

Commercial names and unestablished terminology

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Abstract

Commercial names differ in many ways from traditional subjects of onomastic research. The functions of names are focal in an economic environment and the semantic features have a remarkable synchronic importance as well. There is also a great deal of variation and complexity in the structure of commercial type of names.

The aim of this paper is to define what a commercial name is and what kind of subcategories they are constituted of, to discuss how juridical and economic issues have to be taken into account in the terminology, and what kind of special terminological problems do semantic and functional viewpoints bring to the research of commercial names.

The variation of terminology in different countries is highlighted and a suggestion is made for harmonising the terminology to some extent.

Background

Worldwide, the study of commercial nomenclature is quite new and only rather few of these studies have been carried out. In any case, interest in the field is on the rise: linguistic studies on commercial nomenclature, especially articles, have already been available to some extent. The most key subject in these articles is brands. Since brands as names are based either on company names or registered trademarks, the difference between company names and brand names has not necessarily been highlighted in all the studies.

Also, other researchers than just linguists are interested in commercial names. There have been studies published especially in marketing research which deal with names from many angles: branding, brand architecture, brand naming among others. In the science of commerce, the convention to speak about language as well as words and names is different from linguistics.

All countries have their own legislation concerning trade and commercial activity. The differences in legislation have an impact on commercial naming as well. The law usually determines what kind of terms concerning commercial names are applicable in the country.

Commercial names differ in many ways from traditional subjects of onomastic research. The functions of names are focal in an economic environment, and the semantic features have a remarkable synchronic importance, too. There is also a lot of variation and complexity in the structure of commercial kind of names.

All of these reasons cause the confusion of terminology in international onomastics, and the diverse set of concepts may, to some extent, complicate becoming familiar with sources of the field. These facts also throw a challenge to the scholars in the field of terminology.

After completion of my dissertation on Finnish company names (Sjöblom, 2006), I have continued studies on Finnish commercial naming (e.g. Sjöblom, 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010). In my studies, I look at names from a cognitive and functional linguistic point of view. The data that I base my implications on are primarily Finnish but also non-Finnish company names, brand names as well as other names that have a commercial tone. Finnish as a Finno-Ugric language has a very different (i.e. synthetic) structure from the Indo-European languages, and this may enable a somewhat more diversified angle to the study of names.

Definition of *commercial name*

Commercial nomenclature is best to be defined from a financial perspective: *Commercial names* are names whose function is to direct the choices of consumers and investors and that have economic objectives in their use. There is usually a juridical owner of a commercial name who determines its rights and limitations of use. One, but not the only function of a commercial name is to represent the monetary yield of its owner. Commercial names are also different from many other names in that the names themselves can be a subject of trade. Commercial names thus have monetary worth.

A great deal of money is increasingly being spent for the creation and development of different names in world economy. A commercial name is meant to be seen, and visibility costs money. A good name is a good way to show and sell things, because of the fact that the heart of a proper name is to identify its referent, to single it out, make it unique and distinguish it from all others. All of these factors are also central objectives of marketing.

Paradoxically, as more and more referents get their own unique name and the number of various names is continuously on the rise, a result of this is an inflation of commercial names. A continuous conflict between the underlying reason behind commercial naming and the competitive outcomes with names leads to the fact that commercial nomenclature is the most vulnerable name category to radical changes and experimentation with linguistic boundaries.

In international onomastics commercial names are sometimes called *ergonyms*. However, the concept of *ergonym* is somewhat broader than the concept of *commercial name*. Aside from names of commercial businesses and products names, ergonym also includes all basically non-commercial institutions, such as schools, cultural places, churches, different administrative fields and organisations. I consider both these terms necessary and useful, albeit ergonym is, in a way, a hyperonym and commercial name partly its hyponym.

Definitions of subcategories

Concerning the terms of subcategories of commercial names, there is some variation between languages. I will refer here only to German, Swedish and Finnish even though there are a great deal of studies on commercial naming in French, Spanish, Italian or Russian as well. I suggest dividing commercial names into four subcategories that could be defined differently from each other:

1. A *company name* (also *business name*) is an expression which consistently refers to a certain business. With this name, a company is identified and its activities distinguished from other companies. In German studies, the term *Unternehmensname*, in Swedish *företagsnamn* and in Finnish *yrittysnimi* ('enterprise name') are often used in the same sense. However, if we discuss it in depth and also take legal aspects into consideration, these terms are not unambiguous. For example, the Finnish Trade Names Act uses the term *toiminimi* ('acting name', in Swedish *firma*) which refers to names of all kind of financial actors from private entrepreneurs to cooperatives and listed corporations (Toiminimilaki, 1979). The same word *toiminimi* in colloquial Finnish refers to the name of a private entrepreneur. To make matters even more complicated, the English term *company name* does not literally correspond to the terms in these other languages. One must also remember that all businesses are not companies (in Finnish *yhtiö* from the verb *yhtyä* 'to combine') in a strict sense, as we take, for example, private entrepreneurs, who do not share their entrepreneurship with a partner. Nor, on the other hand, can all companies be considered businesses that practise economic activity (e.g. housing cooperatives). When studying company names, the researcher must be aware of the business legislation and trade name legislation of the country in question, because the law determines what kind of companies can exist, sets limits to company names and regulates them.

2. A *trademark* (Ger. *Warenzeichen* or *Geschäftsmarke*; Swe. *varumärke*; Fi. *tavaramerkki* ‘ware mark’) could be defined as a registered sign with reference to a certain product group of a specific manufacturer. The sign can include text and patterns. A trademark can also be a form of packaging (such as a Coca-Cola bottle) or some sound (such as an ice cream truck’s theme song). An important function of a trademark is to signify, to mark the origin of the product or service and to function as a tool in marketing. A registered trademark is not first and foremost a linguistic expression: it is not a name nor a term but rather a phenomenon outside of linguistics. Its natural use is in marketing or legal contexts. (Cf. Teutsch 2007, 11.)

3. A *product name* (Ger. *Markenname* or *Produktname*; Swe. *produktnamn* or *varumärkesnamn*; Fi. *tuotenimi* ‘product name’), however, is an element of language. It is a linguistic expression referring to the concept of a manufactured or developed product for commercial use. Products can be items, services, events etc. A product name is often included in a registered trademark and because of that, it can be difficult to differentiate a trademark and product name from one another. In any case, the difference should be quite clear regarding onomastics: a product name is a proper name whereas a trademark is not. Nevertheless, if there is a desire to emphasise the registration and establishment of a product name, the term trademark is, in my opinion, quite acceptable to be used in onomastics as well.

Not all product names are part of a trademark. A product can also be identified with a product name from a broader product group expressed with a trademark. For example, there is a Finnish trademark *Elovena* which refers to oat products by a company called *Raisio*. The company sells instant porridge in individual packets by the product name *Hetki* ‘moment’.

4. By commercial names, most people primarily mean *brands*. The term *brand* partly overlaps with a company name and a trademark. A brand is a widely known, financially valuable name which includes an image of the surplus value offered by the products. A brand usually refers to many product groups (*Nokia*, *Canon*) and is often based on a company name (*Ford*) or on a company’s registered trademark (*Pepsodent*®). Brands are bought and sold and their worth can dramatically rise higher than the worth of the actual production plant and the professionals working there (*Microsoft*, *Disney*, *Google*). A brand is, above all, a name and, from the owner’s perspective, this name has a key, unique role: everything from packaging to manufacturer and marketing can change but the name of the brand will stay the same. A name is the core of a brand.

In Finnish onomastics, the loan word *brändi* (< *brand*) is used in the same way as in marketing literature written in English. However, in German and Swedish onomastics, the word *brand* is not as common. The terms *Markenname* and *varumärke* seem to be typical in such contexts where brands are actually spoken about, names that include many images of surplus values. It is true that the concepts *product name* and *brand name* in a way overlap, but on the other hand, using them both might offer a possibility to more precise terminology and successful dialogue with the researchers of marketing.

There has been a great deal of discussion about the proprial status of product names and brand names (e.g. Andersson, 1997, 147; 2004, 11-12). In principle, consequential to the definitions of the terms, they are obviously proper names. An appropriate example sentence for the clear proprial use of a product name and brand is: *Benecol was created as a result of long product development*. In any case, these expressions are often used as appellatives, such as in the sentence *My sister-in-law bought a Ford* which can be compared to a sentence like *My boyfriend bought a rose*. The word *Ford* is used in the same way as *rose* in the second sentence. In this kind of context, the expression referring to the product is not an identifying name but rather a classifying appellative. The fact that, in this case, the word is usually written with a capital letter may make the interpretation more indistinct.

Studying the structure of commercial names

A terminological point of view can also be applied to the analysis of commercial names. What terms could be used, on one hand, in the structural analysis and, on the other hand, in the semantic analysis of company and product names? Would the traditional terminology developed for place name or personal name studies be sufficient? The following ideas and suggestions are based on the theoretical and methodological aspects of cognitive and functional linguistics.

The fact is that commercial names structurally differ from many other names. There is quite a great deal of variation in their structure and the vocabulary used in them. Commercial names are usually more complex than place names and seem to include many different elements which is why the syntactic segmentation used, for instance, in Finnish toponomastics does not work. In commercial nomenclature, the order of name elements may be syntactically significant but it is not as systematic as it is in place names.

My suggestion concerning the division of structural name parts¹ in commercial names is as follows: The name parts each have their own function based on the semantic content of the part in the name as a whole. Long official company names in particular can be divided into meaningful syntactic parts whose arrangement and internal structure can be examined further. For example, in the Finnish registered company name *Kukkakauppa Floora tmi Anna Lindberg*, there is a part signifying the form of business (*tmi* ← *toiminimi* ‘legal name, trade name’), which is called a *corporate identifier*. The first word in the example, *Kukkakauppa* ‘flower shop’ is the *part signifying the business concept*. The actual name that separates the company from all other companies is *Floora* ‘flora’, which is the *identifying part*. In this example, there is also a *supplementary part* that provides further information (*Anna Lindberg*, the name of the owner).

Finnish legislation stipulates that the form of business has to be expressed in the name, except in the case of private traders, who can have it optionally. Compulsory for all company names is a part which identifies and differentiates the business, i.e. the identifying part (even though the law does not have such exact terms). (Toiminimilaki, 1979.) Finnish law does not require mentioning the branch of business or the name of the owner, for example, in a company name, whereas, according to Ludger Kremer (1996: 187-188) for instance, in German legislation, the line of production can be obligatory and in the central part of a name, in the so called *Firmenkern*. The German terms *Firmenkern*, *Firmenzusatz* and *Erweiterungen*, introduced by Kremer, are reminiscent of the foregoing name parts in relation to the basic goal to separate functionally different and unequal parts from the name, but in detail they diverge from each other. The main reason for this seems to be the differences in legislation. (Also Sjöblom, 2006, 39.)

Products are often identified with a long *product description*, which similarly can be divided up into functional parts: the *name of the company*, a *trademark*, the *name of the product*, the *type of product* and the *supplementary part* providing further information can all be separated in these expressions. Every part is not necessary in a product description such as in the Lumene example in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1. Functional parts of a product description

Name of the company	Trademark	Name of the product	Type of product	Supplementary part
<i>Unilever</i>	<i>Pepsodent®</i>	<i>Junior</i>	<i>toothpaste</i>	<i>Mild Mint</i>
–	<i>Lumene®</i>	<i>Quick & Chick</i>	<i>Nail Polish</i>	<i>Horizon</i>

¹ I will use the term *name part* referring to syntactic-semantic parts of a name, instead of the term *name element*, which means all of the separate morphological elements that are included in a name, such as words, derivational affixes and endings. (See Ainiala et al. 2012, 36-37.)

In the first example, the registered trademark *Pepsodent* consists of a product name, whereas in the second example, the registered trademark *Lumene* is the identifying part of the company name *Lumene Oy*, and that is why there is no need to repeat it in the product description. (More detailed typology in Heegen 2013.)

Studying the semantics of commercial names

It has been categorically stated at times in onomastics that a name carries no meaning because it functions only in a referential relationship. However, it is not insignificant what the context of an expression, i.e. the meaning of a product name with reference to a certain drink, for example, is. Its importance does not only remain in the circumstances of naming but instead, the meaning is continuously present when the name is being used. These contexts of expression are exploited in marketing: a Finnish consumer is probably more likely to adhere to a beer bottle that has the name *Karhu* ‘bear’ on it rather than one that had the name *Pupu* ‘bunny’ or *Lehmä* ‘cow’.

Often, the semantics of commercial names is examined by formally looking at the words in the names and dividing them lexically into different groups. Christoph Platen (1997, 39-44) has divided commercial names into the following groups:

- 1) words of real language, such as appellatives or other lexemes (*Golf*, *Camel*, *Elle*) and proper names (*Wasa*, *Brigitte*)
- 2) creative formations, such as phonetic or orthographic formations (*X-tra*), derived words (*Yougurette*, *Nutella*), compound structures (*Dentagard*, *Ultra Pampers*) and phrases (*Nimm Zwei*, *After Eight*)
- 3) quasi words, such as acronyms (*Haribo* ← Hans Riegel Bonn) and arbitrary formations (*Elmex*).

Platen emphasises that in his point of view, a name carries information only to a lesser extent and an informative constituent is more or less a stylistic element. Instead, there is an intentional expressive component whose purpose is to evoke positive associations and emotions and which are conveyed via phonetic form and meanings. (Platen, 1997, 52-53.)

From a cognitive point of view, it is possible to examine the semantic content of a commercial name by looking at the meaning relationship between the elements (words) in the name and the referent of the name itself. The elements can express something direct about the referent (*direct meaning relationship*), for example, convey what field of activity or who the owner of the business is, as in the name *Construction Company William Smith*, or what the manufactured product is at hand and by whom, as in the Finnish name *Mattilan leipomon Ruisleipäset* ‘Mattila+GEN bakery+GEN rye bread+PL’. They can also express something about the referent through indirect association (*indirect meaning relationship*), which can be metonymic (the name of shoes, *Vagabond* ‘wanderer’) or metaphoric (the name of a beer, *Karhu* ‘bear’, “strong as a bear”). Many commercial names include expressions which are not real words of any language. These elements can, however, include recognisable parts from some words or names, whereupon a large group of different meaning associations can get compressed into one name element (*compressed meaning relationship*), such as in the name *Medilab*, which is associated to the words *medical* and *laboratory*. Quite many commercial names have been formed so that they are not in any way semantically connected to their referent, such as the Finnish company name *Luhta*. In this case, the meaning relationship is *disconnected*.

Conclusion

In regard to commercial names, there is indeed a great deal of terminological variation, not only between different countries but apparently between onomasticians in one country as well. This is due to different angles from which commercial naming has been reviewed. Names of businesses and products are of importance especially for marketing people and legislators, and both these groups have their own way of speaking about these names. Onomasticians must also take juridical and economic issues into account when considering the terminology of commercial nomenclature to facilitate discussion between different disciplines.

I have attempted to enlighten some terminological issues, bearing in mind that commercial names are in one way or another regulated by law and they are created and used in a commercial, economic context.

The important questions that have been brought about are: 1) how to categorise commercial names and how to define the terms used for these categories, and 2) when studying commercial names how to be conscious about the characteristics of this field of research (compared to other names) and the theoretical background that will have an effect on which terms one will choose to use.

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