

PEJORATIVE LANGUAGE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY: THE LABELLING OF ILORIN PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

Language is a central resource through which social identities are constructed, evaluated, and contested in daily interaction. In linguistically diverse settings such as Ilorin, Nigeria, evaluative and pejorative expressions serve as instruments for positioning individuals and groups within local social hierarchies. This study examined the pejorative labelling of Ilorin identity, focusing on how such expressions contribute to inclusion, exclusion, and identity regulation in ordinary speech. Despite growing scholarship on naming and identity in Ilorin, existing research has largely focused on nicknames as markers of social bonding or on broad patterns in language and political history, leaving the mechanisms by which pejorative terms police identity boundaries underexamined. To address this gap, the study adopted a qualitative sociolinguistic design, drawing on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and naturalistic recordings involving sixty participants comprising Ilorin indigenes and non-Ilorin residents. Data were analysed thematically, with attention to interactional context, pragmatic force, and speaker positioning. Findings showed that pejorative language occurred frequently in informal interaction, with about two-thirds of participants reporting direct exposure to such terms. Gendered and morality-based pejoratives accounted for over half of the expressions discussed, while economic and behavioural labels formed a substantial minority. Although humour and familiarity softened delivery in roughly 40 percent of reported instances, the underlying evaluative force remained largely intact. Responses ranged from silence and avoidance, reported by nearly half of participants, to vocal resistance and reappropriation. The study concludes that pejorative speech functions as a routine mechanism through which social boundaries and power relations are produced and contested in Ilorin.

Keywords: Language and Identity; Pejorative Terms; Sociolinguistics

INTRODUCTION

Language occupies a central position in how individuals perceive themselves and others within society. Beyond its communicative function, language operates as a vital resource for classifying, evaluating, and positioning social groups. In multilingual and multi-ethnic settings, ordinary words and expressions are used not merely to describe people but to locate them within social hierarchies (Kircher & Fox, 2021). Pejorative expressions, in particular, carry evaluative force that can affirm belonging for some while marginalising others (Corredor, 2014). Although such expressions often appear casual or humorous, they are frequently embedded in deeper structures of power and historical experience. Ilorin serves as a significant site for analysing the politics surrounding pejorative language, influenced by its historical Yoruba roots, Fulani political power, and Islamic culture, reflecting the intersection of northern and southwestern Nigeria. This layered history has produced complex patterns of language use and identity affiliation that do not correspond neatly with ethnic origin or civic belonging (Joseph, 2016). Prior research has shown that many residents adopt Yoruba as a primary language while retaining non-Yoruba ancestral identities, indicating that linguistic assimilation does not necessarily entail identity transformation (Oloso, 2017). Within this context, naming practices become critical sites where belonging is negotiated, contested, and conditioned.

Pejorative expressions aimed at Ilorin people are typically anchored in impressions of speaking style, place of origin, religion, or social conduct. Expressions such as Agbákàn, Agbákò, and the mocking mimicry of Ilorin speech markers are not merely casual insults; they function as social assessments that cast Ilorin identity as coarse, primitive, or culturally ambiguous (Ayigun, 2018). Even when used playfully, their recurrent circulation contributes to shared prejudice. It reinforces uneven symbolic relations, echoing the wider sociolinguistic understanding that language is a site where social boundaries are produced and maintained rather than a neutral medium of interaction. Scholarship on language and identity

has long established that language is not a neutral communicative tool but a fundamental resource through which social meaning, group membership, and hierarchy are constructed (Norton, 2010; May, 2012; Bonvillain, 2019). Identity, in this view, is socially constructed and interactionally negotiated rather than fixed, and language supplies the labels and evaluative criteria through which persons are recognised and positioned (Scott, 2016; Bucholtz & Hall, 2010). Social identity theory extends this understanding by framing identity as an outcome of categorisation and comparison between in-groups and out-groups, in which language markers—accents, labels, and names—serve as prominent boundary-making devices (Darvin & Sun, 2024). Within this broader literature, pejorative terms have been theorised as condensed social evaluations that encode judgements of morality, intellect, and authenticity within single expressions, deriving their force less from literal meaning than from shared ideological associations attached to particular groups or regions (Donovan, 2014; Vendler, 2019; Woolard, 2020; Orman, 2008). Naming is theorised as powerful precisely because it categorises individuals before any direct encounter has occurred, so that when naming practices shift from neutral identification to scorn, they become instruments of symbolic violence that shape how groups are subsequently regarded and treated (Ngubane & Thabethe, 2013; Hall & Bucholtz, 2012).

Within the Nigerian and Yoruba-speaking context specifically, research on naming has tended to foreground its integrative and affiliative dimensions. Studies of nicknaming practices among Ilorin indigenes demonstrate that nicknames are typically flexible, context-dependent devices that index social ties and group participation, even when playful or sarcastic in tone (Jaiyeola, 2020). This body of work shows that the boundary between an affectionate nickname and a pejorative label is not fixed in the term itself but depends on who uses it, in what setting, and from what social distance. Complementing this line of work, historical and political scholarship situates Ilorin as a sociolinguistic contact zone shaped by the convergence of Yoruba, Fulani, and Islamic institutions, in which language choices, accents, and labels continue to reflect long-standing contests over legitimacy, power, and belonging within the Ilorin Emirate (Danmole, 1994; Jawondo, 2012; Oloso, 2018). Building on this history, Oloso's (2017) account of the politics of language and identity in the Ilorin Emirate shows that questioning who counts as a “real” Ilorin person, or disparaging speech associated with the city, engages long-standing status conflicts that extend well beyond the immediate interaction.

Taken together, this body of scholarship establishes two things clearly: first, that naming and evaluative language are consequential sites of identity work in Ilorin; and second, that language use in the city is historically and politically layered rather than a simple marker of ethnicity. What this literature has not yet done, however, is treat pejorative naming as a distinct object of sustained empirical inquiry. Existing studies of nicknames emphasise solidarity and social bonding (Jaiyeola, 2020), while studies of language and political history address broad patterns of identity contestation without close attention to the interactional mechanics of derogatory speech (Oloso, 2017). Consequently, comparatively little is known about how specific pejorative expressions targeting Ilorin people operate moment-to-moment in ordinary talk: how their force is calibrated by context and speaker identity, how they intersect with gender, morality, and economic status, and how targets respond to and sometimes resist them. This is the research gap that the present study addresses. Where prior work has established that naming matters in Ilorin and has traced its broader historical-political entanglements, it has not systematically examined pejorative expressions themselves as a sociolinguistic phenomenon operating through everyday discourse, nor has it detailed the interactional and pragmatic conditions under which such expressions shift between playful and harmful, or the range of strategies through which targets respond. By foregrounding disparaging expressions used to identify Ilorin people, the present study extends prior sociolinguistic work on Ilorin naming and identity while directing sustained attention to a dimension largely left unexamined: the everyday politics of pejorative naming.

Accordingly, the objective of this study is to examine how pejorative expressions associated with Ilorin identity are used, interpreted, and negotiated in everyday interaction, and to assess how such expressions contribute to processes of inclusion, exclusion, and identity regulation. To meet this objective, the study draws on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and naturalistic recordings involving sixty participants, analysed through thematic discourse analysis attentive to interactional context, pragmatic force, and speaker positioning. This design allows the study to move beyond documenting that pejorative terms exist toward explaining how they function socially, thereby filling the gap left by earlier scholarship and contributing a focused, empirically grounded account of pejorative naming as a mechanism of everyday identity politics in Ilorin.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical studies on language and identity highlight that language is more than a set of signs; it is intricately connected to how social groups identify themselves and others. Contemporary sociolinguistic research stresses that language choices and evaluative labels are crucial to constructions of social identity, particularly in multilingual and multi-ethnic situations. In the Nigerian context, language and identity intersect along numerous axes, including ethnicity, religion, class, and geography, with linguistic practice shaping how people are categorised and how power relations are perpetuated (Idowu & Ogundeko, 2026). Such theoretical views are important for understanding derogatory phrases in Ilorin, which both reflect and create social limits. One important perspective for understanding identity via language is Social Identity Theory, which posits that group identities are established by opposing conceptions of “us” and “them”. In communicative exchanges, speakers utilise linguistic labels to include those they consider similar and to exclude those they view as distinct.

Group-based categorisation frequently contains evaluative language that emphasises distinctions and supports in-group cohesion (Mukhtar & Fatima, 2024). From this approach, derogatory labels aimed toward Ilorin people may be viewed as part of wider social processes that preserve hierarchical connections between local and non-local identities.

Closely connected to this is the idea of language ideology, which refers to the collection of beliefs and attitudes that communities have about language and its social roles. Language ideologies affect not only views of linguistic variety but also social judgments about speakers themselves. They create frames through which language behaviours are regarded as signs of rank, cultural authenticity, or social value. Language ideologies are consequently intertwined with power: dominant groups frequently establish what qualifies as prestigious or standard, whereas marginalised groups are linked with inferior or non-standard forms (Kir, 2025; Münch et al., 2025). In Ilorin, prejudices about local speech patterns, accent traits, or colloquial identifiers are inscribed as derogatory terms that, in turn, reflect broader societal narratives about refinement, belonging, and validity. Understanding how language operates in identity-building also involves identifying the relationship between language use and the social environment. Research on Nigerian multilingual contexts reveals that people navigate and negotiate their identities across diverse language environments, choosing and enacting identities in response to social signals and expectations (Idowu & Ogundeko, 2026). Identity markers originate not just from the choice of language but also from the contextualised use of phrases that denote group membership or distinction. Pejorative phrases, in this view, are not only linguistic elements; they are socially situated actions that place speakers and targets inside intricate hierarchies of belonging and exclusion.

An additional theoretical insight comes from discourse-centred studies, which stress the important relationship between language and power. Such methods explore not just what words imply but how their usage in social interaction leads to power relations. Negative branding and pejorative naming practices sometimes operate through subtle, ordinary speech, making exclusionary procedures appear normal or innocuous. The use of disparaging phrases may naturalise social hierarchies, impacting how groups view themselves and how others regard them. This accords with wider sociolinguistic approaches that regard language as both a channel and an effect of social conflict for meaning and status. Taken together, these theoretical strands provide a framework for studying how disparaging words that identify Ilorin people interact with larger societal processes. They highlight that language is a place of identity negotiation and power contestation, where ordinary speech practices engage in upholding or challenging social limits. In the Ilorin context, this paradigm allows for an analysis of how derogatory language is embedded in local histories, communication patterns, and societal expectations, affording insight into the politics of identity in multilingual contexts.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study utilised a qualitative sociolinguistic approach to explore the use, interpretation, and negotiation of pejorative expressions related to Ilorin identity in everyday interactions. The focus was on social meaning and lived experience rather than statistical analysis, viewing language and identity as socially constructed and contextually generated. The research involved sixty participants from diverse backgrounds, including Ilorin indigenes, those from Ilorin living elsewhere, and non-residents, ensuring a range of perspectives on pejorative language. The methodology aimed to capture meaning and speaker positioning in real interactions, aligning with sociolinguistic scholarship that emphasises the importance of ordinary conversation in understanding identity and power dynamics. Three data sources were utilised in the study: semi-structured interviews with sixty participants, participant observation in various social settings, and naturalistic recordings of everyday conversations. The interviews focused on participants' experiences with pejorative expressions associated with Ilorin identity and explored the social and emotional impacts of these expressions. The semi-structured format allowed for comparability while enabling personal narrative. Observational notes added context to participants' accounts, capturing spontaneous instances of pejorative language and the reactions they evoked. Additionally, recorded conversations provided insights into interactional features of the language that interviews alone could not reveal, and all recordings were transcribed and anonymised for analysis. Data were analysed using thematic discourse analysis, drawing on interview transcripts and observational notes to identify patterns in language use. Key areas of examination included the pragmatic force of pejorative expressions, their interactional contexts, and the identity implications they create. Themes emerged around mockery, exclusion, moral judgment, boundary marking, emotional responses, and resistance, reflecting the notion of language as a form of social action. The study adhered to ethical protocols, ensuring informed consent and participant anonymity. Data collection involved interviews, observations, and discourse analysis, providing insights into how pejorative terms function in Ilorin's sociolinguistic context, linking language use to identity construction and social regulation, thereby fulfilling the study's objective.

RESULTS

Across the sixty interviews, observational encounters, and recorded conversations, pejorative expressions emerged as a routine feature of everyday talk about Ilorin identity. Approximately two-thirds of participants reported direct exposure to such expressions in ordinary discourse, most commonly in casual, unplanned exchanges rather than formal or confrontational settings. Gendered and morality-based pejoratives together accounted for over half of the terms discussed, while economic and behavioural labels made up a substantial share of the remainder. Humour and familiarity softened

delivery in roughly 40 percent of reported instances. However, participants consistently described the underlying evaluative judgement as remaining intact regardless of tone, a pattern consistent with the view that pejorative force derives from ideological association rather than from the literal content of an utterance (Vendler, 2019). Reported responses were similarly patterned: close to half of participants described relying on silence or avoidance, while the remainder described vocal resistance, confrontation, or ironic self-use, mirroring the range of accommodative and resistant strategies documented in prior studies of identity negotiation through language (Brook, 2014). The thematic patterns underlying these figures are presented below and organised according to the analytic categories that emerged from the data.

1. Pre-emptive Labelling and Social Shorthand

Pejorative terms such as *Agbákàn* and *Agbákò* functioned less as casual descriptors than as compressed social evaluations, immediately recognisable and widely circulated enough to allow speakers to invoke communal judgements about Ilorin people without further explanation. Adebola, a 34-year-old merchant from Ilorin West, explained that *Agbákàn* was often used “to suggest that someone from Ilorin is somehow backward or not fully sharp,” adding that “once they say *Agbákàn*, they have already decided who you are before you speak.” Her account illustrates the pre-emptive force of such labelling: identity was assigned in advance of encounter, constraining the target’s capacity to define themselves on their own terms. This pattern corroborates theorisations of naming as a categorising act that operates prior to, and independently of, direct interaction, whereby labels shift from neutral identification to instruments of symbolic violence once they circulate widely enough to be invoked as shorthand (Ngubane & Thabethe, 2013; Hall & Bucholtz, 2012).

2. Context-Dependent Force: Humour versus Hostility

The same expressions shifted markedly in force depending on interactional context, even though their underlying evaluative content remained stable. Ibrahim, a 29-year-old public worker, observed that, among friends, *Agbákò* could be delivered “with laughter,” while in conflict, “it is meant to wound.” This variability suggests that pragmatic force is calibrated by situational alignment rather than lexical meaning alone, giving speakers a socially useful ambiguity: they could assert social judgment while retaining the ability to deny offensive intent if challenged. This finding is consistent with accounts of pejorative terms as condensed social evaluations whose force is licensed by shared ideological associations rather than fixed to any single context of use (Woolard, 2020; Scott & Stevens, 2019), which helps explain why identical lexical items could function simultaneously as banter and as insult.

3. Moral Character Pejoratives

Expressions targeting moral character, such as *omólàlàsé* and *aláyébàjé*, carried particularly strong and lasting weight. Sadiq, a 41-year-old teacher, noted that calling someone *aláyébàjé* signalled “you are saying the person is spoilt inside, not just mistaken.” Because such terms characterised moral failing as an inherent trait rather than a situational lapse, they left little discursive room for repair or reinterpretation within the encounter, distinguishing them from more transient forms of criticism. This finding is consistent with established accounts of the centrality of upbringing and moral discipline (*iwà*) to Yoruba personhood, in which a single evaluative label can be read as a verdict on character rather than on conduct (Ikotun, 2010).

4. Fate- and Lineage-Based Insults

Expressions invoking destiny and ancestry, such as *orí ẹ̀ buru*, extended judgment beyond present conduct to a person’s perceived life trajectory and family background. Zainab, a 26-year-old postgraduate student, described such phrases as “heavier than ordinary insults because it feels like your whole life is condemned.” Because these expressions drew on culturally established beliefs linking destiny to human worth, participants found them especially difficult to deflect or dismiss. This observation aligns with the broader explanatory role that cosmological belief plays in everyday speech, whereby framing misfortune or failure as fated rather than circumstantial narrows the discursive space available for a target to contest the judgment (Agyekum, 2018; Brekhus, 2015).

5. Speaker Position and Interpretive Authority

Interpretation of pejorative language depended heavily on who was speaking. Musa, a 37-year-old technician, contrasted his response to *Agbákàn* depending on the speaker’s identity: from a fellow Ilorin person, “you may manage it”; from a non-Ilorin speaker, “it sounds like rejection.” Across the data, insider use was more readily tolerated, though rarely treated as fully neutral. At the same time, identical terms from outsiders were consistently read as exclusionary — evidence that linguistic authority and the right to name were unevenly distributed according to social affiliation. This asymmetry is consistent with social identity theory’s account of in-group/out-group boundary-marking through language (Tajfel, 2010) and with the view that the legitimacy of an evaluative speech act depends on the socially recognised authority of the speaker rather than on the words themselves (Petrey, 2016).

6. Gendered Pejoratives

Gender constituted a distinct axis of harm within the data. Female participants frequently identified *obìnrinòfò* as the most damaging label directed at them. Fatimah, a 31-year-old businesswoman, explained that the term “does not just

insult you, it questions your worth as a woman,” and that its public use led others to “start watching you differently.” Beyond individual insult, the term operated as a mechanism of social control, reinforcing normative expectations of female conduct and inviting heightened scrutiny of women’s behaviour in public life. This finding corroborates the broader literature on language as an instrument of gendered regulation, in which naming practices discipline women’s conduct by subjecting it to heightened moral evaluation relative to men’s conduct (Litosseliti, 2014).

7. Economic Metaphors

Economically coded pejoratives such as gbélépawó associated targets with poverty and dependency, though participants stressed that such associations were symbolic rather than strictly factual. Kunle, a 45-year-old transport worker, described the term as “a way of showing who feels superior,” adding that “it is not always about money, it is about position.” Such language compressed social hierarchy into everyday speech, allowing speakers to assert relative status without confrontation. This pattern is in line with sociolinguistic accounts of symbolic domination, whereby language naturalises social distance and inequality by encoding hierarchy into routine, seemingly descriptive terms (Mautner, 2010; Woolard, 2020).

8. Dehumanising Animal Metaphors

Animal-based metaphors, including ọmọyẹyẹ and fawỌrajà, were regarded by participants as crossing a distinct moral threshold by diminishing the target’s humanity. Rukayat, a 22-year-old student, observed that once ọmọyẹyẹ was used, “you are no longer being spoken to as a person.” Such metaphors constructed sharp symbolic boundaries between speaker and target, thereby legitimising contempt through figurative dehumanisation. This corroborates the argument that pejorative naming, at its most extreme, functions as an instrument of symbolic violence that reshapes how a group is subsequently regarded and treated by delegitimising its claim to full personhood (Ngubane & Thabethe, 2013; Woolard, 2020).

9. Cumulative Effects on Identity and Power

Participants described repeated exposure to pejorative labels as shaping broader, longer-term perceptions of Ilorin identity rather than producing isolated episodes of offence. Bashir, a 39-year-old businessman, remarked that the widespread use of Agbákàn positioned Ilorin people “somewhere in between, not fully accepted” — an outcome he attributed to cumulative repetition rather than any single act of exclusion. Aisha, a 28-year-old NGO worker, linked this process explicitly to power, observing that “whoever names you controls how others talk about you.” Taken together, these accounts support the proposition that naming is a form of symbolic power whose effects accumulate through repetition rather than through any single interaction, gradually shaping how a group is positioned within the wider social order (Beaver & Stanley, 2023; Vendler, 2019).

10. Emotional Responses and Strategies of Resistance

Participants’ emotional responses frequently diverged from their outward presentation: several described smiling or laughing in the moment while feeling diminished internally. Zainab captured this tension directly: even while smiling in response to an insult, “inside you feel reduced.” Responses to pejorative labelling were correspondingly varied rather than uniform. Some participants confronted speakers directly, particularly when insults recurred; others favoured silence or strategic disengagement; a smaller number reported using terms like Agbákàn ironically among trusted peers as a coping strategy. Sadiq, however, questioned the effectiveness of this last approach, noting that “joking with it does not remove how others use it” — a reminder that reappropriation offered only limited relief where the underlying power relations remained unchanged. This range of responses is consistent with the view that identity is enacted through repeated, situated acts of accommodation and resistance rather than fixed once and for all (Howarth, 2011), and it echoes findings elsewhere that linguistic reappropriation confers only partial agency where structural asymmetries of power persist (Norton & Toohey, 2011).

DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine how pejorative expressions associated with Ilorin identity are used, interpreted, and negotiated in everyday interaction, and to explain how such expressions contribute to inclusion, exclusion, and identity regulation. The findings show that expressions such as Agbákàn, AgbákỌ, ọmọlálàsẹ, and aláyébàjẹ are not spontaneous or idiosyncratic insults but socially structured resources through which identity and hierarchy are routinely negotiated. This supports the broader sociolinguistic premise that language is deeply implicated in the construction and maintenance of social identity within speech communities (Joseph, 2016; Kaschula, 2021), while extending that premise into a specific empirical domain - pejorative naming - that prior Ilorin scholarship had not directly addressed. Jaiyeola (2020) found that nicknames typically strengthened social connection and engagement even when playful or sarcastic. The present findings depart from this pattern. While nicknames and pejoratives both involve acts of naming, the pejorative expressions examined here functioned predominantly to impose negative identity judgements rather than to negotiate familiarity or solidarity. This distinction matters: it suggests that naming in Ilorin does not operate along a single continuum from neutral to affectionate, but instead bifurcates into practices that build affiliation and practices that police boundaries - the latter of which had

received comparatively little sustained empirical attention until now. In this respect, the study directly addresses the gap identified in the introduction, moving beyond documentation of naming as a general phenomenon toward an account of pejorative naming as a distinct interactional practice with its own logic.

The moral weight carried by terms such as *omolàlàsé* and *aláyébàjé* is consistent with established Yoruba cultural emphases on upbringing, discipline, and moral standing (Ikotun, 2010). The present findings extend this literature by showing that such moral judgements are not confined to private or familial contexts but circulate widely in public interaction, amplifying their social consequences. Similarly, the use of destiny-based expressions such as *orí ẹ buru* illustrates the continuing explanatory power of cosmological belief in everyday speech (Agyekum, 2018; Brekhus, 2015): by framing failure as fated rather than circumstantial, such expressions narrow the discursive space available for renegotiating identity within the interaction itself. Together, these patterns support the view that language does not merely describe social reality but actively legitimises particular readings of it through culturally sanctioned belief systems (Vendler, 2019). Consistent with social identity theory's emphasis on in-group and out-group boundaries (Korostelina, 2014), speaker position emerged as a decisive factor shaping how pejorative language was received. However, the findings complicate the assumption in some prior work that insider use of evaluative language is largely benign (Omoniyi & White, 2006): participants' tolerance of insider use more often reflected constrained acceptance than genuine neutrality. This distinction is theoretically significant because it indicates that power operates even within shared identity categories, shaping who may legitimately name, evaluate, and be believed (Haslam et al., 2025) - a dynamic that a simple insider/outsider binary risks obscuring.

The prominence of *obìnrìnfò* among female participants situates the findings within a wider literature on language as an instrument of gendered social control, in which women are subject to heightened moral scrutiny through naming practices that reinforce normative expectations of conduct and respectability (Walsh, 2016; Urone & Miano, 2026). The present data show this dynamic operating concretely in daily Ilorin talk, where a single gendered label was reported to alter how a woman was subsequently watched and judged in public life — demonstrating that the regulatory function of gendered pejoratives is not merely theoretical but interactionally consequential. Economic and animal-based metaphors, such as *gbélépawó*, *omoyèyè*, and *fàwỌrajà*, align with sociolinguistic accounts of symbolic domination, in which language naturalises inequality and social distance (Yuldashev, 2025; Woolard, 2020). What the data add is texture: participants were explicit that such labels operated symbolically rather than factually, functioning as claims to relative status rather than as accurate economic description, and that dehumanising metaphors, in particular, were experienced as crossing a distinct moral threshold rather than simply intensifying ordinary insult.

Responses to pejorative language — ranging from confrontation to silence to ironic self-use — illustrate a pattern of agency exercised within, rather than against, prevailing social hierarchies (Elloukmani et al., 2026; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Notably, participants themselves questioned the efficacy of reappropriation, suggesting that playful or ironic self-use provides only partial and localised relief when the broader distribution of naming rights remains unaltered. This finding tempers more optimistic readings of linguistic reappropriation in other contexts and suggests that its effectiveness may depend heavily on whether structural power asymmetries are simultaneously addressed. Collectively, these findings substantiate the study's central claim: pejorative naming in Ilorin functions as an everyday mechanism of identity positioning, boundary marking, and power negotiation, operating through mechanisms — contextual calibration, speaker-position sensitivity, moral and cosmological framing, gendered regulation, and constrained resistance — that had not previously been mapped together in a single empirical account. The study's qualitative design, while well-suited to capturing the interpretive and interactional richness of pejorative language, does not permit claims about the relative frequency of these patterns across the wider Ilorin population; the quantitative estimates reported here describe this sample rather than the city as a whole. Future research employing larger or more representative samples, or combining ethnographic methods with corpus-based analysis of naturally occurring speech, could test the generalisability of these patterns and examine how they shift across generations or in digitally mediated communication.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates the use, interpretation, and negotiation of pejorative expressions associated with Ilorin identity, focusing on their role in fostering inclusion, exclusion, and identity regulation. Through sixty semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and naturalistic recordings, the research reveals that pejorative labelling in Ilorin is socially structured rather than incidental or playful. Terms such as *Agbákàn*, *AgbákỌ*, and others serve as compressed social evaluations, pre-assigning identities, encoding moral and cosmological judgments, regulating gender-related behaviours and dehumanising their targets. The effects of these expressions are context-dependent; the same term can fluctuate between banter and hostility without altering the underlying judgment. The study identifies a bifurcation in naming practices: some foster affiliation while others enforce boundaries. These are executed through distinct mechanisms, including pre-emptive categorisation, contextual calibration, moral framing, gendered regulation, and limited resistance. Furthermore, this research connects everyday language practices to broader historical and political discourses on identity in the Ilorin Emirate, demonstrating how conflicts over belonging are reproduced in daily interactions. It posits that pejorative naming is a tool of symbolic power, shaping social boundaries and power dynamics rather than permanently

establishing them. The findings present a qualitative view based on the experiences of the sixty participants and are not statistically representative of the larger Ilorin population. The study suggests that further research with more extensive or diversely representative samples, possibly integrating ethnography with corpus-based approaches, could clarify the extent to which these patterns are generalizable and how they evolve over generations or in digital contexts. Ultimately, the research offers an empirically grounded perspective on pejorative naming as a mechanism of everyday identity politics in Ilorin and lays the groundwork for future inquiries into how ordinary speech interacts with social hierarchies.

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