

AN OVERVIEW OF GENERICIZATION IN LINGUISTICS

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Abstract: Genericization refers to the process by which a brand name changes from specific in reference and representative of a single product by a particular company (e.g. Xerox photocopiers, or more recently, Google search engine) to a generic form representative of the entire semantic class to which that product belongs (a xerox, to xerox, or to google). This paper will give an overview of a theory first offered by Clankie (1999) to account for the changes seen in genericization, along with what has been learned in the ten years since the theory was first released.

Keywords: genericization, brand names, language change, actuation.

The brand name is one of the most pervasive linguistic forms found in the major languages of the world today. They are an inescapable part of modern capitalist culture, flooding not only our airwaves via our television, radio and Internet, but even so far as being present in our more personal moments, on the clothing we wear, the food on our shelves, and in our conversations with one another. Yet, in linguistics, the study of brand names linguistically has remained an understudied area, with the majority of the research coming in the 1990s and early 2000s by a handful of researchers doing the majority of the groundwork on these forms in English: Lentine and Shuy (1990), Clankie (1999) and (2002), Butters (2004), Cowan (2005), and Shuy (2008). This paper will provide a brief overview of one area in the research done on brand names in linguistics, that of genericization, as first described in Clankie (1999), focusing primarily on structural constraints and creation issues that result from proprietary status and followed-up with a description of genericization, which defined is the process by which a brand name moves from being specific in reference and representative of the company or product line to generic and representative of the entire semantic class for which the product belongs (e.g. google, xerox, etc.).

First, it is important to understand that brand names, as proprietary entities in language, must adhere uniformly to artificial rules dictated by law and that are applicable cross-linguistically. This makes the brand name different from other, unregulated forms, in the language. An example of the regulated structure of the brand can be seen in the two examples provided below from English.

PA	N(common)
(1) Kleenex tissues	

PA N(common)
 (2) Xerox photocopiers

In the first example above, Kleenex tissues, we can see the complete registered name for the box of tissues produced by the Kimberly-Clark Corporation, makers of Kleenex. And in the second example, is the registered name for photocopiers produced by the Xerox Corporation. By law, a brand name must be a proper adjective followed by a common noun or noun phrase representative of the semantic class to which the product belongs. This semantic categorization is not a finite set of categories for legal purposes, but rather is open-ended in order to account for technological advances and new products. Few linguists, let alone the ordinary public, are aware of this structural regulation, the general assumption being that brand names must be proper nouns. As a result of this regulation, we can view a number of grammatical and semantic changes in the brand that may lead to what in legal circles is frequently referred to as dilution of the brand, but in linguistics is called genericization (Clankie 1999). This discrepancy in jargon is not simply a difference in word choice. Rather, the term dilution suggests that the brand name is weakening. And perhaps from the point of view of the owner of the brand who has heavily invested in that name this is true. Linguistically however, this is not the case as it is semantic broadening that is occurring, the meaning of the name is growing, so much so that the brand is often said to be “a household name”. It is for this reason that genericization is a more appropriate term for the phenomenon of semantic broadening in brand names.

Genericization was first addressed in detail by Clankie (1999) who sought to explain the linguistic changes taking place when a brand name becomes generic. To this end, he proposed four hypotheses to a linguistic account of genericization. The four hypotheses are summarized below.

H1. Novelty: If the brand is for an innovative product, one for which no known semantic category exists, then the association of that item with its name will become synonymous, resulting in the brand name as both a product name and the name of the class to which it belongs (e.g. Rollerblades, Walkman, etc.). (79)

Generic brand names that can be said to have developed as a result of novelty include Rollerblades, Walkman and Mace. When these items entered the market there was no existing term. That gap was filled by the brand name in the following manner:

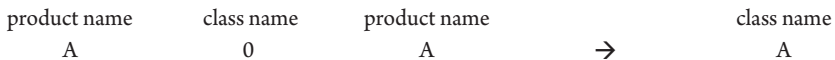


Figure 1: Genericization as a result of Novelty

H2. Length and Predominance: If the predominate brand name in a particular semantic class is shorter than its corresponding semantic class name, then that brand name will become the generic for the entire semantic class (e.g. Velcro hook and loop fasteners). (80)

We know that native speakers tend to simplify their language wherever and whenever possible (abbreviations and shortened words exemplify this). It's the path of least resistance. The same holds true for generic brand names. With no semantic class name available, marketing specialists are left with two choices. They can either create a short semantic class name to represent the new product entering the market (but which may be ambiguous and create problems in registration), or alternatively they can opt for a semantic class phrase that is more descriptive, more understandable to the public and less likely to be deemed unclear in registration. Marketing teams and trademark lawyers tend to choose the latter. This, however, creates a situation where the semantic class noun phrase is significantly longer than the brand name, which itself was designed to roll off the tongue. The result is quite clear. The brand name will become the de facto name for the item.

Clankie (1999: 117–119) demonstrated length differences in his corpus at three levels, the morpheme, syllable and word levels. This can be seen in the table below.

Table 1: Length differences between generic brands and corresponding class names

	Generic brand name	Class name
Morpheme	2.1	3.2
Syllable	2.6	4.4
Word	1.4	2.0

Some examples of this length discrepancy can be found in brand names such as Velcro hook and loop fasteners, and in many pharmaceutical brand names such as Aspirin acetylsalicylic acid. The following diagram shows this pattern.

product name	class name	product name		class name
Rollerblades	0	Rollerblades	→	rollerblades

Figure 2: Genericization as a result of length

H3. Genericization: Genericization as a series of changes is regular. The path from brand to generic form is not haphazard or random, but rather occurs as the result of a regular series of changes. (81)

Prior to Clankie (1999), in the scant research available on brand names in linguistics, it was generally assumed that genericization was a fairly random occurrence. It happened in some cases, but not in others, or was primarily driven by the market. Ed Callary, the former editor of *Names: A Journal of Onomastics*, details this early view in the preface he contributed to Clankie (2002), “All of these examples (and there are hundreds in English) were presented as individual examples of the process of genericization, but there was no known system or pattern underlying it...” (Callary, i)

In contrast, what was discovered was that the pattern that brand names follow as they move from introduction to the market and the language to become a generic household name is straightforward and uniform. This can be seen in the following two diagrams, the first for writing (where majuscule loss is important) and the second for spoken language (where context may differentiate generic use).

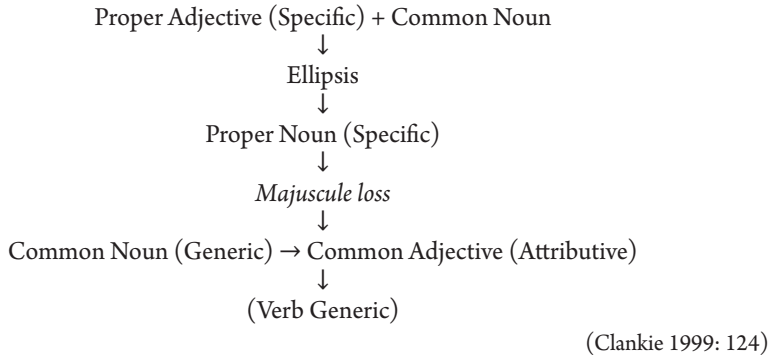


Figure 3: Genericization in Written Forms

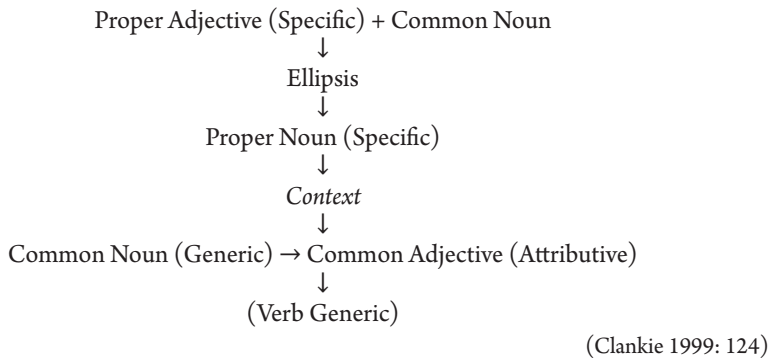


Figure 4: Genericization in Speech

In his initial corpus of 100 brand names that were deemed to be generic (using a low threshold two-token test to demonstrate genericization), 99 of the 100 brand names¹ followed the changes from brand name in the proprietary registration sense through the level of common generic noun. Beyond that level, only those brands representative of an action could be used generically as verbs.

H4. The Single Association Hypothesis: The Single Association Hypothesis sought to solve one of the fundamental problems of brand names, why do some brand names become generic while other great names do not. What was discovered was that there must be a psychological association between the brand name and a single product or use. The overwhelming number of generic brand names carried a single association. In other words, when those products entered the marketplace, that brand name represented a single product or action. Brand names that span a wide variety of products are far less likely to become generic (e.g. Hoover vs. Chanel). (82)

¹ The exception to this was Day-Glo, which at the time of writing had no corresponding generic noun, but could be used attributively generically.

In the original incarnation of the theory, the Single Association Hypothesis was the final piece of the genericization puzzle. But, while genericization theory could now explain how genericization occurs, there was still one issue that remained, and one that has been a particularly sticky problem in language change, the problem of actuation or how language change begins and how we might observe that change. This is an issue first discussed in Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968).

The over-all process of linguistic change may involve stimuli and constraints both from society and from the structure of language. The difficulty of the actuation riddle is evident from the number of factors which influence change: it is likely that all explanations to be advanced in the near future will be after the fact (Weinreich, Labov and Herzog 1968: 186).

To this end, it is worth noting that one of the happy coincidences of regulation of brand structure (and indeed of the entire registration process of brands) is that it gives the researcher clues to solving the problem of actuation, at least as far as brand names are concerned. As brand names are registered, that registration allows for an exact date for when the brand entered the market and the language. It also can, in the case of a very successful novel brand, show very clearly when the brand began to be used generically. In these cases, the entry into the market and the point at which the brand name become generic are close to simultaneous, if not so (particularly in cases where the marketing precedes the actual launch of the product, as is particularly prevalent in the marketing of cutting-edge electronic goods).

This brings up one additional aspect of the actuation problem where brand names stand apart from unregulated parts of the language, the possibility of predictability. If we look back to Weinreich et al.'s 1968 statement on the actuation problem "...it is likely that all explanations to be advanced in the near future will be after the fact." then with what we know about the registration and regulation of brand names, and of the changes these names undergo on the path to becoming a generic form, we must at least consider the possibility that the statement by Weinreich et al., while normally true in natural language, may not be entirely true in the case of genericization of brand names. The rationale for such a position can be posited in this way. We know that novelty, length and a single association are key elements of genericization, along with a dominant position in the marketplace (usually occurring as a result of novelty). We also know from examining previous cases where novel products, particularly in technology, have entered the market and have become generics almost immediately, then it is not a stretch to suggest that if we were to become aware of a product, prior to launch, that would so-revolutionize our lives that an overwhelming number of people would want one, that so long as the name given to that product would adhere to the constraints set out above, that we could very well argue ahead of time that genericization would occur, and we would likely be proven right. At present, however, this remains a theoretical extension of the theory and one which the author anticipates exploring to a great extent in the future.

Our search for actuation of language change in brand names, and for many other conceivable aspects of the subject will likely be aided in great part by our ability to search the Internet for unmonitored usage activity and through being able to rapidly process

increasingly large amounts of data through corpora such as COCA where, for example, first occurrences, largely relegated to Oxford English Dictionary searches in the past, give way to rapid searches via the corpora.

In the ten years that have passed since first publishing *On Brand Name Change: A Theory of Genericization* (1999) and its general release as *A Theory of Genericization on Brand Name Change* (2002) a great deal has been learned about genericization, and the extremes companies will go to in order to argue that their name is not generic (contrary to any linguistic evidence).

At present, and unlike at times in the early 20th century, governments and the courts tend to place a very low threshold on a company being able to protect its brand from being stripped of legal protection and rendered generic in the legal sense. In effect, they simply have to create a paper trail showing their attempts to protect their name from dilution/genericization. This is generally done through what are euphemistically called “trademark education” campaigns, essentially ads placed admonishing editors and writers to properly (sic) use the brand name. It is also done through nasty letters to people who might suggest that their name has, at least in the linguistics sense, become generic.

By consequence, a great deal has been learned about name construction in general. Genericization occurs when novelty and success meet opportunity (as no competing form exists) and ease (of articulation). Let me conclude by discussing in brief two brands, Google and Muji. The brand Google represents adequately the traits presented above (novelty, success, opportunity and ease of articulation). Google was in its infancy when the theory of genericization was first put forth. At that time, other search engines, Yahoo, in particular, existed, but none could capture a significant share of the market like Google was destined to do. Over time, Google became the de facto search engine of the Internet. A name that is short and easy to say, one that lends itself to the action it is representing (i.e. to google) and one for which the next nearest competitor, Yahoo, already had a secondary meaning², violating the single association hypothesis. As with many novel brands destined for genericization there is no established term for the novel process, therefore the name of the main market player will then fill that slot. And Google did just that. It is one of the most recent examples that has developed since the theory was first put forward.

Before turning to the Muji example, it is worth taking a moment to think about name construction and what examples of genericization can teach us about how great names are constructed. And that is what genericized names are. They are the best of the best. Walking down the street, it is easy to differentiate the good from the bad, particularly in business names. Genericization provides a specific singular meaning to the class of items or actions it represents, be it a product name or both a product and the name of the company behind it. It tells us that the best name is the one where the name is associated with what the company or product is or does. This is the essence of good business naming as well. If you can look up the street and see the name of the business, but that name gives no clue to what the business does, then the name is not a particularly good one. Tying the business or product name to what it does is one of the best name building strategies, yet one that unfortunately is so often overlooked. But, sometimes even the best naming intentions can go astray and the

² In English, a yahoo is a slang expression for someone who is a little bit silly or unsophisticated.

law of unintended consequences takes over. And such is the case with Muji. One of Japan's most famous domestic brands is 無印良品 (pronounced, mu-ji-yo-hin). It literally means "Unbranded Products", with the kanji characters from left to right meaning "Un-Branded-Good-Products" respectively. The marketing scheme for Muji is that it has shunned brand identity by creating the "Un-brand", similar to the soft drink maker 7-UP's 1970s campaign calling 7-UP "the un-cola". A novel idea, and one for which Muji found a great deal of success and publicity, but one fraught with a single unforeseen problem that was noticed while riding a train one night through Tokyo. On a particular rainy night, one of the fluorescent lights illuminating a large Muji sign on the side of a building facing the train line had gone out. The result was one that could not have been anticipated, but one which thousands of train passengers could have easily seen. Instead of reading "Un-Branded-Good-Products", the blown fluorescent light inside the sign rendered the reading as "Not-Good-Products".

Companies spend large sums of money creating and marketing their brand. Genericization continues to be the apex of achievement in that sense. It is something many companies fear, but at the same time, secretly desire. A name (and a product) that everyone knows, even to the extent that a competitor's product is called the same name. So, in a sense it is perhaps best to differentiate legal genericization from linguistic genericization. For one is simply an artificial protection against and avoidance of reality, the other an exemplification of the true state of the name.

To conclude, as linguists, the study of brand names in general, and of genericization, remain fertile ground for research. Much remains to be done, and the author would welcome others working on brand names, particularly in languages other than English, for what we can learn about those names and for how brand names fit into the overall framework of language. Hopefully, the best is yet to come.

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