

The Linguistics of the Brand Name: Creation, Genericization, Obsolescence

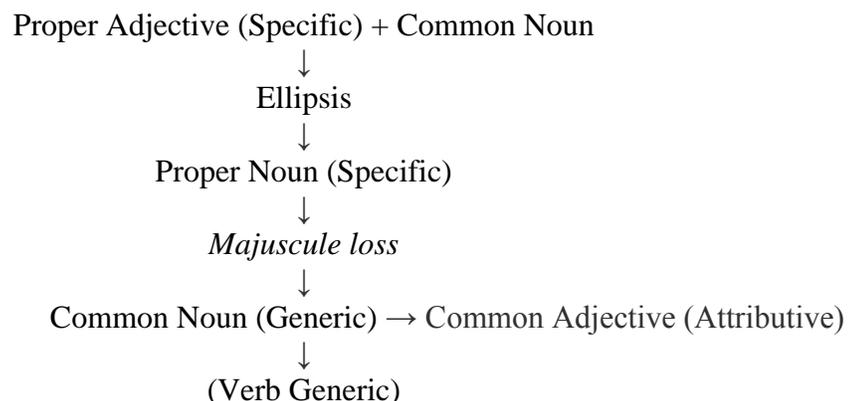
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The brand name is one of the most pervasive linguistic forms found in the major languages of the world today. Yet, in linguistics, it has remained an understudied area, with a handful of researchers doing the majority of the groundwork on these forms in English (Lentine and Shuy 1990, Clankie 2002, Cowan 2005, Butters 2008 and Shuy 2008) and even fewer working on brand names in Japanese (namely, Clankie 2002 and Hotta 2006). This presentation will provide a brief overview of the research that has been done on brand names in linguistics, focusing primarily on structural constraints and creation issues that result from proprietary status and followed-up with genericization, or the process by which a brand name becomes so common that it is no longer viewed as a brand, but simply as the entire semantic class for which the product belongs (e.g. google, xerox, etc.). First, it must be understood that brand names, as proprietary entities in language, must adhere uniformly to artificial rules dictated by law. This can be seen in the example provided below from English.

PA N(common)
Kleenex tissues

In the 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. By law, a brand name must be a proper adjective followed by a common noun 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 somewhat open-ended in order to account for technological advances and new products. Few linguists, let alone the ordinary public, are aware of this law and as a result we can view a number of grammatical and semantic changes in the brand that may result lead to what in legal circles is known as dilution of the brand, but in linguistics is called genericization. This latter subject was first addressed in detail by Clankie, 2002 who proposed the following chart to account for these changes in writing (below).

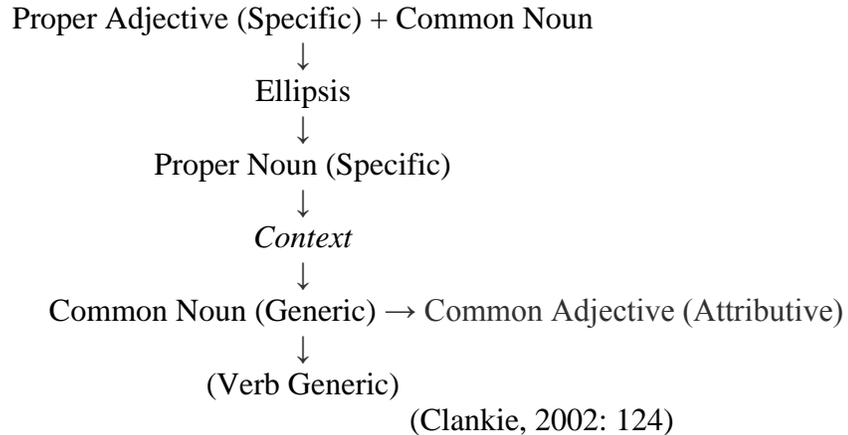
Figure 1: Genericization in Written Forms



(Clankie, 2002: 124)

And, he also examined the much more frequent occurrence of genericization in speech.

Figure 2: Genericization in Speech



In the presentation, the figures above, as part of genericization theory, will be briefly explained, showing how these changes occur and their impact on both the trademark holder and the language as a whole. Moving from Clankie’s models of genericization above, the speaker will turn to the final portion of the talk, concluding with some mention of obsolescence in brand names and some new considerations that have arisen, particularly in the morphology of brand names, such as English-Japanese hybrid names (such as “美 ing” and “Don 栗”) and the creations of brand names out of some closed-category forms such as with the demonstrative pronoun being branded in Japanese with Sangaria’s これ®烏龍茶, and other examples of which are currently being collected by the speaker.

Butters, R. (2008). Trademarks and other proprietary terms. *Dimensions of Forensic Linguistics, Amsterdam: Benjamins*, 231-47.

Clankie, S. (2002). *A theory of genericization on brand name change* (Vol. 6). Edwin Mellen Press.

Cowan, B. (2005). *The language of corporate names/ Historical, social, and linguistic factors in the evolution of technology corporation naming practices*. University of Hawaii at Manoa.

Hotta, S. (2006). A linguistic exploration of foreign terms in trademarks. *Intellectual Property: Bridging Aesthetics and Economics*. Montreal: Editions Themis.

Lentine, G., & Shuy, R. W. (1990). Mc-: meaning in the marketplace. *American speech*, 65(4), 349-366.

Shuy, R. W. (2008). *Fighting over Words: language and civil law cases*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Shawn M. Clankie is Professor of Applied Linguistics and the English Department Chair at Otaru University of Commerce. He is the author of A Theory of Genericization on Brand Name Change (Mellen) and more than 30 text and self-study books. He is also the founder and host of the Otaru University of Commerce English Lecture Series. <http://www.oucenglishlectureseries.com>