

Olga Panic

Brand Names: A Linguistic Phenomenon

A brand name is a name that differentiates the goods or services of a manufacturer or seller from those of competitors. Brand names often designate the name of the manufacturer itself, but they can also be used in reference to individual products. Whenever a brand, which includes both the brand name and its pictorial design, has been given exclusive legal protection, the product comes to be labelled a registered trademark (™) or, alternatively, a proprietary brand name. In this paper, the term brand name will be used as the more generic one, to account for both phenomena—the name of the manufacturer and/or its individual products.

Throughout history, and especially in the last two centuries, brand names have served the purpose of protecting the manufacturer from fakes, protecting the customer as a guarantee of quality, participating in creating goodwill between the manufacturer and the customer and making the product competitive on the market. All these boil down to the ultimate purpose of individualising a product—giving it a name, establishing responsibility for its “behaviour” on the market and thus elevating it to the level of a specific social and legal institution.

Brand names as a marketing device and as a social, legal, psychological and linguistic phenomenon have been subject of much interdisciplinary research. The emergence and development of psychology of marketing and propaganda in the second half of the 20th century has revolutionized the field of marketing and, hence, the process of brand naming. Whenever a new product or service is launched on the market, it requires a name that would be easily recognized and remembered by potential customers. The product-naming process inevitably depends on the mechanisms of language, and it is here that certain levels of linguistic analysis enter the scene and play a crucial role in creating new names. All aspects of brand naming are governed by two general principles—language economy and language creativity, linguistic phenomena which are crucial in creating a successful and memorable brand name and which exert their

influence on and permeate the morphological, phonological and semantic levels of brand naming alike.

The linguistic approach to brand name creation is both scientific and creative—it makes use of well-established morphological, phonological and semantic principles, combining them in a creative way. Thus, a brand name formed according to such principles should be characterized by a creative and imaginative structure that produces a pleasant psycho-acoustic effect and a meaning rich in layers of associativeness that should contribute to the product's recognition value.

There are certain general governing principles—tendencies rather than rules—linguists should follow when undertaking the task of brand naming. They should try to avoid using personal, geographic, descriptive, deceptive or trivial and banal names. Proper names used in brand naming are generally seen as an unwelcome tendency, since exploiting a personal, geographic or institutional name might constitute a breach of regulations governing the protection of trademarks. Nevertheless, examples are to be found in abundance (personal, geographic and institutional names—*Hoover, Jacuzzi, Lincoln, Elgin, Frisbee*) and if they are used, they must not “move in on the lexical territory of another corporation” (Lentine and Shuy 1990: 349), for reasons of trademark infringement—a territory where the legal profession steps in and language becomes but a cause of legal battles.

Finally, despite all legal and non-legal efforts to protect their product's name, a manufacturer's brand name can fall into general use by entering the general vocabulary of a language, initially becoming a household word (which manufacturers have nothing against) and, subsequently, having undergone the process of genericization, a generic, common word (which manufacturers have much against). According to Clankie (1999),

Genericization is the process by which a brand name, specific in reference, undergoes a series of grammatical and semantic changes to become a common class-noun representative of the entire semantic class to which that product belongs.

Paradoxically enough, the nightmare of manufacturers is the triumph of linguists. A widely accepted and genericized brand name is the best evidence that linguists have been successful in following the morphological, phonological and semantic principles of brand naming, governed by language economy and language creativity. Namely, they have

created an appealing name that would stick in the mind of the customer so firmly that he would, through the processes of building brand equity, acceptance, loyalty and insistence, associate the name of an individual product with a whole class of similar items.

The following are examples of active trademarks often used generically and defunct trademarks which have fallen into general use;¹ they have already entered general-purpose dictionaries of the English language or are in the process of becoming generic labels.²

AstroTurf, Baby Buggy, Band Aid, Bisquick, Breathalyzer, Catseye, Chap Stick, Cellophane, Calor (gas), Coca-Cola > Coke, Cool Whip, Ditto Machine, Gatorade, Hoover, escalator, Frisbee, Hi-Liter, Hula-Hoop, Jacuzzi, JCB, jeep, Jell-O, Junglegym, Klaxon, Kleenex, Kool-Aid, Laundromat, Lego, Linoleum, Lycra, Magic Marker, Mace, Muzak, Nutter, Pogo, Popsicle, Pop Tart, Post-It Note, Pyrex, Rollerblade, Q-Tip, Saran Wrap, Scotch tape, Sellotape, Shinola, Spam, Spandex, Styrofoam, Super glue, TelePrompTer, Teflon, Teletype, Thermos, Timex, Tipp-Ex, TV Dinner, Vegeburger, Walkman, Waverunner, Welcome Wagon, Wite-Out, X-acto, Xerox, Yellow Pages, Y-fronts, Yo-Yo, Ziploc, zipper, Zippo.

The above list represents but an illustrative example of names created in accordance with the general principles of brand naming. Thus, memorable names are created by employing and combining virtually all word formation processes (with special emphasis on affixation—as in *Timex, Shinola*, composition—*Band Aid, Walkman* and blending—*Bisquick, Breathalyzer*). Such descriptive (*Baby Buggy*), metaphoric (*Catseye*) or metonymic (*Y-fronts*) names with an appealing psycho-acoustic effect (*Coca-Cola, Hoover*), which carry expressive associative meanings, evoke positive psychological responses (*Magic Marker, Super glue, Kool-Aid*). Additional stick-in-the-mind effect is achieved by graphemic variation and frequent use of playful spelling, which contribute to the name's unique "orthographic identity" (*Hi-Liter, Jell-O, Kleenex, X-acto*).

Combining several word formation processes, accompanied by playful punning, is certainly the most creative and most powerful tool in brand naming. Examples of creative and imaginative structures, such as *Ralgex* =

¹ Brand names that have become generic labels for their product categories are sometimes termed *generonyms*, but the term does not have wide currency.

² The list of active trademarks used generically and defunct trademarks which have fallen into general use originates from the author's own collection.

(*neu*)*ralg(ia)* + *-ex*, exploit both the processes of front- and back clipping and affixation, while *Terminix* = *termi(te)* or *termi(nate)* + *-nix* suggests the complete and absolute elimination of termites, by exploiting the structural similarity between “termite” and “terminate,” the Latin prefix *ex-* (with the meaning “away, gone”) and the new suffix *-nix*, which further implies negation, prohibition and elimination.

Playful punning frequently occurs as an auxiliary device in creating a more appealing name. The names *Headex*, a brand of headache painkiller and *Earex*, a brand of ear drops, are both associated with the kinds of ache on which they are supposed to have a soothing effect, resembling in their phonological forms the words “headaches” and “earaches” respectively.³

Another noteworthy phenomenon is that brand naming itself has given rise to new units of morphological and semantic analysis. The most frequent brand-naming suffixes or suffixoids *-ex*, *-(d)ex*, *-(t)ex*, *-(r)ex*, *-ak*, *-on*, *-o*, *-ola* (in brand names such as *Durex*, *Copydex*, *Coldrex*, *Recordak*, *Klaxon*, *Zippo*, *Shinola*) are either typically found in brand names or they have become productive and acquired affix status exactly as a result of their being exploited in brand names. Their semantic load (their firmly established meanings) exerts a crucial influence on the descriptive and, especially, associative force of the brand name as a whole.

In conclusion, brand names make a valuable contribution to the creative potential of language and provide an ever-fresh and inexhaustible source of material for the study of linguistics—one of the sciences to which they owe their emergence and existence. Brand names both stem from and result in language creativity—a phenomenon that appears to be the trademark of brand naming.

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³ Examples from Sebba (1986).

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Contact information:

Olga Panic
Kralja Petra I 28/I
25 000 Sombor
Serbia and Montenegro
E-mail: olgaivan@EUnet.yo