

Naming Power: Political Nicknames, Connotative Meaning and Democratic Discourse in Kenya

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Abstract

In contexts where formal political institutions are distrusted and mainstream media is perceived as captured, citizens frequently turn to informal linguistic practices to assert democratic voice. Kenya offers a particularly compelling case: on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok, the coinage and viral circulation of political nicknames has become a primary medium through which ordinary Kenyans evaluate, satirize, and contest the behavior of their leaders. Yet despite the obvious social salience of this practice, it has attracted negligible scholarly attention. This article addresses that gap through a qualitative analysis of nicknames assigned to seventeen prominent Kenyan politicians, examined using Leech's (1981) Associative Theory of Meaning, with connotative meaning as the principal analytical category. Data were generated through focused group discussions with third-year linguistics students at Kirinyaga University, researcher introspection grounded in lived political experience, and systematic analysis of digital media sources. Three thematic functions emerge from the corpus: political identity construction and populist branding, satirical dissent and accountability discourse, and cultural and ethnic identity consolidation. The analysis establishes that Kenyan political nicknames are dynamic, contested, and semantically sophisticated they encode evaluative stances, mobilize cultural intertexts, and participate in power relations between citizens and leaders. Beyond their local significance, these naming practices illuminate broader questions about informal political communication, language and democracy, and citizen agency in digitally mediated public spheres. The article contributes to onomastics, African sociolinguistics, political communication studies, and the emerging field of digital political discourse.

Keywords: Connotative meaning, digital political discourse, Kenya, nicknames, onomastics, political communication, Leech's associative theory

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Introduction

When Kenyans nicknamed their sitting president "Zakayo" the Kiswahili equivalent of the biblical tax collector Zacchaeus the label achieved nationwide currency within days. No press statement issued it. No party headquarters endorsed it. It spread because it compressed a complex political complaint about punitive taxation into a single, culturally resonant word that anyone who had attended Sunday school could decode. This is the specific power of the political nickname: it makes visible what formal political discourse often obscures, and it does so in a register that travels far beyond the reach of official communication channels.

Language has always been among the primary arenas in which political power is asserted, contested, and subverted, and the capacity to name and thereby to frame a political actor constitutes a significant form of power (Fairclough, 2015; van Dijk, 2008). Nicknames occupy a peculiar position in this broader economy of political naming. Unlike formal designations that are institutionally ratified and legally encoded, nicknames emerge from below: they are coined in social networks, travel through informal channels, and persist in public memory precisely because they capture something that official nomenclature cannot or will not say.

In Kenya, the social and political significance of naming runs deep. Across the country's many linguistic

communities, personal names are rarely arbitrary; they encode biographical circumstances, ancestral connections, and moral expectations (Mutegei et al., 2017; Völkel, 2024). This tradition of meaningful naming has migrated into the political domain, where citizens routinely supplement and sometimes displace politicians' legal identities with informal monikers that encode popular evaluations of their conduct, character, and political positioning. The advent of social media has dramatically amplified this practice: nicknames that might once have circulated within a single constituency can now achieve national and international reach within hours. Political communication scholars have increasingly recognized that informal language such as slang, satire, memes and nicknames is not merely an epiphenomenon of formal political discourse but constitutes a distinct and consequential mode of democratic participation (Corner & Pels, 2003; Street, 2004). In environments where access to formal political platforms is unevenly distributed, informal linguistic practices serve as equalizers, providing citizens without institutional power with effective tools for political commentary, critique, and mobilization.

Existing onomastic studies in Africa has made significant contributions to the study of birth names, clan names, and ethnically specific naming traditions (Mensah, 2016; Neethling, 2005; Mutunda, 2011), but political nicknaming

particularly in digital environments has been largely overlooked. Research in political communication has attended to slogans, frames, and political branding (Needham, 2005; Scammell, 2015) but has rarely engaged with the semantic architecture of informal appellations as a distinct object of analysis. This article addresses both gaps simultaneously by examining the phenomenon of political nicknaming in Kenya through the lens of linguistic theory, critical discourse analysis, and democratic theory. The recent proliferation of nicknames surrounding President William Ruto from the once-celebratory "Hustler" to the biting "Zakayo," the satirical "Kasongo," and the politically consequential "WanTam" illustrate how naming practices in Kenya have become a critical site where citizens negotiate authority, express dissent, and reframe the terms of democratic legitimacy.

The connotative density of Kenyan political nicknames is further enriched by the country's multilingual linguistic ecology, where English, Kiswahili, and indigenous languages intersect to produce layered meanings that are culturally specific yet broadly accessible. Malande's (2020) analysis of Kenyan political party names reveals how language choice constitutes a deliberate political strategy that signals identity, ideology, and voter alignment. This insight extends to political nicknames, where code-mixing and intertextual references amplify connotative meaning. The nickname "Kasongo," appropriated from a viral warthog meme and a 1977 Congolese rumba song, carries no inherent political meaning yet acquires satirical force through its deployment in digital spaces where President Ruto is visually caricatured as a comical, bumbling figure (Africa Briefing, 2025). Likewise, "Vasco da Ganya" a pun combining the Portuguese explorer Vasco

da Gama with the Swahili word *danganya* (to deceive) encodes a critique of the president's extensive foreign travel and perceived dishonesty in a single, memorable formulation (Africa Briefing, 2025). Such nicknames operate as what Leech (1974) identifies as connotative meaning: emotional and cultural associations that exceed dictionary definitions and are activated by shared sociocultural knowledge.

The democratic implications of political nicknaming in Kenya are particularly pronounced in the context of the country's vibrant but fragile democratic institutions and its increasingly digitized public sphere. The 2024 Gen Z-led protests against the Finance Bill, organized under hashtags such as #RejectFinanceBill2024 and #RutoMustGo, marked a watershed moment in which digital nicknames and satirical labels became instruments of mass mobilization and accountability (Arzani Ardebili, 2025). Critical discourse analysis of protest tweets reveals how the nickname "Zakayo" functioned not merely as ridicule but as a discursive anchor for blame attribution, constructing President Ruto as culpable for economic violence against ordinary citizens (Arzani Ardebili, 2025). The protests were characterized by what Tufekci (2017) describes as "connective action" decentralized, leaderless mobilization facilitated by social media platforms where nicknames and memes served as "discursive anchors" around which grievances were organized and solidarity was forged (Arzani Ardebili, 2025). In this sense, political nicknames constitute a form of "digital decolonization" (Ozkula, 2024, as cited in Arzani Ardebili, 2025), enabling marginalized voices to reclaim narratives distorted by state-controlled media and to project their critiques into a global public sphere.

The state's response to this naming power further points out its democratic significance. When President Ruto's communication team attempted to neutralize "WanTam" by rebranding it as "Wan Mo Tam" ("one more term"), and when the president himself sought to deflect "Zakayo" by noting that the biblical Zacchaeus met Jesus, these reactions reveal an official recognition that political nicknames are not trivial but constitute serious threats to symbolic authority (Nation, 2025). The government's deployment of counter-narratives, the labeling of critical media as "Githeri media," and the reported abduction of creators of satirical content all indicate that political nicknaming is perceived as a form of speech that can destabilize power relations (Democracy in Africa, 2026; Arzani Ardebili, 2025). This dynamic aligns with Fairclough's (1989, 2001) critical discourse analysis framework, which posits that language is not merely reflective of social reality but constitutive of it, and that struggles over meaning are simultaneously struggles over power.

Similar studies across Africa supports the argument that political nicknaming is a continent-wide phenomenon with deep democratic resonance. In Botswana, political cartoons deploy animal metaphors and deterritorialized names such as "Popaul the Lion-Man" for Cameroon's Paul Biya or "Mullah Omar B" for Gabon's Omar Bongo to lampoon authoritarian leaders and expose the absurdities of power (Akpabio, 2021). These practices suggest that political nicknaming in Kenya is part of a broader African tradition of vernacular political commentary that operates alongside and often in tension with formal democratic institutions. What distinguishes the Kenyan case, however, is the velocity and scale of digital circulation, which has transformed

nicknames from localized oral traditions into viral, multimodal phenomena that can trend globally within hours.

The relationship between political nicknames and democratic discourse in Kenya is thus characterized by a productive tension. On one hand, nicknames democratize political expression by lowering the barriers to participation: they require no formal political membership, no institutional platform, and no financial resources only linguistic creativity and digital access. They enable citizens to perform what Butler (1997) terms "discursive defiance," using speech acts to challenge authority and normalize the idea that presidential legitimacy is contingent rather than absolute (Arzani Ardebili, 2025). On the other hand, the very informality and emotional charge of political nicknames risk displacing substantive policy debate, as constitutional lawyer Willis Otieno warns regarding the "WanTam" versus "TuTam" binary, which threatens to reduce electoral politics to slogan-driven polarization (Knowles, 2026). Moreover, the state's capacity to co-opt and neutralize critical nicknames through counter-narratives, cultural appropriation, or outright repression raises questions about the sustainability of nicknaming as a tool of democratic accountability.

This review therefore situates the study of political nicknames in Kenya at the intersection of linguistics, political communication, and democratic theory. It argues that these connotative labels are not peripheral to democratic discourse but central to it, functioning as what Muriithi and Ong'onda (2023) identify as "rhetorical resources" that presidential candidates employ to propagate ideologies, construct identities, and persuade electorates. Yet unlike formal campaign rhetoric, which is strategically controlled and institutionally

bounded, the nicknames examined here emerge from below from the streets, the digital commons, and the everyday experiences of citizens who feel economically betrayed and politically marginalized. They represent what Habermas (1989) would recognize as a form of communicative action within the public sphere, albeit one that is often affective, humorous, and antagonistic rather than deliberative and rational.

Through the analysis of nicknames borne by seventeen prominent Kenyan politicians, this study pursues three objectives: first, to identify and document political nicknames circulating in the Kenyan public sphere and trace their etymological origins; second, to analyse the connotative meanings these names mobilize using Leech's (1981) Associative Theory; and third, to examine the socio-political functions these names perform in relation to political identity, accountability, and democratic expression. Three research questions guide the inquiry: (i) What are the origins and etymological sources of the nicknames assigned to prominent Kenyan politicians? (ii) What connotative meanings do these nicknames encode, and through what cultural, historical, and affective mechanisms do they operate? (iii) What socio-political functions do these nicknames perform within Kenyan political discourse, and what do they reveal about the relationship between language, power, and democratic participation? The significance of these questions extends beyond the Kenyan case. As digital platforms globalize informal political communication, the dynamics of nicknaming in Africa offer insights relevant to political communication studies, media studies, and democratic theory more broadly.

Literature Review

Onomastics and the Social Life of Names

The question of whether proper names carry meaning or function as semantically empty referential labels has long divided philosophers and linguists. Mill (1843) treated names as mere marks devoid of descriptive content; Frege (1892) countered that they carry both sense and reference; and Kripke (1980), arguing for names as 'rigid designators,' largely resolved the logical debate without touching its social dimensions. As Algeo (1973) observed, names may be semantically empty in the strict logical sense while remaining pragmatically full saturated with cultural expectation, social memory, and evaluative significance. It is this pragmatic fullness, rather than denotative content, that makes names interesting to sociolinguists and onomasticians, and that renders political nicknames analytically rich.

Contemporary onomastics has moved decisively toward this pragmatic richness. Völkel (2024), in a comparative typological study spanning European, African, and Indigenous Australian naming systems, demonstrates that names function as structural mirrors for a society's cosmological beliefs, moral frameworks, and collective memory a finding that challenges any residual notion of names as neutral labels. In African studies, this insight has been extensively documented. Mbiti (1969) established that personal names in many African communities are ontologically significant, encoding the circumstances of a person's birth, their relationship to ancestors, and their expected social role. Mutunda (2011) reinforces this in the Luvale context of Zambia, and Mutegi et al. (2017) demonstrate parallel naming logics among the Meru of Kenya's Tharaka-Nithi County. The point that emerges across these diverse contexts is

not merely that African names are meaningful but that the act of naming is a culturally serious enterprise through which communities articulate their values and inscribe identities into a social order. Neethling (2005) introduces a productive tension by acknowledging that the referential and semantic functions of names exist in constant negotiation: name-givers sometimes prioritize euphony over meaning. Yet even this concession underscores that the tension is real—meaning and reference are competing pressures rather than mutually exclusive categories. For political nicknames, coined not by parents performing a cultural ritual but by citizens making evaluative judgments about public figures, the balance tilts decisively toward meaning. A nickname assigned to a politician is almost always semantically motivated: it says something the coiner wants to say about the person it names.

Nicknames: From Social Identity to Political Weapon

Scholarly accounts of nickname function have converged on several consistent themes. Leslie and Skipper (1991) established in their foundational account that nicknames signify status, power, achievement, and social organization within defined communities a claim confirmed across diverse contexts. Kennedy and Zamuner (2006) demonstrated that nicknames in sports culture encode complex evaluations of athletic persona, skill, and community belonging. Chevalier (2004) traced nicknaming in Australia as a practice of in-group solidarity and relational warmth. Mensah (2016), working within the African context, showed that female nicknames in Calabar reflect gendered social meanings and community attitudes, while Nikolenko (2023) synthesized these threads by

characterizing nicknames as 'emotionally evaluative social identity carriers' a formulation that captures both their semantic content and their social function.

Two distinctions are particularly important for political analysis. Sobane (2009) differentiates between nicknames with positive communicative intent coined to express solidarity, affection, or admiration and those with negative intent, coined to express criticism or mockery. Crozier (2002) complicates this binary by showing that the same nickname may function as endearment in one relational context and insult in another, depending on who uses it, to whom it is addressed, and in what social circumstances. This contextual instability is not incidental but constitutive: the connotative meaning of a nickname is always negotiated in the social field of its use rather than fixed at the moment of coinage. For political nicknames, this negotiability is especially consequential: bearers, users, and opponents all compete to fix the meaning of a name in their favor, a process that is itself a form of political contest.

The body of studies on political nicknaming specifically, while less extensive than the general nickname literature, has produced important insights. Gladkova's (2002) analysis of American presidential nicknames identified the connotative compression that political monikers characteristically achieve: terms like 'Honest Abe' or 'Tricky Dick' encapsulate complex political narratives in two-word packages. Garayeva et al. (2016), examining public figure nicknames in English and American contexts, show that such names function as compressed evaluations that circulate through cultural memory and shape long-term perceptions. Potter (2007) demonstrates that within institutional contexts nickname systems encode

hierarchical values and community identity in structured ways. Taken together, these studies establish that political nicknaming is a systematic, socially organized practice that performs identifiable functions rather than a random epiphenomenon of informal speech.

Studies on African political naming has been comparatively sparse. Soyiso and Ntsoaki (2022) document the functional richness of Basotho nicknames as instruments of social safety and community regulation, while work on place-name politics in South Africa (Mesthrie, 2002) illuminates how naming practices enact symbolic contests over historical memory—dynamics that apply, by analogy, to individual political nicknaming. These studies affirm the richness of African naming cultures as sites of political meaning-making while underscoring that political nicknaming in electoral democracy contexts remains under-researched on the continent.

Political Communication, Informal Language, and Democratic Participation

Political communication studies has undergone a significant shift in recent decades, moving from a primary focus on elite communication such as speeches, press releases, campaign advertising toward recognition of informal, citizen-generated political discourse as a substantive object of inquiry (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Loader & Mercea, 2011). Corner and Pels (2003) theorize political style and persona as central dimensions of contemporary democratic politics, arguing that how politicians present themselves and how citizens respond to those presentations constitutes a form of political meaning-making that shapes electoral outcomes and democratic legitimacy. Street (2004) extends this analysis by examining popular culture as a site of political engagement, showing that

the boundaries between entertainment and political commentary are consistently blurred in contemporary democracies.

Within this broader reorientation, scholars have increasingly attended to satirical and informal political communication as modes of democratic participation. Humor, parody, and mockery including nicknaming function not merely as entertainment but as forms of critique available to citizens who lack access to formal political platforms (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). In contexts where mainstream media is perceived as captured or compromised, these informal channels become especially important: they constitute what Fraser (1990) termed 'counter-publics' alternative discursive spaces where excluded or marginalized voices can articulate political claims.

Digital platforms have fundamentally altered the scale and speed at which informal political discourse can operate. Nicknames and satirical labels that once circulated within local communities can now achieve national or global reach within hours (Loader & Mercea, 2011). This transformation has been particularly consequential in African contexts, where access to mainstream media remains unevenly distributed but smartphone penetration has grown rapidly. In Kenya, platforms such as X and TikTok have become primary sites of political commentary, with users generating satirical content including nicknames that shapes public discourse in ways established media cannot ignore. Understanding political nicknaming in this digital context is therefore not merely a matter of linguistic curiosity; it illuminates fundamental questions about the structure of democratic communication in the digital age.

The Research Gap

Three significant gaps in the existing literature justify the present study. First, despite the richness of African onomastic studies, political nicknaming in electoral democracy contexts has not been systematically analysed on the continent. The political nicknames that circulate in Kenya represent a culturally rich, publicly significant, and analytically tractable body of data that has been treated where it has been treated at all only in journalistic rather than scholarly register. Second, the intersection of political communication and onomastics remains underdeveloped: studies in each field have proceeded largely independently, and neither has engaged adequately with the semantic architecture of political nicknames as objects that simultaneously inhabit linguistic, cultural, and political domains. Third, the specific dynamics introduced by digital platforms such as speed, scale, participatory production have not been examined in relation to African political nicknaming.

By bringing onomastic analysis, Leech's semantic framework, and political communication studies to bear on a corpus of Kenyan political nicknames sourced substantially from digital platforms, this study addresses all three gaps and contributes to a cross-disciplinary conversation spanning linguistics, political science, African studies, communication studies, and cultural analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in Leech's (1981) Associative Theory of Meaning, which distinguishes between the conceptual (denotative) content of an expression and the associative dimensions that surround it. For political nicknames, conceptual meaning is typically minimal what a nickname

denotes rarely explains why it sticks or what it accomplishes. The analytical leverage lies entirely in the associative plane.

Three of Leech's associative dimensions are directly operative in this analysis. Connotative meaning that is the real-world values, cultural assumptions, and evaluative stances that an expression accumulates in circulation is the principal analytical lens throughout. As Leech (1981) emphasizes, connotative meanings are open-ended, context-sensitive, and variable across social positions and historical moments: the same nickname may carry radically different connotations for different audiences, and its meaning may shift as political circumstances change. This instability is not a defect but a defining feature one that makes the framework uniquely suited to the analysis of political language. Nelvia et al. (2019) develop the point, arguing that connotative meaning is the interface between language and social life: it encompasses both the conceptual content of an expression and the collective experience speakers bring to its interpretation.

Affective meaning that is the emotional attitude encoded by an expression operates alongside connotative meaning in a number of cases. 'Baba' carries warmth and protective care; 'Soprano' encodes contempt and diminishment. Social meaning what an expression reveals about the social situation of its use surfaces in the code-switching between Swahili, English, Sheng, and ethnic languages that characterizes Kenyan political nicknaming, where choice of linguistic register signals audience address and social positioning. Reflected meaning, finally, operates in nicknames that draw on a secondary cultural referent: in 'Zakayo,' the entire biblical Zacchaeus narrative colours the semantic

field in which the nickname operates, making that narrative's moral logic inseparable from the name's political effect.

The framework is applied here not as a taxonomic checklist but as a heuristic for identifying the semantic mechanisms through which political nicknames do their social work. The governing analytical question is not 'which type of associative meaning does this nickname exhibit?' but 'what connotative resources does this nickname mobilize, and what political work do those resources perform?' This orientation connects the semantic analysis to the broader questions in political communication and democratic theory that motivate the study.

Methodology

A qualitative descriptive design frames the inquiry, consistent with the study's interpretive objectives and its concern with meaning rather than measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The sample of seventeen prominent Kenyan political figures was selected through purposive sampling based on three explicit criteria. First, each figure had attracted at least one nickname that achieved sustained circulation across multiple platforms between 2013 and 2025, a period encompassing the presidencies of Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto and major opposition configurations. Second, the selected figures represented diversity across regional backgrounds, ethnic affiliations, generational cohorts, and levels of government national and county to capture the heterogeneity of Kenyan political life. Third, each figure's nicknames had generated sufficient documentary and discursive trace to enable meaningful etymological reconstruction and connotative analysis. The seventeen figures included national

officeholders such as Presidents William Ruto and Uhuru Kenyatta, former Prime Minister Raila Odinga, Deputy Presidents Rigathi Gachagua and Kithure Kindiki, and county-level leaders including governors, senators, and members of parliament whose nicknames had achieved significant public currency.

Purposive rather than random sampling is appropriate here because the research interest lies in depth of semantic analysis rather than statistical representativeness.

Three complementary methods generated the data. Document analysis drew on digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Facebook, and major Kenyan online news portals including the Daily Nation, The Standard, and Citizen TV to identify circulating nicknames and reconstruct the circumstances of their coinage. This method was well established in political discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2008) and was particularly suited to the study of digital political language, where the primary textual archive was publicly accessible. A systematic keyword search strategy was implemented using Boolean combinations of politician names with terms such as "nickname," "moniker," "tag," and "label," alongside direct searches for known nicknames including "Zakayo," "WanTam," "Kasongo," "Hustler," and "Baba." The search was not restricted to English; Kiswahili and select indigenous language equivalents were included to capture the full range of naming practices.

Focused group discussions were conducted in a semantics class comprising third-year students of English Language and Literature at Kirinyaga University. Participants, drawn from different Kenyan counties and ethnic communities, explored the origins, meanings, and perceived social significance of the nicknames identified

through document analysis. The diversity of the group across ethnicity, region, and political sympathy was treated as an analytical resource rather than a confound, since contested readings of the same nickname themselves constituted data about connotative variability. Two focus group sessions were conducted, each lasting approximately ninety minutes and facilitated by the first author using a semi-structured protocol that asked participants to identify nicknames they recognized, explain their understood meanings, discuss their emotional responses, and reflect on the social contexts in which they encountered or used these names. The sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The student sample was acknowledged as a limitation: university students in a semantics class were likely to be more linguistically aware, more digitally connected, and more politically engaged than the general Kenyan population, and their interpretations could not be assumed to represent those of older, rural, or less formally educated citizens. This demographic skew was managed by triangulating focus group findings with document analysis data from broader public sources and by explicitly noting in the analysis where student interpretations diverged from or aligned with documentary evidence.

Researcher introspection, grounded in the first author's experience as a former Kenyan politician, provided contextual knowledge unavailable through document analysis alone and enabled the kind of insider interpretive depth that ethnographic approaches value (Hayano, 1979). This introspective dimension was formalized through the maintenance of a structured reflective journal in which the first author recorded impressions, contextual hunches, and

interpretive insights triggered by engagement with the data. The journal entries were dated, keyed to specific data instances, and shared with co-authors for critical review. The first author's political experience was treated as a double-edged resource: it offered privileged access to the institutional logics, interpersonal dynamics, and strategic calculations that shaped political nicknaming, but it also introduced risks of unexamined partisan assumption or selective attention. These risks were mitigated through several procedures. First, the first author engaged in explicit bracketing exercises at the outset of data collection, articulating prior political commitments and hypotheses in writing before engaging with the dataset. Second, co-authors who did not share the first author's political background reviewed all analytical claims and challenged those that appeared to derive from unexamined assumption rather than evidence. Third, the reflective journal was subjected to periodic peer debriefing with a political communication scholar external to the research team, who provided independent assessment of whether introspective insights were adequately grounded in data or excessively speculative.

Methodological triangulation across these three sources enhanced the trustworthiness of interpretations, allowing cross-validation of emergent themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When document analysis, focus group data, and researcher introspection converged on a particular interpretation of a nickname's meaning or function, that interpretation was treated as robust. When sources diverged, the divergence itself became an object of analysis, illuminating the contested and variable nature of connotative meaning.

Thematic content analysis, informed by Leech's (1981) Associative

Theory, was applied to the combined dataset. Leech's framework distinguishes between conceptual meaning, which corresponds to dictionary definitions, and associative meaning, which encompasses connotative, stylistic, affective, reflected, and collocative dimensions. The analysis was organized around the study's three research questions.

The study also incorporated a limited comparative dimension by situating Kenyan political nicknaming within the broader African context. Data from existing studies on political language and visual satire in Ghana, Botswana, Cameroon, and Gabon were drawn upon to identify shared patterns and distinctive features. This comparative perspective was not intended to produce generalizable cross-national findings but rather to illuminate the specificity of the Kenyan case particularly the role of digital platforms in accelerating and amplifying nickname circulation.

Several measures were taken to ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings. Credibility was pursued through prolonged engagement with the data over six months, through triangulation across the three data sources, and through member checking with two focus group participants and one independent political communication scholar, whose feedback was incorporated into the final analysis. Transferability was addressed through thick description of the Kenyan political and linguistic context, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other settings. Dependability was enhanced through the maintenance of an audit trail documenting analytical decisions, coding iterations, and the evolution of interpretive categories.

Confirmability was pursued through the explicit marking of researcher positionality, the peer debriefing of introspective insights, and

the presentation of disconfirming evidence where interpretations were contested. Reflexivity was practiced throughout the research process, with the first author's political background acknowledged as both a resource and a potential bias, and with co-authors providing corrective balance.

Ethical considerations were addressed through several procedures. Focus group participants were fully informed about the research purposes and provided written consent; they were anonymized in all reporting, with pseudonyms used in any direct quotations. Digital data were publicly available and required no individual consent, but usernames were redacted in direct quotations to prevent reverse searching, and care was taken not to reproduce posts that could enable re-identification of private individuals. The study avoided nicknames that could be construed as hate speech or incitement to violence, and adhered to platform terms of service in data collection. The research was conducted with awareness that political nicknaming, even when satirical, could contribute to polarization or stigmatization; the analysis therefore examined both the democratic potential and the risks of informal political language.

The limitations of the methodology were acknowledged and managed where possible. The ephemeral nature of social media content meant that some instances of nickname use were irretrievable by the time of data collection, potentially skewing the corpus toward more persistent or widely shared examples. The reliance on publicly available digital content excluded nicknames that circulated exclusively through private channels such as encrypted messaging apps or face-to-face conversation, though focus group data and researcher introspection partially

compensated for this gap. The purposive sampling strategy, while appropriate for the study's objectives, precluded claims about the representativeness of the seventeen figures or their nicknames across the full spectrum of Kenyan political life. The student focus group sample, while diverse in some respects, could not claim to represent the full demographic range of Kenyan citizens. The interpretive nature of the semantic and discourse analysis meant that alternative readings of specific nicknames were always possible; the findings presented here represented the research team's reasoned interpretation rather than definitive decoding. Finally, the

cross-sectional design captured nicknames at a particular moment in their circulation but could not fully address how meanings evolved over time or how they might be transformed by future political events.

Findings and Discussion

The Corpus

Table 1 presents the thirty-five nickname entries spanning seventeen politicians across national and county levels with etymology and dominant connotative function identified for each.

Table 1: Corpus of Political Nicknames, Kenya: Etymologies and Connotative Dimensions

Politician	Nickname(s)	Etymology / Origin	Dominant Connotative Function
Ruto	Hustler / Chief Hustler	Self-coined; narrative of humble origins	Populist identity construction; empathy with economically marginalized citizens
Ruto	Zakayo	Kiswahili rendering of biblical Zacchaeus (tax collector)	Satirical accountability: fiscal exploitation; moral condemnation of taxation policy
Ruto	Nabii	Swahili: 'prophet'; church attendance, claims of divine mandate	Ambivalent religious authority; critique of theocratic political positioning
Ruto	Kasongo	Congolese song (Super Orch. Mazembe) about a straying husband	Satirical dissent: broken promises; political unreliability; viral digital mockery
Ruto	Flying Man	Frequency of presidential foreign travel	Accountability critique: neglect of domestic governance; citizen frustration
Ruto	Kaunda Uongoman	Kaunda suit style + Sheng 'uongo' (liar)	Dual critique: authoritarian dress aesthetics; perceived dishonesty
Ruto	El Chapo	Chapati machine promise; pun on drug lord alias	Political satire: policy absurdity; ironic comparison with criminality

Politician	Nickname(s)	Etymology / Origin	Dominant Connotative Function
Ruto	Uncle Willy	Coined by a child at a public event	Positive affective bonding: warmth, paternal accessibility, youthful appeal
Kindiki	Abra K	Manufactured by President Ruto at swearing-in ceremony	Top-down branding: youth appeal; informal accessibility; manufactured legitimacy
Kindiki	Fire si Fire	Self-coined rallying cry; phonosemantic self-assertion	Political transformation narrative: shedding academic persona for combatant identity
Kindiki	Soprano	Coined by Gachagua; acoustic critique of vocal register	Political weaponization: emasculation; hollow authority; performative ridicule
Kenyatta	Kamwana	Kikuyu: 'young person'	Contested: initial affection; later resistance to political retirement
Kenyatta	Jayden	Popular name connoting privileged, pampered youth	Class critique: elite disconnect; inherited wealth insulating leader from citizens
Kenyatta	Wamashati	Kikuyu-Swahili blend: 'man of shirts'	Superficiality critique: style over substance; political vanity
Kenyatta	Wanjohi	Kikuyu: 'one who loves alcohol'	Moral critique: personal habits; character questioning
Odinga	Baba	Swahili: 'father'; emerged organically from supporters in 2014	Paternal authority; collective care; political loyalty across ethnic lines
Odinga	Tinga	Swahili: 'tractor'; NDP party symbol (1997 election)	Unstoppable political momentum; forceful forward movement
Odinga	Agwambo	Luo: 'mystery' / 'unpredictable spirit'	Political resilience; supernatural invincibility; ethnic identity anchor
Odinga	Vitendawili	Kiswahili: 'riddles'; referencing oblique campaign rhetoric	Critical: evasive communication; deliberate political opacity
Odinga	Jakom	Luo: 'chairperson' / community leader	Communal authority; ethnic leadership endorsement; political network marker

Politician	Nickname(s)	Etymology / Origin	Dominant Connotative Function
Odinga	People's President	Coined at controversial 2017 alternative inauguration ceremony	Contested legitimacy; popular mandate vs. institutional authority
Gachagua	Riggy G	Melodic shortening of surname; coined by a fan	Youth branding; informality; digital-era political accessibility
Gachagua	Wamunyoro	Post-impeachment residence used for political meetings	Geographic identity; political base; resilience after institutional defeat
Musyoka	Watermelon	Coined by Odinga; green outside, red inside metaphor	Political duplicity; ideological indecisiveness; contested allegiance
Joho	Sultan	Coined as a taunt by Regional Commissioner Marwa	Contested: intended as arrogance critique; reclaimed as coastal cultural pride
Mbuvi	Sonko	Sheng: 'rich person' / 'boss'	Street credibility; flamboyant generosity; populist wealth performance
Mudavadi	MaDVD	Phonetic reduction of 'MuDaVaDi'	Informal familiarity; popular cultural modernization; brand accessibility
Wetangula	Papa wa Roma	Swahili: 'Pope of Rome'; cult-like following in Bungoma County	Unquestioned regional authority; sacred devotion of constituents
Karua	Iron Lady	Global archetype for strong-willed female political leadership	Contested: strength and competence; simultaneously reproduces gender stereotyping
Waititu	Baba Yao	Swahili: 'their father'; earned through confrontations with police	Combative populist protector; masculine assertion; later legally registered
Njoroge	Wamatangi	Kikuyu: 'of the tanks'; water tank distribution to constituents	Accountability-as-brand: service delivery identity; electoral endorsement
Mwangi	Wa Iria	Kikuyu: 'of milk'; revival of dairy cooperative (KCC)	Economic empowerment; developmental leadership; constituency service

Politician	Nickname(s)	Etymology / Origin	Dominant Connotative Function
Mohamed Ali	Jicho Pevu	Swahili: 'keen eye'; investigative TV journalism programme	Watchdog authority; integrity; accountability transposed from media to politics
Passaris	Mama Taa	Swahili: 'woman of lights'; street-lighting campaign in slums	Gendered service identity; maternal care for urban poor; community protection
Ndung'u	Kanini Kega	Kikuyu: 'young but good'; subverts ageist dismissal	Positive reframing of social stigma; youthful competence; electoral affirmation

Note. Multiple entries appear for politicians with more than one widely circulated nickname. Connotative dimensions reflect the dominant interpretive orientation identified across focus group discussions, documentary sources, and researcher analysis.

Even a preliminary survey of Table 1 reveals several patterns that structure the analysis to follow. The corpus divides, broadly, along lines of intent and origin: some nicknames are cultivated by politicians themselves or their supporters to construct a desired public identity (Hustler, Baba, Fire si Fire, Wamatangi); others emerge from citizens or opponents as instruments of critique, satire, or accountability (Zakayo, Kasongo, Watermelon, Jayden); and a third group anchors political identity in cultural, ethnic, or historical referents that consolidate communal belonging (Agwambo, Jakom, Sultan, Baba Yao). Across all three categories, however, the dominant semantic mechanism is the same: it is not what the name denotes but what it connotes that is the cultural scripts it activates, the affective responses it solicits, and the power relations it encodes that determines its political effect. The four thematic sections that follow examine each pattern in turn, while the last part addresses the cross-cutting phenomenon

of connotative fluidity and semantic contestation.

Political Identity Construction and Populist Branding

The most consequential function of political nicknames in the Kenyan corpus was their role in constructing and sustaining political identities, particularly identities organized around populist appeals to marginalized constituencies. William Ruto's self-designated "Hustler" and "Chief Hustler" were the paradigmatic cases, but the pattern was widespread across the corpus.

"Hustler" carried predominantly negative connotations in Western anglophone contexts, where it typically implied cunning or exploitative self-interest. Ruto's strategic appropriation of the term represented a study in connotative reorientation. Deployed consistently from approximately 2017 onwards within a narrative emphasizing humble origins, the term acquired a new connotative architecture in Kenyan political culture: industriousness in the face of structural disadvantage, identification with the economic precariat, and a politics of dignity directed at those whom Ruto termed the "wheelbarrow economy." Focus group participants from rural and peri-urban backgrounds recognized this

reorientation immediately; one participant from Bungoma observed that "when Ruto says hustler, he is not talking about stealing. He is talking about waking up at four in the morning to sell vegetables, which is what my mother does." This participant's interpretation illustrated Leech's (1981) emphasis on the contextual shaping of associative meaning: because Ruto's key electoral constituency related to the hustler experience through their own lives, "Hustler" achieved its political effect not through redefinition but through consistent and culturally grounded application. The affective dimension was particularly pronounced: participants described the term as evoking respect, identification, and hope rather than the suspicion or cynicism that the English dictionary definition might suggest. The collocative dimension reinforced this positive loading; "Hustler" consistently co-occurred with terms such as "nation," "movement," and "revolution" in campaign rhetoric, clustering it within a narrative of collective uplift rather than individualistic self-interest.

The stylistic dimension of "Hustler" was equally significant. The term circulated primarily in informal registers such as rally speeches, social media posts, and vernacular radio broadcasts rather than in parliamentary debate or policy documents. This register positioning was strategic: it signaled Ruto's accessibility and his rejection of the formal, English-dominated political discourse associated with the Kenyan elite. Focus group participants noted that Ruto's use of Sheng and Kiswahili alongside "Hustler" created a multilingual stylistic package that distinguished him from competitors who relied on English-language formalism. The reflected meaning of "Hustler" evolved over time: initially associated with Ruto's personal biography of rising from chicken-selling to

the presidency, it gradually accrued broader associations with a generational cohort of young Kenyans excluded from formal employment. By the 2022 election, "Hustler" had become less a description of Ruto than an identity label that supporters applied to themselves, transforming the nickname from a leader-centric appellation into a movement identifier.

The comparison with Raila Odinga's "Baba" (Swahili: father) was instructive because the two names constructed political authority through contrasting affective registers. Where "Hustler" positioned the leader as a peer of the marginalized one of us, risen from the same struggle "Baba" positioned him as a figure of protective paternal authority: older, wiser, responsible for the welfare of his political family. The nickname emerged organically in 2014 when supporters began prefacing messages to Odinga with "Baba while you were away," a formulation that focus group participants recognized as marking a shift from formal political support to familial devotion. The connotative content of "Baba" drew on the African conception of fatherhood as a communal role extending across an extended network of dependents and relationships, not merely a nuclear household. One participant from Nyanza explained that "Baba is not just his children. Baba is the whole community. When we call Raila Baba, we are saying he carries all of us." This interpretation illustrated how "Baba" mobilized a culturally specific conception of political leadership that differed meaningfully from Western populist models a difference that comparative political communication studies had not adequately registered.

The stylistic dimension of "Baba" operated at a different register than "Hustler." While "Hustler" thrived in informal digital and rally contexts, "Baba"

circulated with equal facility across formal and informal settings, appearing in parliamentary addresses, international media profiles, and protest chants alike. This stylistic flexibility reflected Odinga's longer political tenure and his establishment as a figure of institutional as well as movement authority. The affective dimension was complex: participants described "Baba" as evoking warmth and security, but also obligation and deference. Several participants noted that the nickname could feel exclusionary to those outside Odinga's ethnic or political community, suggesting that its capacity to mobilize solidarity within the in-group was matched by its potential to signal distance from out-groups. The reflected meaning of "Baba" accumulated across Odinga's political career, gathering associations with survival, resilience, and repeated return from political defeat that reinforced its paternal connotations through narrative repetition.

Moses Wetangula's "Papa wa Roma" (Swahili: Pope of Rome) operated on a related but distinct axis: religious rather than familial authority, specifically the kind of unquestioned loyalty that characterized the relationship between Catholic faithful and the papacy. Focus group participants from Western Kenya confirmed that the nickname was used with genuine reverence rather than irony, one stating that "in Bungoma, Wetangula is like the Pope. What he says, we follow. It is not about reasoning; it is about faith." This participant's formulation captured the quasi-sacred quality of certain forms of local political loyalty in Kenya, grounded in identity rather than interest. That this relationship could be encoded in a three-word Swahili phrase and understood immediately by any Kenyan illustrated the extraordinary communicative efficiency of culturally embedded political nicknaming. The connotative loading of "Papa wa Roma"

extended beyond Wetangula himself to characterize his constituents' relationship to him: the nickname implied not merely that Wetangula was authoritative, but that his followers were devoted, even doctrinally submissive. This double encoding of leader authority and follower subjectivity distinguished "Papa wa Roma" from leader-centric nicknames such as "Hustler" or "Baba."

A particularly important sub-category of identity-constructing nicknames were those that encoded specific acts of service delivery. Paul Kimani Njoroge's "Wamatangi" (Kikuyu: "of the tanks"; *w-a-matangi*, where *matangi* denotes water tanks) and Francis Mwangi's "Wa Iria" (Kikuyu: "of milk"; *w-a-iria*, where *iria* denotes milk) both worked by permanently attaching a politician's public identity to a concrete benefit delivered to constituents. These nicknames functioned as informal accountability instruments operating in an affirmative mode: the politician was identified not with what they failed to do but with what they demonstrably did. Focus group participants from Central Kenya confirmed that "Wamatangi" was remembered and used specifically in electoral contexts, with voters invoking the nickname as shorthand for Njoroge's reliability. "When you say Wamatangi," one participant noted, "you don't need to explain. Everyone knows he brought water." This participant's observation pointed toward a wider and underexplored relationship between nickname-based accountability and electoral outcomes in African democracies. When a name became an electoral asset, the boundary between informal linguistic practice and formal political strategy dissolved.

James Ndung'u's "Kanini Kega" (Kikuyu: "young but good"; *kanini* = young/small, *kega* = capable/good) added a further analytical layer. When Ndung'u

first sought office at twenty-six, opponents weaponized his youth against him. The nickname his supporters adopted did not deny this youth but reframed it: *kanini* was qualified by *kega*, producing a compound meaning that refused the premise that age and political competence were positively correlated. Focus group participants recognized this reframing as a deliberate strategy, one noting that "they tried to say he is too young, but his people said no he is young and good. The name became his shield."

That Ndung'u subsequently swore a legal affidavit incorporating the nickname into his official ballot identity testified to its electoral salience and illustrated the remarkable capacity of informal linguistic practice to achieve legal status. The collocative dimension was notable here: "Kanini Kega" consistently appeared alongside terms of electoral endorsement and generational pride, clustering it within a narrative of youth empowerment rather than inexperience.

The democratic implications of these identity-constructing nicknames were substantial. They lowered the barriers to political identification by providing accessible, emotionally resonant labels that citizens could adopt without formal party membership or ideological commitment. They enabled what Butler (1997) termed "discursive agency" the capacity to name oneself and one's political community in ways that challenged official designations. However, they also introduced risks of political simplification. Focus group participants observed that "Hustler" had become so capacious that it obscured policy differences among supporters, reducing political affiliation to identity performance rather than programmatic engagement. Similarly, "Baba's" paternal connotations could discourage critical evaluation of Odinga's policy positions,

with some participants admitting that they found it difficult to disagree publicly with "Baba." These observations suggested that identity-constructing nicknames, while democratizing access to political belonging, could simultaneously constrain the quality of democratic deliberation by substituting affective attachment for reasoned disagreement.

Satire, Dissent and Informal Accountability

Kenya's satirical nicknaming tradition constituted a form of what Scott (1990) termed the "weapons of the weak": informal, deniable, and often humorous modes of resistance available to citizens who lacked access to formal channels of political opposition. Digital platforms had dramatically amplified both the reach and the velocity of these weapons, transforming nicknames from localized oral traditions into viral, multimodal phenomena that could achieve national and international circulation within hours.

"Zakayo" Ruto's nickname during his government's unpopular tax expansion was a masterclass in connotative precision. The biblical Zacchaeus was not merely a tax collector; he was a chief tax collector who had grown wealthy by extracting levies on behalf of an occupying power, despised by his community for his extractive role and his collaboration with the oppressor. The connotative loading of "Zakayo" in contemporary Kenya was correspondingly layered: it positioned Ruto not merely as a tax-raiser but as a figure who extracted from the poor to serve interests other than theirs, whose conduct carried the quality of moral betrayal rather than merely unpopular policy. Focus group participants confirmed this reading unanimously; one from Nairobi stated that "Zakayo is not just about taxes. It is about betrayal. Zacchaeus took from his

own people for the Romans. Ruto is taking from us for who?" This participant's interpretation illustrated the reflected meaning that Leech (1981) identified: the entire biblical Zacchaeus narrative, with its moral logic of exploitation and redemption, colored the semantic field in which the nickname operated and made it effectively impossible to hear "Zakayo" in isolation from that narrative.

The affective dimension of "Zakayo" was predominantly one of moral indignation rather than policy disagreement. Documentary analysis revealed that the nickname co-occurred consistently with terms such as "oppression," "betrayal," and "greed," clustering it within an evaluative framework that rendered fiscal policy as moral transgression. The stylistic dimension was equally significant: "Zakayo" circulated primarily in informal digital spaces, protest chants, and vernacular radio call-in shows, rarely appearing in parliamentary debate or mainstream editorial commentary. This register positioning enabled citizens to voice critique without assuming the formal responsibilities of political opposition. The collocative analysis revealed a striking pattern: "Zakayo" appeared with particular density alongside the hashtag #RejectFinanceBill2024 during the 2024 Gen Z protests, functioning as what Arzani Ardebili (2025) described as a "discursive anchor" around which grievances were organized and solidarity was forged.

Ruto's public acknowledgment of the nickname, accompanied by a defense of his fiscal policies, inadvertently reinforced its connotative power by accepting the frame it imposed. When Ruto noted that the biblical Zacchaeus met Jesus, he attempted to redirect the narrative toward redemption, but focus

group participants interpreted this response as defensive rather than transformative. "He is trying to become the Zacchaeus who was saved," one participant observed, "but we are still waiting for the repentance." This participant's comment illustrated the dynamic that Fairclough (1989, 2001) identified: struggles over meaning are simultaneously struggles over power, and the state's engagement with critical nicknames can amplify rather than neutralize their force.

"Kasongo," drawn from a 1977 Congolese song by Super Orchestra Mazembe about a wife pleading with a straying husband to return, operated through a different intertextual mechanism. Applied to Ruto's perceived abandonment of campaign commitments, the nickname differed from "Zakayo" in a crucial respect: where "Zakayo" was morally severe, "Kasongo" was comic. Its viral spread on TikTok was partly a function of the catchiness of the underlying song the sonic accessibility of the allusion lowering the barrier to participation in the satirical practice. Documentary analysis revealed that "Kasongo" appeared predominantly in video formats rather than text, with users lip-syncing to the original song while superimposing images of Ruto. This multimodal circulation illustrated how platform affordances shaped nicknaming practices: TikTok's algorithmic preference for musical, visually engaging content amplified "Kasongo" in ways that text-based platforms such as X might not have enabled.

Ruto's embrace of the nickname with visible good humor represented a calculated co-optation strategy designed to neutralize its critical charge by performing immunity to mockery. Focus group participants were divided on whether this strategy succeeded: some interpreted his embrace as confident self-

awareness that deflected criticism, while others saw it as desperate performance that confirmed the nickname's accuracy. "If he was not Kasongo," one participant argued, "he would not need to sing about it. The fact that he has to show he is in on the joke means the joke is true." This divergence of interpretation illustrated the contested nature of connotative meaning and the impossibility of determining a single "correct" reading. The democratic significance of this contestation lay in its capacity to sustain political engagement: the debate over whether Ruto's co-optation succeeded or failed was itself a form of democratic participation that kept citizens attentive to his governance record.

Kalonzo Musyoka's "Watermelon" coined by Odinga to describe Kalonzo's perceived political duplicity during the 2010 constitutional referendum achieved its critical effect through a spatial metaphor of concealment: green outside, red inside, the visible surface misrepresenting the interior reality. Its durability across more than a decade of Kenyan political life reflected the extent to which Kalonzo's career had continued to provide occasions for its application. Focus group participants recognized the nickname immediately, with one noting that "every time Kalonzo changes sides, someone says watermelon. It is automatic." This participant's observation confirmed Crozier's (2002) insight that negative nicknames were used referentially with the conscious intention of offending the bearer and undermining their standing, with the additional complication that the bearer's very attempt to minimize the name's significance became part of the public record it generated. Kalonzo's resigned acknowledgment "It was Raila who gave me the watermelon tag but there is no problem" was itself politically revealing: it located the name's origin

with a specific rival, implicitly contesting its legitimacy while accepting its circulation, and performed the equanimity of a politician who had learned that resistance to a widely circulated nickname typically amplified rather than extinguished it.

Uhuru Kenyatta's "Jayden" encoded a class critique of particular acuity. "Jayden" circulated in Kenyan popular culture as a name associated with children of wealthy, Westernized families insulated from ordinary economic difficulty. By attaching this name to the presidency, citizens articulated an evaluative judgment about the relationship between inherited elite status and political responsiveness that formal political analysis typically struggled to express in comparably direct terms. Focus group participants from non-elite backgrounds described "Jayden" as capturing something essential about Kenyatta's perceived detachment: "He does not know the price of unga [maize flour]. He is Jayden. He lives in a different Kenya." This participant's formulation pointed toward a structural argument about Kenyan political economy the degree to which presidential leadership reflected the perspectives of a narrow, privileged class while delivering it in the register of popular cultural satire. The double register, at once analytically precise and culturally accessible, was characteristic of the most effective political nicknames in the corpus.

The "Soprano" episode was analytically distinctive because it illustrated political nicknaming not as citizen dissent directed upward but as a weapon deployed between political elites. Rigathi Gachagua, following his parliamentary impeachment, coined "Soprano" to characterize his successor Kithure Kindiki's vocal delivery as high-pitched and therefore lacking the

resonance of genuine authority. His ritual performance of the epithet at public rallies mimicking Kindiki's alleged register while chanting "Ni Fire si Fire! Ni Soprano si Soprano!" transformed nicknaming into political theatre. Documentary analysis revealed that "Soprano" circulated primarily through video clips of Gachagua's performances rather than through organic citizen adoption, suggesting that its critical force was dependent on the original performer's charisma rather than on widespread cultural resonance. Focus group participants recognized the nickname but few adopted it spontaneously; one observed that "it is Gachagua's joke, not ours. He is fighting his war, and we are watching." This participant's comment illustrated how intra-elite nicknaming differed from citizen-generated satire: it was strategic communication designed to wound a specific rival rather than to mobilize collective sentiment.

The democratic implications of satirical nicknaming were substantial but ambivalent. On one hand, nicknames such as "Zakayo" and "Jayden" provided citizens with accessible tools for political commentary that required no institutional platform, no financial resources, and no formal political membership. They enabled what Arzani Ardebili (2025) described as "discursive defiance," using speech acts to challenge authority and normalize the idea that presidential legitimacy was contingent rather than absolute. They constituted a form of "digital decolonization" (Ozkula, 2024, as cited in Arzani Ardebili, 2025), enabling marginalized voices to reclaim narratives distorted by state-controlled media. On the other hand, the very informality and emotional charge of political nicknames risked displacing substantive policy debate. Focus group participants acknowledged that "Zakayo" was emotionally satisfying but analytically

thin: "It tells us Ruto is bad on taxes, but it does not tell us what the taxes are for or whether they are necessary." This participant's observation aligned with constitutional lawyer Willis Otieno's warning that slogan-driven polarization could reduce electoral politics to affective performance rather than reasoned deliberation (Knowles, 2026). The risk that nicknaming democratized expression while impoverishing deliberation represented a central tension in the democratic politics of informal language.

Cultural and Ethnic Identity Anchoring

A third major function of political nicknames in the corpus was the anchoring of political identity in cultural, ethnic, and historical referents. In Kenya's ethnically complex political landscape where ethnic identity continued to shape political alliance and electoral behavior in consequential ways (Cheeseman, 2008; Lynch, 2011) nicknames derived from indigenous languages and cultural archetypes served as signals of communal belonging, markers of in-group membership, and instruments of political allegiance.

Raila Odinga's "Agwambo" a Luo term conveying mystery, unpredictability, or the presence of a spirit that cannot be contained was the richest example of cultural branding in the corpus. The name emerged from the Luo community's experience of Odinga's extraordinary political survival: multiple imprisonments under the Moi regime, political exile, electoral defeat, and repeated reinvention, none of which ended his public career. Focus group participants from Nyanza described "Agwambo" with a reverence that transcended ordinary political admiration; one stated that "Agwambo is not just a name. It is a force. You cannot kill it. You cannot predict it. It comes back." This participant's formulation encoded not

merely admiration for resilience but something approaching awe at an apparently supernatural capacity for return—a quality that the Luo term, with its connotations of uncontainability and spiritual force, captured more precisely than any available English equivalent. Unlike the fluid nicknames that tracked Ruto's fluctuating fortunes, "Agwambo" had remained connotatively stable across decades a measure of how thoroughly it captured something constant in its bearer's political identity.

The stylistic dimension of "Agwambo" was notable for its register flexibility: it circulated with equal facility in formal political oratory, informal conversation, and digital media. The affective dimension was complex, evoking pride, mystery, and protective devotion among Luo participants, while non-Luo participants often described it as opaque or exclusionary. One participant from Central Kenya admitted that "I don't really understand Agwambo. It is their thing. It makes me feel that Raila is not for me, even if I agree with his policies." This participant's comment illustrated how culturally anchored nicknames could simultaneously consolidate in-group loyalty and signal out-group distance, a dynamic with significant implications for cross-ethnic democratic coalition-building.

"Jakom," Odinga's other Luo-language moniker a term for a community chairperson or group leader functioned differently: not as an expression of quasi-mystical authority but as a marker of formal communal endorsement. When Luo speakers and their political allies used "Jakom," they enacted recognition of Odinga's authority as community leader, signaled their membership in the political network he led, and deployed the naming practice itself as a form of political allegiance. Focus group participants confirmed this

performative dimension; one noted that "when we say Jakom, we are not just naming him. We are showing we are with him. The name is the membership card." In the context of Kenyan electoral politics, where ethnic bloc voting remained electorally consequential, such naming practices were not mere linguistic flourishes: they were socially performative acts through which political allegiances were declared and reinforced.

Ferdinand Waititu's "Baba Yao" (Swahili: "their father") demonstrated how the paternal archetype that ran through Kenyan political naming could be inflected in sharply different directions. Where Odinga's "Baba" connoted wise, experienced, protective authority, "Baba Yao" connoted combative, physically assertive, street-level protection the protector whose authority was exercised through willingness to fight rather than mere capacity to speak. Waititu earned the nickname through widely circulated videos of him hurling stones at police officers during confrontations over land rights an act of political theater that resonated powerfully with constituents many of whom experienced the police as an instrument of oppression. Focus group participants from Kiambu recalled the videos with evident pride; one stated that "he was not afraid. He stood with us against the police. That is why he is Baba Yao not because he is old, but because he fights for us." This participant's interpretation illustrated how the same familial term could encode radically different models of political authority, depending on the cultural and political context of its deployment.

The nickname's eventual legal registration at the Registry of Documents transforming a popular appellation into an official identity illustrated how deeply informal naming could penetrate political and even legal life. Documentary analysis confirmed that Waititu had formally

adopted "Baba Yao" in official communications and campaign materials, a move that focus group participants interpreted as legitimizing popular authority through institutional recognition. "The government had to accept what the people already knew," one participant observed. This participant's comment pointed toward a broader pattern in which informal linguistic practice achieved formal status not through top-down imposition but through bottom-up pressure that institutions could not ignore.

Ali Hassan Joho's "Sultan" was the most instructive case of connotative contestation in the corpus. The nickname was coined by Regional Commissioner Nelson Marwa as a deliberate taunt, alluding to historical associations of coastal Arab rulers with the slave trade to suggest that Joho was behaving as an unaccountable autocrat. Joho initially resisted the name, correctly identifying its derogatory intent. Focus group participants from the coast confirmed this initial hostility; one recalled that "at first, we were angry. Sultan was meant to say Joho is a slave trader, that he is arrogant like the Arabs who ruled us. It was an insult from Nairobi." However, the public's subsequent embrace of "Sultan" reinterpreted its connotative content along entirely different lines: drawing on coastal cultural associations of the term with dignity, authority, and historical presence rather than colonial exploitation. Joho's eventual adoption of the identity represented a recognition that the public had successfully reclaimed the semantic field. "Now when we say Sultan," the same participant continued, "we mean our own power, our own history. It is not what Marwa meant. It is what we made it." This trajectory from hostile coinage through public reinterpretation to bearer embrace confirmed Crozier's (2002) insight that

connotative meaning was not fixed at the moment of coinage but negotiated in the social field of circulation: bearers, users, and communities all participated in determining what a name finally meant, and the outcome of that negotiation was never guaranteed in advance.

Mohamed Ali's "Jicho Pevu" (Swahili: "keen eye"), derived from his investigative journalism programme, illustrated the transposition of reputational capital across professional domains. The nickname's connotative content such as integrity, forensic scrutiny, willingness to pursue truth against institutional resistance derived from the cultural authority of investigative journalism and was carried into the political sphere intact. Focus group participants who had watched "Jicho Pevu" during its broadcast run described the nickname as evoking a specific kind of authority that political office alone could not confer. "He is not just a politician," one participant stated. "He is Jicho Pevu. That means he sees what others hide." The persistence of "Jicho Pevu" long after Ali's departure from journalism suggested that voters valued and responded to this accountability identity in ways that his formal political designation alone could not provide. Social meaning, in Leech's sense, was here at its most transparent: the nickname signaled which social world journalism, not party politics the holder's authority was ultimately grounded in.

The democratic implications of culturally anchored nicknames were double-edged.

On one hand, they provided resources for political identity and collective mobilization that were deeply rooted in shared cultural knowledge, enabling forms of political expression that resonated with citizens' lived experience in ways that abstract ideological labels could not. They constituted what

Bourdieu (1991) would recognize as symbolic power operating through cultural capital: the power to name and be named in ways that felt authentic rather than imposed. On the other hand, their capacity to signal in-group membership simultaneously marked out-group exclusion. Focus group participants repeatedly noted that nicknames such as "Agwambo" and "Jakom" were difficult for non-Luo speakers to fully access, while "Wamatangi" and "Wa Iria" carried specific regional resonances that did not travel nationally. This ethnolinguistic boundedness raised questions about whether culturally anchored nicknames facilitated democratic participation within communities while potentially fragmenting cross-ethnic democratic solidarity. The study did not resolve this tension but documented it as a structural feature of nickname-based political communication in ethnically plural societies.

Fluidity, Contestation, and the Negotiation of Connotative Meaning

Across all functional categories, the most significant structural property of Kenyan political nicknames was their semantic instability. Allen (1983) observed that nicknames were often in a state of perpetual flux; the Kenyan data confirmed this with particular force, and in doing so pointed toward a theoretical revision of how political nicknaming should be conceptualized.

Raila Odinga's nickname career from "Agwambo" through "Tinga," "Baba," "Jakom," "Vitendawili," and "People's President" constituted something like a running connotative biography, with each moniker encoding the public's reading of Odinga at a particular political moment. The accumulation of names across a long political career was not merely a biographical curiosity; it illustrated how

citizens used the informal naming register to document, evaluate, and periodically revise their assessments of political leaders over time. Focus group participants who had followed Odinga's career across decades could date political periods by the dominant nickname: "Tinga was the 90s, when he was pushing for change. Baba came after 2013, when he was the father of the nation, even if he was not president. People's President was 2017, when he said the election was stolen." This participant's periodization illustrated how nickname succession functioned as a popular historiography, with citizens using informal language to mark political epochs that official chronologies might obscure.

Ruto's simultaneous nickname plurality presented a different kind of instability: "Hustler" and "Uncle Willy" (warmth, solidarity) coexisted in public discourse with "Zakayo," "Kasongo," and "Flying Man" (exploitation, unreliability, neglect). The balance between positive and negative names tracked the public's shifting assessment of his governance record. Documentary analysis revealed that "Hustler" dominated digital discourse during the 2022 election campaign, while "Zakayo" surged following the Finance Bill protests of 2024. This temporal distribution suggested that nickname plurality was not random but responsive to political events: nicknames functioned as a barometer of public sentiment, with their relative frequency and emotional valence shifting in response to policy decisions, scandals, and economic conditions. Focus group participants confirmed this responsiveness; one noted that "when Ruto was campaigning, we called him Hustler. Now that he is taxing us, we call him Zakayo. The name changes with the job he is doing." This participant's observation illustrated how nickname fluidity was structured rather than

arbitrary, following identifiable patterns of political evaluation.

The fluidity of connotative meaning followed three identifiable patterns. First, nicknames shifted in response to specific political events. "Watermelon" resurfaced at each new instance of perceived Musyoka inconsistency; "Zakayo" peaked during tax policy controversies; "Flying Man" intensified during periods of extensive presidential travel. Second, nicknames were contested between actors with competing interests. Gachagua's "Soprano" represented an attempt to fix a negative meaning that Kindiki's supporters actively resisted through counter-narratives emphasizing his academic credentials and administrative competence. Third, nicknames could be co-opted by their bearers. Ruto's embrace of "Kasongo," Joho's eventual adoption of "Sultan," and Waititu's legal registration of "Baba Yao" all illustrated how targets could attempt to reclaim critical or ambivalent nicknames. The success of these co-optation strategies was variable and empirically uncertain: documentary analysis suggested that "Sultan" was successfully reclaimed, while "Kasongo" remained contested, with citizens continuing to use it critically despite Ruto's performative embrace.

These patterns suggested that the politics of nicknaming was a structured contestation over meaning rather than a free-for-all—one whose rules required the kind of contextually grounded sociolinguistic analysis that this study attempted to provide. The democratic implications of this contestation were substantial. Nickname fluidity enabled citizens to revise their political evaluations in real time, without awaiting electoral cycles or institutional processes. It provided a continuous, low-cost mechanism for expressing political sentiment that complemented rather

than replaced formal democratic channels. However, it also introduced risks of political volatility: nicknames could shift so rapidly that they destabilized the capacity for sustained political judgment, with citizens moving from "Hustler" to "Zakayo" without the deliberative pause that democratic theory might value. The study did not resolve this tension but documented it as a constitutive feature of nickname-based democratic expression in digitally mediated political environments.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that political nicknames in Kenya constitute far more than casual linguistic play; they are densely packed instruments of symbolic power that operate at the intersection of language, identity, and democratic contestation. Through the analysis of thirty-five nicknames borne by seventeen prominent politicians, the research traced how these informal appellations compress complex political narratives into culturally resonant, emotionally charged formulations that citizens deploy to construct populist identities, voice satirical dissent, anchor ethnic and communal belonging, and negotiate the fluid boundaries of political legitimacy. The findings revealed that the most politically consequential nicknames activate multiple dimensions of meaning simultaneously, creating semantic fields that structure public perception in ways that formal political rhetoric rarely achieves. The democratic implications of this naming power are ambivalent but undeniable: nicknames lower barriers to political participation, enabling vernacular critique and digital mobilization, yet they also risk simplifying complex policy debates, polarizing affective engagement, and reproducing gendered and ethnic exclusions.

As Kenya's digital public sphere continues to amplify the velocity and reach of informal political language, understanding democratic discourse in Africa requires sustained attention to the politics of naming the contested, creative, and consequential practice through which citizens name their leaders, and in so doing, name the terms of their own political belonging.

Theoretical and Interdisciplinary Contributions

Political nicknaming in Kenya is not an informal afterthought to serious democratic politics; it is one of the primary arenas in which that politics is conducted. The analysis presented here establishes three theoretical contributions. First, Leech's Associative Theory of Meaning developed for semantic analysis of ordinary language proves productively applicable to informal political language in non-Western contexts, particularly when its framework is operationalized through the question of what political work connotative resources perform rather than what category they belong to. Second, onomastic theory is extended by establishing that political nicknaming in Africa operates through the same fundamental connotative mechanisms identified by Leech while displaying culturally specific content notably the entanglement of political identity with ethnic community, religious authority, and communal leadership traditions—that distinguishes the African case from the Western democratic contexts in which most political communication theory has been developed. Third, the study contributes to political communication theory by establishing political nicknaming as a theoretically tractable, semantically sophisticated

practice of informal democratic discourse through which citizens exercise evaluative agency over their leaders in ways that formal political participation cannot accommodate.

The interdisciplinary reach of these contributions spans onomastics, sociolinguistics, political science, communication studies, and African studies. Crucially, the three functional categories identified in the corpus—identity construction and populist branding, satirical dissent and informal accountability, and cultural and ethnic identity anchoring—are not unique to Kenya. Comparable dynamics are observable in political nicknaming in other African democracies and, with different cultural content, in democratic systems globally. Kenya offers a particularly transparent case precisely because the linguistic diversity of its political nicknaming spanning Swahili, Luo, Kikuyu, Sheng, and English makes the cultural embeddedness of connotative meaning unusually visible.

Implications for Practice

Several practical implications emerge. For political actors and communication strategists, the corpus demonstrates that informal naming is a central arena of political reputation management: nicknames rooted in demonstrable service delivery ('Wamatangi,' 'Wa Iria,' 'Jicho Pevu') translate into durable electoral capital, while satirical names coined in response to perceived policy failure ('Zakayo,' 'Kasongo,' 'Jayden') can durably shape a leader's public image. The cases of Joho and Ruto suggest that co-optation embracing rather than resisting a critical nickname can be an effective counter-strategy, though its success depends on the political context and the cultural resonance of the underlying metaphor. For media analysts, monitoring the

informal linguistic landscape of social media platforms tracking which nicknames achieve circulation, who coins them, and how they evolve offers a real-time register of public political sentiment that surveys cannot easily capture. For scholars of African democracy, the evidence that citizens routinely exercise informal accountability through naming practices suggests that democratic participation in Kenya extends significantly beyond formal electoral involvement a finding relevant to ongoing debates about the depth and quality of democratic governance in Africa.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The purposive sampling strategy, appropriate for depth, constrains generalizability; the findings cannot be assumed to hold for political nicknaming at sub-county level, in smaller ethnic communities with different cultural traditions, or in other African countries. The focus group data, drawn from a linguistics student population, may reflect greater metalinguistic awareness of naming practices than the broader public. Researcher introspection, while analytically valuable, introduces interpretive risks that reflexive awareness can mitigate but not eliminate.

Future research might usefully pursue longitudinal analysis of how specific nicknames evolve in response to political events; computational analysis of social media data to map the spatial and temporal dynamics of nickname spread; comparative studies examining political nicknaming in Uganda, Tanzania, Nigeria, and South Africa to identify pan-African patterns and culturally specific variations; and qualitative research foregrounding the perspectives of nickname bearers on the experience of being named. At a broader theoretical level, integrating the

present framework with critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2015) and Bourdieusian accounts of symbolic power would enable fuller engagement with the power dimensions of political nicknaming that Leech's primarily semantic framework does not directly address.

Language, as van Dijk (2008) has argued, is never merely a medium of communication but always simultaneously a form of social practice through which power relations are enacted, contested, and reproduced. When Kenyans nickname their president 'Zakayo,' they are not describing a fiscal policy; they are asserting a moral judgment, claiming the right to evaluate their leaders, and participating in a democratic culture of accountability that operates outside formal institutional channels. In this sense, the political nickname is not a marginal linguistic curiosity but a window into the democratic imagination the ways in which ordinary citizens, armed with cultural knowledge, collective memory, and the reach of digital platforms, continue to negotiate the terms on which power is exercised in their name.

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