

# Chinese and English Brand Naming: Translation, Recall and Recognition

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**Abstract:** The memory of a brand name is one of the key factors to evaluate whether a brand name is successful or not. Given that more and more Chinese products are entering the international market, it is important to understand how consumers process information in names of brand, and it is even more important to translate the Chinese brands into the world market in a way to enhance the value of Chinese Brands. This paper reviews the Chinese-English translation strategies for Chinese brands, and the related factors influencing recall and recognition of brand names.

**Keywords:** Brand naming; Chinese-English; Translation; Recall; Recognition

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**Fund Project:** Liaoning Provincial Social Science Planning Fund, Project Name: Comparative Study on Brand Naming Industry in China and the United States, Project Number: L09DJY095

With the rapid development of China and world's economy, the market competition is increasingly fierce. Every year the market will welcome many new brands, but also eliminate many old brands. As brand naming plays an important role, it has been argued that only the best-managed and strongest brand names will survive<sup>[1]</sup>. A brand name is the foundation of the product, an asset to the company, and an important consumer cue<sup>[2]</sup>. Whether a local brand name is proper or not can directly influence established brand equity<sup>[3]</sup>. A successful brand name can bring inherent value to the product and company, otherwise, a careless choice of brand name could even lead to the damage of reputation. Driven by the interests of companies, a growing number of empirical studies on brand names have been conducted. Most of them are focused on the perspectives of consumer perception and brand name evaluation. Furthermore, the memory of a brand name is also one of the key factors to evaluate whether a brand name is successful or not<sup>[4]</sup>.

As the growing realization of the importance of brand names in establishing brand image and equity, a lot of researches in this area have been conducted. Most of them are focused on sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics. From the perspective of psycholinguistics, researchers investigate the psychological process, information process and memory mechanism of consumers. Therefore, this paper briefly reviews some Chinese-English bilingual studies on brand naming from consumer psycholinguistic and marketing perspective, and what is more, on the memory of them.

## 1. Translation Methods of Chinese-English Brand Names

To categorize the levels of semantic and phonetic congruity, three translation methods have been proposed by Shi Zhang and Bernd H. Schmitt<sup>[5]</sup>, namely phonetic translation, semantic translation and phonosemantic translation.

The phonetic translation aims to select certain Chinese characters in a sequence which pronounced as much as possible to the original English brand names. The meaning of each character is no longer retained when they are combined together<sup>[6]</sup>. As a result, these characters and such sequences function as purely phonetic symbols, similar to the meaningless syllables made up of letters used in alphabetic systems. Therefore, brand names made up of these characters provide no clues about brand and meaning associations. Thus, the phonetic translation is considered as high phonetic congruity but low semantic congruity.

The semantic translation aims to represent the actual meaning of the original English brand name regardless of its pronunciation. A pure semantic translation is possible only if the original brand name happens to be a lexicalized item in the dictionary. However, the

standard is less stringent for nonword brand names. The semantic translation of such brand names employs common associations of the product category. The semantic translation is regarded as high semantic congruity but low phonetic congruity.

The phonosemantic translation aims to select Chinese characters which are related to the original English brand name both phonetically and semantically. The objective is to select Chinese characters that carry a certain sound and represent a meaning that is associated with the brand or the brand's product category. The semantic and phonetic components in phonosemantic names are typically nonpure. Therefore, the phonosemantic translation is considered as moderate semantic and phonetic congruity.

## **2. Recall and Recognition of Brand Names**

Despite the common recommendation that brand names be memorable, little is known about the effect of brand name type on various forms of memory processing such as recall and recognition. Memory is often measured by recall and recognition <sup>[7]</sup>.

### **2.1 Recall**

Recall refers to “the ability to reproduce previously presented items” and it occurs when long-term memory is searched and a word is independently retrieved. In this retrieval process, Semantic processing is considered as the most intense and elaborate processing, and therefore results in the strongest associations <sup>[8]</sup>. A strong association, as may be found with the use of familiar words in a local language, often facilitates easier recall than a weak association. On the other hand, when a word is processed based on its sound or spelling, a weak association is likely to be formed.

### **2.2 Recognition**

Recognition refers to “the ability to identify an item as having been recently encountered” <sup>[9]</sup>. Uniqueness or novelty, such as with the use of a foreign language, plays an important role as an aid for recognition because distinctive memory tends to stand out <sup>[8]</sup>.

## **3. Influencing Factors on the Memory of Brand Names**

The memory advantage of a brand name is of critical significance to brand equity. Hence, a lot of researches are conducted to study the factors which influence the memorability of a brand name. In a research undertaken by Dawn Lerman and Ellen Garbarino <sup>[8]</sup>, recall and recognition for three sets of brand names were compared: words versus nonwords, relevant (i.e., related to a product attribute) words versus irrelevant (i.e., unrelated to a product attribute) words, and relevant words cuing an advertised attribute versus relevant words cuing an unadvertised attribute. They found that recognition appears to be higher for nonword names than word names, for irrelevant word names than for relevant word names, and for word names related to an advertised attribute than word names related to an unadvertised attribute. The nonword advantage, however, is eliminated in recall. In fact, the opposite occurs; subjects recalled words better than nonwords. Among word names, the irrelevant word name and the word name related to an advertised attribute outperformed the word name related to an unadvertised attribute. The results of this experimental study indicate that memory for these brand name types depends on whether it is accessed via recall or recognition.

Previous research undertaken by Dawn Lerman and Ellen Garbarino <sup>[8]</sup> only tested the memory of brand names when one single language (English) was presented. However, the research conducted by Jungsun Ahn and Carrie La Ferle <sup>[10]</sup> examined brand name and body copy variations using a mixed-language approach on recall and recognition measures. Furthermore, their research explores how foreign and local languages influence recall and recognition for brand name and body copy messages. Their findings suggested that recall and recognition were significantly affected by the language presented. An ad presenting a brand name in the foreign language with the body copy message in the local language is an effective strategy to enhance recall and recognition of the brand name and the ad message in the market.

The results of Jungsun Ahn and Carrie La Ferle's (2008)<sup>[10]</sup> research have provided practical suggestions for multinational advertisers to enhance the recall and recognition of the brand name and the ad message. Furthermore, other factors were also found to affect the memory of brand names, such as picture-text congruity. Three levels of brand-name and product-attribute congruity with the ad picture were categorized by Luna and Peracchio <sup>[11]</sup> in their study: (1) a low-congruity ad condition, in which neither the brand name nor the product attribute are congruent with the picture; (2) two moderate- or mixed-congruity ad conditions, in which either the brand name or the product attribute is congruent with the ad picture, while the other element, brand name or product attribute, is not congruent with the picture; and (3) a high-congruity ad condition, in which the picture, brand name, and product attribute are all congruent. The results suggested that a high level of congruent between picture and text could increase memory for ads in language 2 (L2) and thereby reducing the impact of language asymmetries on memory. Their research examined the proposition of the Revised Hierarchical Model which suggests that L2 messages result in inferior memory as compared with language 1 (L1) stimuli and found that the conceptual link between L2 and concepts could be facilitated if it is accompanied by a high congruent picture and text.

Analogously, whether the translation is congruent with a brand name semantically or phonetically could also have some impact on the memory of the brand name.

Considering the residual effect from the second-language-acquisition process, bilinguals who are more proficient with L1 tend to relate their words in L2 to words in L1. Thus, brand names may be memorized better when presented with corresponding L1 translation together, no matter word or nonword.

In summary, this research reviewed a psycholinguistic perspective of Chinese-English translation methods of brand names and memory of brand naming studies. The results of this research have enriched previous studies in brand name area and provided guidance for brand naming products to world market as it is of some significance to enable enterprises to gain the great advantage in market competition.

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