	Desert Foxes				
Cameron		Indomitable Lions				
Ghana			Black Stars			
Ivory Coast		Elephants				
Nigeria		Super Eagles				
S.Africa					Bafana Bafana (boys)	
Argentina			Sky-Blue White	Tango		
Australia		Kangaroo				
Brazil		Little Canary	Green& Yellow	Samba		

To be continued

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Country	War	Animals/birds	Color	Dancing	Masculine	Other
Chile			Red One			
Denmark						Dynamitic
England		Three Lions				
France		Roosters	Blues			
Germany						Mannschaft/ Machine
Greece	Pirate Ship					
Honduras						Hondurans
Italy			Azzuri (blues)			
Japan	Samurai Warriors		Samurai Blues			
Mexico			Tricolor			
Netherlands			Oranges			
N. Zealand			All Whites			
N. Korea		Chollima (mythical horse)				
Paraguay			White -Red			Guarani
Portugal						Team of the Five Shields
Serbia			White Eagles			
Slovakia						Repre
Slovenia		Fighting Jonda(dragons)				
S. Korea	Taeguk Warriors					
Spain		Matador				Red Fury
Switzerland						Schweizer Nati/ Watch
USA	Yanks				Men's National Team	
Uruguay			Sky- Blue			

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Metaphorical Nicknames We Live by

In the heart of nearly every everyday sentence lies a metaphor, simply because it links two domains together (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Sweetser 1995). Using this concept of the metaphor, coupled with Koller's conceptual metaphors above, the nicknames are classified into six types as Table 1 shows. Five of the teams are described as *Warriors*. The Japans are *Samurai warriors* and the Greek are *Pirates*. Nine teams are associated with animals and birds; in some cases the names of the animals used are the most common, such as the Ivory Coast's *Elephants* and the Australian *Kangaroos*. In other cases they are mythical animals, such as the North Korean mythical horse *Chollima*, and the Slovenian dragon *Jonda*. The above 'actual' uses of nicknames presuppose an 'underlying' metaphor, namely THE FOOTBALL MATCH IS A WAR or THE PLAYERS ARE FIGHTERS.

The distinction of the teams upon colors contributes to the battle theme. The armies are distinguishable in the battle field according to their colors, and so are the teams in the 'playing field'. From a psycholinguistic viewpoint, the gist of an expression is what is remembered in the course of time. Therefore, in a sentence like *a red face*, the adjective *red* is fused with the noun *face*, and the mental representation of the noun is retained only long enough to

be used in comprehending subsequent sentences (Taylor, 1990, p. 131). Unlike the adjective in the above example, the color words are more prevalent and long remembered than the team words they describe. The word 'team' is common among all the teams and therefore is no longer distinctive. For example, the Netherlands team are the *Oranges*, not the orange team; the Serbian are the *Blue*, not the blue team, and so on.

Notice that the Italians are described as the *Azzuri*. Although it is the Italian word for 'blue', it is more widely remembered. Similarly, the Germans are nicknamed as the *Mannschaft*, which is simply the German word for 'the team'. Finally, the football players are like dancers. They perform in front an audience. The Argentine team are the *Tango*, and the Brazilian are the *Samba*, after their national dancing.

### 4.2 Masculine Humor and Masculine Violence: Shall the Twain Ever Meet?

Yes, they shall meet, in football! What directly comes to mind after assuming the football match as a war is the violence that often accompanies sports activities. Violence is an essential component that makes sports appealing to spectators. Small wonder that contemporary sports violence is a reminder of the "public appetite for violent sports entertainment [dating] to the Roman era of gladiator spectacles" (Fuller, 2010). Ironically, violence is a basic ingredient of masculinity, and so is humor! Nicknames are

an opportunity to intensify gender identity. The Spanish team are the *Red Fury*; they are furious and angry, and if I were you, I would be wary of their fury when they are in the battlefield! In addition, the nicknames are informal ways that allow users “considerable linguistic license in breaking the rules” (Klerk & Bosch 1997). Describing the teams as warriors, pirates, lions, and boys adds to the image of hegemonic masculinity, but at the same time gives a flavor of playfulness and informality that is necessary to lessen the stress that often accompanies competitions. Moreover, humor is often viewed as a protective mask against being made fun of (Biela, 2008, p. 129), and to underpin objectivism, self-awareness and modest self-depreciation, and as Easthope (as cited by Biela, 2008) convincingly puts it, “I’ll laugh at myself before others laugh at me”.

### 4.3 Arab, African and Global Identities

By global we mean all the countries in the table above other than the six African countries. The Algerian is the only Arab team participating in the tournament. It seems the Arabs are not keen on using animals in their nicknames. The Internet resources (e. g., worldcupblog.org) describe the Algerians as the *Desert Foxes*, whereas in the Arabic speaking media (e. g., Aljazeera channels) they are described as the *Desert Warriors*. However, the African and the global teams use the animal terms fairly frequently, especially the lions and the horses. The Arabs usually describe the German team as the *machine*, and the Swiss team as the *Swiss Watch* to reflect an admiration in their efficiency and punctuality. Skin Colors are generally avoided when it comes to the Arab and the African teams, except for Ghana’s *Black Stars*. More apparently in the global teams, the national heritage and folklore are employed, such as the Japanese *Samurai*, the South Korean *Taeguk*, the North Korean mythical horse *Chollima*, and the Slovenian mythical dragon *Jonda*. In Paraguay, the indigenous people are called the *Guarani*, and in Brazil, the people dance the *Samba*.

### CONCLUSION

The ability to put the data into patterns according to certain theoretical and empirical frameworks plays a crucial role towards a better understanding of a variable, diverse and multi-facet phenomenon like the language behavior. In the present study, the critical discourse analysis serves this end perfectly well. It is quite a helpful approach as it dissects and groups the nicknames into comparable domains within the socio-economic umbrella. However, one should be wary of some of the downsides of the above approach, since it is simply an attempt to tame the un-tamed! In the simple act of nickname-giving, a number of social, political and personal forces are in effect, altogether trying to reinforce an identity.

As a result, the nicknames in football are looked at

from some other angles such the audience design and the mask theory. The role of the listeners or spectators in forming the nicknames can never be ignored, either directly or by the feedback criticism via the media. What adds to the complexity of the identity issue is the fact that it is not a matter of ‘one man - one identity’ dichotomy. For example, the football player in the Algerian team simultaneously holds ‘the burden’ of the Arab, African and global identities, not to mention the personal, religious and gender ones. Moreover, the mainstream research is directed towards how language acts as a marker, i.e. the identity you want to unveil, but not much is being said about how you use language to express an identity you want to conceal.

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