Testing Phonetic Symbolism Effects on Brand Name Preference For Bilinguals Across Multiple Languages

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Three experiments investigated the effects of phonetic symbolism on brand name preference. Bilingual participants in English and either French, Spanish or Chinese showed consistent preference in connecting words with front/back vowel sounds to specific product categories. The results were unaffected by language presentations or participants’ language proficiency.

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Testing Phonetic Symbolism Effects on Brand Name Preference for Bilinguals Across Multiple Languages

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Good brand names can enhance memorability, create favorable images, and increase preference for the products, and are an important component in building brand equity (Aaker 1996; Keller 1993). When investigating the construction of the brand names, researchers found that not only the semantic meaning, but also phonetic symbolism, which refers to a non-arbitrary relation between sound and meaning, may influence brand preference (Klink 2000). In its simplest form, phonetic symbolism suggests that phonemes (the smallest unit of sound) can convey meaning apart from their configuration in words or syllables. Research on the relation between phonetic symbolism and brand name preference has shown that brand name preference and brand attitudes are more positive when the fit between phonetic symbolism and the product attributes is maximized. Although previous research has been successful at documenting phonetic symbolism effects in brand names, the processes underlying these effects have remained elusive. First, as some critics have pointed out, phonetic symbolism effects do not necessarily occur spontaneously, but only when specific dimensional judgments (e.g., size, shape, brightness) are elicited (Bentley and Varon 1933), suggesting that the effect may be a methodological artifact. Second, the effects that have been obtained with determining the meaning of foreign words (e.g., matching pairs of antonyms in a foreign language with comparable English antonyms; Brown, Black, and Horowitz 1955) are eliminated if both sets of stimulus words are in languages foreign to the participants (Maltzman, Morrisett, and Brooks 1956). Besides, there are in fact some reasons to think that phonetic symbolism effects would not hold for some forms of language. For example, in the Chinese written language, there are important differences in how alphabetic and logographic word representations are processed (Schmitt, Pan, and Tavassoli 1994; Tavassoli 2001), and there is considerable debate as to whether phonetic information in logographic characters can even be activated prior to some semantic activation (Chua 1999; Zhou 1978).

The goal of this paper is to extend previous research on the existence of phonetic symbolism and its application to brand naming by testing the generalization of these findings across languages, and testing the extent to which fluency may moderate the phonetic symbolism effects. On the one hand, if the phonetic symbolism effects are indeed universal (Ultan 1978), fluency may have little effect. On the other hand, research shows that form and meaning in a second language, even for fluent bilinguals, are not as tightly connected as for a first language (Luna and Peracchio 2001). If so, we would expect to see weaker effects for less fluent second-language learners.

Three experiments were conducted to determine the extent to which phonetic symbolism effects are spontaneous and generalizable to other languages, and the extent to which non-native speakers are influenced by second-language fluency. In experiments 1–3, Spanish-, French- and Chinese-speaking participants who were fluent in English expressed preferences between brand name pairs that differed only in their primary vowel sound (front vs. back), and did so as a function of product category (2-seater convertible, knife, 4 X-4 vehicle, hammer). In addition, Chinese-speaking participants received brand name stimuli that were constructed using either alphabetic letters or logographic symbols in order to test possible differences in the two presentations. Our focal hypothesis was that preference for front versus back vowel sound words as brand names would vary as a function of product category: front vowel sound words should be preferred over back for 2-seater convertible and knife, and back vowel sound words should be preferred over front for 4 X-4 vehicle and hammer. Note that the elicitation of a brand name preference for each product category does not directly elicit a judgment regarding concepts such as size, speed, or sharpness (cf. Bentley and Varon 1933). Rather, the predicted effects should be noted only if participants form perceptions of these concepts spontaneously and then apply them to their preference judgments. The results of the ANOVA indicated that there was a significant interaction between vowel sound and product category as we predicted, whereas the effect of experiment was not significant. These findings indicate that phonetic symbolism effects are robust across the different languages and cultures we tested, including logographic representations in Chinese. The results also show that these general relations were for the most part unaffected by whether participants completed the experiment in their native language or a foreign language, and were also unaffected by their proficiency in that language.

The studies we have presented make a number of contributions to the consumer behavior literature, but they also contribute to the more general fields of cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics. We replicate the phonetic symbolism effects noted in previous studies (Lowrey and Shrum 2007; Yorkston and Menon 2004), but also show that a) these effects generalize to languages other than English, b) generalize to languages in which presentation is non-alphabetic (logographic), c) hold for second-language as well as first-language participants, d) these latter effects are observed regardless of level of proficiency of participants, and e) the effects are spontaneous rather than a function of being elicited by the research method.

REFERENCES


