Phonetic Symbolism and Brand Name Preferences in French and English

Tina Lowrey, University of Texas at San Antonio, USA
Dawn Lerman, Fordham University, USA
David Luna, Baruch College, USA

This paper reviews an experiment conducted among French-English bilinguals at an English-language business school in France. The main purpose of the experiment was to determine whether phonetic symbolism effects obtained in past research (Lowrey & Shrum, forthcoming) would manifest themselves in languages other than English. In addition, another factor investigated included processing in one's native language vs. a 2nd language (Luna & Peracchio, 2005). A total of 54 students participated in a 2 (language) by 2 (product category) replication and extension of previous research, and results indicated a significant main effect for product category (as previously obtained) and a significant interaction between language and product category.

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Tina M. Lowrey, University of Texas at San Antonio, USA
Dawn Lerman, Fordham University, USA
David Luna, Baruch College, CUNY, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Phonetic symbolism refers to the notion that the sounds of words convey meaning apart from their semantic connotation, and research in this area has a long history. For example, many researchers have shown that certain vowel sounds (e.g., the “ih” of “mill”) convey certain impressions (e.g., small, light, fast, and/or sharp) whereas other vowel sounds (e.g., the “ah” of “mall”) convey others (e.g., large, heavy, slow, and/or dull; see Newman 1933; and Sapir 1929). Similar effects have been noted with consonants as well.

Recent consumer research has applied these notions to the phonetic symbolism of brand names (Klink 2000; Lowrey and Shrum 2007; Lowrey, Shrum, and Dubitsky 2003; Yorkston and Menon 2004). In three of these studies, researchers showed that specific vowel sounds convey product attributes related to size, taste, temperature, etc. (Klink 2000; Lowrey and Shrum 2007; Yorkston and Menon 2004). These studies have also shown that brand names in which phonetic symbolism is complimentary to the product category (e.g., creamy and ice cream, Yorkston and Menon 2004; sharp and knife vs. dull and hammer, Lowrey and Shrum 2007; soft and shampoo, Klink 2001) are preferred over brand names with no such complimentarity.

One explanation for some of these findings is found in the front/back distinction for classifying vowels. This refers to the highest point of the location of the tongue when pronouncing a sound. For example, the highest position of the tongue is toward the front of the mouth for bee, and toward the back for boot (Klink 2000). In Klink’s research, front vowels were determined to convey meanings of smaller, quicker, and sharper, whereas back vowels conveyed the opposite qualities of larger, slower, and duller.

Most research applying phonetic symbolism in the context of consumer behavior has been conducted in English. Although the results are quite robust, it is important to determine if the effects hold in other languages. In this paper, we present the results of an experiment designed to extend the research on the relation between phonetic symbolism, attribute congruence, and brand names to the French language. We exposed bilingual French-English speakers to questionnaires written either in their native language of French, or in English.

Experiment
In this experiment, we expected the following:

H1: Brand names with back vowel sounds (“ah” sounds) will be preferred for products for which largeness, heaviness, lack of quickness, and/or dullness are considered positive attributes.

H2: Brand names with front vowel sounds (“ih” sounds) will be preferred for products for which smallness, lightness, quickness, and/or sharpness are considered positive attributes.

However, there are two factors that might yield different results for processing materials written in different languages. First, given that the effects of phonetic symbolism are automatic, and given the more automatic nature of processing in one’s native language (and consequently the possibility of more deliberative processing in a second language, see Luna and Peracchio 2001), it could be that phonetic symbolism effects are more likely to occur in one’s native language, yielding our third hypothesis:

H3: Native French speakers (who also speak English) responding to French questionnaires will show a more pronounced phonetic symbolism effect than those responding to English questionnaires.

Method
Participants and Procedure. Fifty-four undergraduate students at an English-language business school in France participated in the study in return for partial class credit. All participants provided written consent to participate. The sessions were conducted in small groups (e.g., 12 participants) in a classroom.

Participants received questionnaires containing six name pairs. Order of presentation was counterbalanced. Participants indicated their brand name preferences for each name pair for a single set of products whose attributes are compatible with the symbolism of a particular vowel sound (i.e., either a 4X4 vehicle paired with a hammer, or a two-seater convertible paired with a knife). Thus, phonetic symbolism was a within-subjects factor and product category was a between-subjects factor. Assignment to groups was random. Participants then provided general demographics and language proficiency for both French and English. Finally, participants were asked to provide their impression of the purpose of the study. Following the study, all participants were thanked and debriefed.

Stimuli. Extensive pre-testing was conducted to arrive at six front/back name pairs that were valid in both languages. To insure validity, names were selected that were non-words in both languages, were easily pronounceable in both languages (in the manner intended), and did not cue real words in either language. The six front/back name pairs are as follows: plim/plam; gliv/glav; frig/frag; brido/brado; prish/prash; and urid/urad. Pre-testing also confirmed that when pronounced or heard, the names were perceived to sound as intended.

Product categories were pre-tested to ensure a selection of products that differed on the important dimensions of size, weight, speed, and sharpness. Two product categories were selected: automotive vehicles and tools. For automotive vehicles, two-seater convertibles and 4X4 vehicles were selected as opposites (small/large; light/heavy; fast/slow; sharpness is irrelevant). For tools, knives and hammers were selected as opposites (light/heavy; sharp/dull; size and speed are irrelevant).

Results
The data from two incomplete questionnaires were dropped from the analysis. No participants indicated knowledge of the purpose of the experiment. There were no name pair order effects. The hypothesized main effects (H1 and H2) were supported. As the tabulation shows, “ah” names were strongly preferred over “ih” names when the product category was a 4X4 vehicle and hammer,
but the exact opposite was true when the product category was two-seater convertible and knife. This main effect for product category was significant ($F (1, 51)=4.13; p=.02$):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4X4/Hammer</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convertible/Knife</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The hypothesized interaction (H3) was also supported. The interaction between language and product category was significant ($F (1, 51)=4.08; p=.02$). The effects were stronger for those who received questionnaires written in French, and weaker for those who received questionnaires written in English:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>French</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4X4/Hammer</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convertible/Knife</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


