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CHANGING PATTERNS OF OPEL BRANDING POLICY – A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

The study focuses on the names of Opel cars and serves as an example of the potential contribution that a linguist can make to the process of development and evaluation of brands. It also analyses how the patterns of branding have changed together with the shift from the descriptive names in the production era through those influenced by semantics and social rank to those phonetically and orthographically guided in the marketing era.

1. Introduction

Linguistics is one of the disciplines that has its say, often neglected and overlooked, in creation and evaluation of brand names. The present article continues and complements the research started by Mamet (2008) on the branding policy of Opel in a given period of time i.e. the year 2008. The aim of this work is to show, in a diachronic way, how the policy changed together with the company's history and its marketing concepts until the year 2009.

2. Brand and branding – definitions and key notions

Contemporary marketing recognizes the role of brands and branding. According to American Marketing Association (AMA) brand is:

A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers. The legal term for brand is trademark. A brand may identify one item, a family of items, or all items of that seller. If used for the firm as a whole, the preferred term is trade name. (<http://www.marketingpower.com/mg-dictionary-view329.php> – 2007-05-07)

P. Kotler very rightly observes that branding "... is such a strong force today that hardly anything goes unbranded..." (2001: 189) and claims that a good name:

- suggests the benefits and qualities of a product, e.g. *Craftsman*;
- is short, and thus easy to pronounce, recognise and remember, e.g. like *Tide*;
- is distinctive, e.g. *Kodak*;
- is extendable, e.g. *Amazon.com* expanded from a bookseller into other categories;
- avoids poor meanings in other countries and languages, e.g. *Nova* means "doesn't go" in Spanish (Kotler 2001: 192).

Marek Zboralski (2000: 138–139) classifies brands in terms of the relationship between the symbol (brand) and the referent into:

- **Transferred names** – existing lexemes are given some new meaning related to the products they give name to, e.g. a noun denoting a game is transferred onto a car model *Golf*;
- **Invented names**, e.g. abbreviations like *IBM*, acronyms like *Microsoft* or words created by the removal of an affix or suffix, e.g. *fanta-stic* – *Fanta*. They form "...semantically empty but phonotactically correct combinations of letters or whole words..." (Zboralski 2000: 139, transl. P.M).

The author also suggests a more elaborate classification which may be presented in the table below.

Brand type	Brand character – method of transferring the message	Examples
Descriptive (semantic)	Direct motivation through the meaning of words	<i>Lux</i>
Suggestive (relative)	Allusion, connotation, suggestion	<i>Dr Witt, Mustang</i>
Symbolic (emblematic)	Symbol contents	<i>Gold, Ivory</i>
Arbitrary (speculative)	Motivation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hidden from the receiver • free (accidental) • image based 	<i>Hit, Renault</i>
Artificial (non-semantic)	No motivation	<i>Adidas, Kodak</i>

Table 1. Types of brand names (own study based on Zboralski 2000: 80)

The linguistic research on brands, called *chrematonimy*, made by C. Kosyl (2001) complements this classification. Thus Kosyl identifies the following types of brands:

- proper names that are transferred from one class to another, e.g. *Aramis* – the name of a literary character becomes a product name;
- common names that are transferred to proper names, e.g. *golf* and *Golf*;
- names being the result of word formation, e.g. *Pianon* (2001: 449–450).

3. The role of linguistics in branding

The success or failure of a brand may depend to a great extent on its linguistic aspect. Thus Rolls Royce's *Silver Mist* did not sell well in Germany where the name meant "silver animal dropping". In a similar way *Chevy Nova* (i.e. *Chevy* cannot do it) could not sell well in Latin America (Haig 2006: 181). On the other hand when FIAT was about to launch its *Panda* in 1980 it contacted journalists, managers, scientists and even fashion designers in their search for an attractive, easy to remember name with good connotations. It was assessed that the word *panda* was pronounced in a similar way in eight major languages of the world (Metelski 1980: 26).

Brand may be considered in terms of a message that is sent by the manufacturer to the potential client. Therefore, it has a linguistic character and the linguistic criteria may be applied to analyse it. The demand for a short and easy to pronounce name involves the count of syllables and clusters of sounds that are typical for a language and that facilitate the pronunciation or vice versa. A semantic analysis may indicate not only poor meanings in other languages and cultures but also connotations that make the name distinctive or pleasant to hear, write and remember.

J.C. Usunier and J. Shanier (2002) offer a comprehensive framework for assessing the linguistic value of a brand. According to their research the textual identity of a brand is determined by phonetics, phonology, rhetoric, semantics and semiotics (: 213).

A special attention may be given to sound and letter symbolism as it is indicated by many authors, e.g. D. Crystal (2005: 176), F. Dogana (after Kall 2001: 151,) and J.C. Usunier and J. Shanier (2002: 214). The main concept is that "...individual sounds are thought to reflect, or symbolize the properties of the world and thus 'to have meaning'..." (Crystal 2005: 176). Similar remarks may be referred to the symbolic dimensions of letters as it is indicated in the research made by Lexicon Branding (<http://www.lexicon-branding.com/process2bAnatomy.html> 2008-11-27). Enclosure 1 contains the author's summary of symbolic features of sounds based on the above mentioned research and applied to the analysis of Opel car names.

4. The analysis

The aim of this study is to analyse Opel car names and to show how the patterns and their linguistic dimensions changed over a period of time. The analysis is based on the semantic, phonetic, graphemic and phonotactic features and will show their role in the branding process. The semantic analysis will be supported by the considerations connected with the development of the marketing theory and its practice.

While space limitations make it impossible to present all the relevant theory of branding the assumptions presented above and regarding the product name, its features and type will be used in the analysis. For stylistic reasons terms brand, product name and car/model name will be used interchangeably.

The names of the car models and the years of their models into the market, unless specified otherwise, were consulted with:

- http://media.gm.com/intl/opel/en/company/c_history/2008-10-28;
- <http://www.opel.de/meetopel/tradition/history/2008-11-28>;
- <http://www.motonews.pl/opel/model-168-opel-combo.html> 2008-11-07.

4.1. *The Production Era – descriptive names, the numeric system and funny nicknames*

In the production era most of the manufacturer's effort concentrated on the improving of their production capacities (Reece, O'Grady 1987: 309). As far as the motor industry is concerned one may add that the efforts of the pioneers concentrated not only on the manufacturing efficiency but, first of all, on the construction and design of the first automobiles. Marketing activities were not in demand since new products attracted attention and potential clients anyway. This may explain why the name of the first Opel car [1899] was *Opel Patent – Motorwagen System Lutzman*. This was a purely descriptive name telling what the product was – a car made by Opel brothers in Friedrich Lutzmann's factory. When the next model was launched, i.e. *Opel Darracq* [1902], subject to a licence agreement with a French manufacturer Alexandre Darracq its name was purely descriptive and it indicated a car with an Opel body and a Darracq chassis.

Another branding strategy used by Opel in the pioneering period was that of using the system that is currently referred to as the numeric one (Kall 2001: 160). This refers to the first model built entirely by Opel, the *10/12* [1902], and later models such as *20/24* [1903], *4/8* [1909], *6/16* [1911], *40/100* [1912], *5/14* [1914] or *18/50* [1916]. To some extent, the names are also descriptive because one may judge that figure following the backslash stood for the engine power. Nicknames seem to be more interesting in this period showing that the market displayed more initiative in branding, e.g:

- the *4/8* model [1909] nicknamed *Doktorwagen* (Doctor's Car) just since it seemed tailored to the needs of doctors, vets and lawyers travelling to their clients;
- the *5/12* model [1914] called *Puppchen* (Little Doll) because of its funny shape simple construction and maintenance;
- the *4/12* model called *Laubfrosch* (Tree Frog) which it resembled due to its protruding headlamps and green body;
- *Koloss von Rüsselheim* (Giant of Rüsselheim) – the name given to the utility version of Opel's first car – *Opel Patent – Motorwagen System Lutzman* [1899] presumably because of its bulky shape.

4.2. *The sales era and the marketing era – different concepts of branding*

The major feature of the sales era, which according to Reece and O'Grady (1987: 309) lasted from 1920 till 1950 is the fact that "...production capacity was no longer a major problem ..." and, moreover, firms could no longer be sure of selling all they could produce..." (ibid.). Manufacturers recognised the need of advertising (1987: 310). This concept seems to be confirmed by Opel's branding policy at the time. The introduction of the "flagship model" *Regent* (1928) started the tradition of giving attractive, suggestive names with good connotations. This model was followed by *Blitz*

(Lightning) [1930] Opel's first lorry and *Olympia* [1935]. All three names turned out to be important in terms of corporate branding policy in the future.

The *Blitz* was originally a logo put on Opel's bicycles and it underwent various changes of design – combining the company name and the word *blitz* in different arrangements. Finally the *Blitz* became a part of the current logo of Opel – a lightning in a circle (see http://media.gm.com/intl/opel/en/company/c_history/2008-10-28).

Olympia – the name designed in connection with the Olympic games held in Germany in 1936 – started the tradition of giving cars names ending with /a/ vowel and [a] grapheme at the end of the word. This concept was resumed by Opel in the seventies and will be discussed later in the article. This tradition has reached its apex today and may be contrasted with the one which started with the model *Regent* and its followers.

4.2.1. Social recognition as the inspiration for branding

It is the *Regent* model [1928] that started the concept of Opel's car names that reached its peak in the sixties with the introduction of the *KAD* series of luxury models – *Kapitän*, *Admiral* and *Diplomat* [1964] continued until 1993 when the last *Senator* left the assembly lines. This is a very interesting concept and its milestones – the names of car models and the years of their introduction may be listed chronologically in the following way:

Regent [1928]
Kadett [1936]
Kapitän [1938]
Admiral [1964]
Diplomat [1964]
Commodore [1970]
Senator [1978]

All the names may be classified as transferred names i.e. the names of posts, positions and ranks and due to their presumed connotations were used to brand car models. As far as this concept is concerned one may identify two major criteria used to name car models:

- Semantics – all the names are meaningful and because of their reference to the positions in the army, government and state/government administration they may be classified as the components of a semantic field that may be described as “position in the society”.
- Connotation – all the names have similar, semantically based, connotations of expert knowledge, prestige and recognition, reliability and professional career.
- The name corresponds to the position in the society and to the class of the car, hence following the pattern: the class of the car = the position in the society.

This was a very well organised concept of car branding. Although rooted in the German language the names could easily be understood internationally – probably a major issue for the German company that has been a subsidiary of General Motors, first a USA and then a global brand, since 1929 (http://media.gm.com/intl/opel/en/company/c_history/1920/index.html 2008-10-28). Apart from being suggestive the

names reflected the range of car models offered in terms of their size, engine capacity, etc. In other words the naming system seemed to follow the rule: “Tell me the name of your car model and I will tell you how rich you are.” Thus the *Kadett* was the smallest car in the range and its name stood for a student of a military school. It contained some good connotations such as youth, studies, bravery, military career to follow, etc. The word *Kapitän* has more than one meaning. It stands for a rank in the army and for the ship captain who is responsible for the vessel, its passengers, crew and cargo. All these meanings arouse positive connotations, e.g. knowledge (e.g. how to sail a ship), reliability (the captain is the last to leave the ship) as well as a relatively high position in the army and society. The *Kapitän* was a medium class car and its name suggested a higher position in the army and society than that of cadets. Like the other names it has good associations. The owners of *Kapitän* cars, who had to spend more money to buy the car than the *Kadett* owners were rewarded with connotations of more prestige and power. On the other hand they could experience a feeling of inferiority when confronted with owners of *Admiral*, *Diplomat*, *Commodore* or *Senator* models not only in terms of the car price and performance but also the connotations of even more prestige and power that went behind the names. One may say that such a well organized system of branding reflected the German feeling of order and the values of a well organized society.

One has to remember, however, that not all people like to be reminded of their economic and social status. While traffic regulations treat all vehicles equally, regardless of their power, speed and overall performance why should the manufacturer stress differences between the car models and their owners. The marketing era that started in 1950 reflected the need of an affluent society with a lot of discretionary income Reece and O’Grady (1987: 310). The prevailing marketing concept of the marketing era was that of customer satisfaction. However the idea of stressing the differences in status of the customers proved not to be the best policy. Hence the development of another branding concept presented below which was heralded, as said before, by the introduction of Opel *Olympia* [1936].

4.2.2. *Suggestive, symbolic and artificial names organized phonetically and orthographically*

The introduction of *Ascona* [1970] started the application of the branding concept that has been continued until today. Its major features are:

- The /a/ grapheme and phoneme in the final position.
- Three syllables being the maximum length of the name
- Positive and suggestive connotations not following one regular and prescribed pattern

This basic system is currently even more elaborate and provides for more detailed rules:

- The final /a/ grapheme and phoneme is restricted to passenger cars while the names of vans, regardless of their size, end with /o/ : *Combo* [1998], *Movano* [1998];

Vivaro [2001]. The names of SUV and cross country vehicles are three syllable ones, e.g. *Zafira* [1999], *Agila* [2000], *Meriva* [2002] or *Antara* [2002] while the names of other models are limited to two syllables, e.g. *Manta* [1970], *Corsa* [1982], *Astra* [1991], *Tigra* [1994] or *Vectra* [1998]. There are some exceptions, to this rule, e.g. the name *Calibra* [1989] – a sport car consists of three syllables. The names of two top class models either do not end with /a/ – *Signum* [2002] or have three not two syllables – *Insignia* [2007].

- Semantically the names do not follow any particular system but they are suggestive and have good connotations. Thus transferred names, like *Astra*, which means eagle in the *star* in Latin may go hand in hand with invented and artificial names like *Vectra*, which has no meaning in itself. Enclosure 2 summarises the connotations of the names of major Opel car models:

The role of sound symbolism in Opel's branding policy is difficult to assess. Thus the final /a/ and /o/ may suggest slowness and heaviness, i.e. hardly suitable features for a modern car. On a similar basis the initial /i/ in *Insignia* [2008] may suggest smallness – a rather unusual feature for a big “flagship” model. Some other names seem to follow the sound symbolism rules, e.g. the name *Vectra* [1988] starts with a fast and large /v/ or *Zafira* starts with the /z/ sound which very rightly indicates a large and fast car.

It seems that sound symbolism rules must be sacrificed if some other systems are introduced such as ordering the fleet of models with final /a/ and /o/ or inventing names with positive connotations at the higher phonotactic or semantic level. The best example to illustrate this is the name *Agila* [2000] where “large” /a/ and /g/ go hand in hand with small /i/. To make things worse /a/ stands for round shapes and /i/ for sharp ones.

4.3. Other patterns

It is not only the influence of the shift in the global economic trend, i.e. from the sales to the marketing era that have affected the changes in the branding policy. The company's policy may be a good reason as well, especially when, as K. Wojciechowicz rightly observes, the manufacturer wants to show that a totally new model replaces an old one (2009: 17). This may happen within the existing branding concept or accompany a structural change of the branding policy. Such changes occurred in Opel's history a number of times and a separate study, not only a linguistic one, would be necessary to deal with them. The best examples to quote here are the changes from *Kadett* to *Astra* and from *Vectra* to *Insignia*.

There are also some names that escape the classification presented above and surprisingly they are often connected with Opel's popular and successful models. The major car names to be classified in this group include:

- *Blitz* [1930] – a suggestive name, taken from the German word *blitz* meaning lightning, did not arouse any connotations outside Germany itself. Moreover it does not seem to be a very fortunate name for a lorry, either. It was used before, during

and after World War II and at that time global marketing issues were given little, if any attention.

- *Rekord* [1953–1986] – the name enjoys a very long period of application. It evolved from models with double names, i.e. *Olympia Rekord* [1953] and *Olympia Record P1* [1957] and it started to function on its own when *Record P2* [1960] appeared on the market. The name escapes the branding strategies discussed above but it was as successful as the car models that it represented. It does not indicate any social or military position but, just like the models classified under the heading “suggestive names” it has positive connotations, in this case those of breaking records, presumably of speed, performance and quality. It consists of three syllables which is another distinctive feature of this group.
- *GT* [1968] – one of the most famous models has the shortest name. For a car lover it is obvious that the abbreviation stands for *Gran Turismo* – a phrase that indicated unlimited possibilities and pleasures of travelling. The name indicates one of the most successful sports cars. It is not the name itself but also the slogan *Nur Fliegen ist schöner!* (Only flying is better) that became generally known as the classic example of the language of advertising. The GT model was so famous that Opel decided to use the name again for the sports car introduced in 2006.
- *Speedster* [2001] – the name illustrates the firm's efforts to find a good name for a sports car. The name is dominated by the *speed* component which is quite understandable since represents a sports car. It consists of two syllables only but is quite long in terms of graphemes (8) and phonemes (8 – since the sound /i:/ is a double vowel. Phonotactically speaking it includes a cluster of three consonants /-dst-/. The latter factors make the Speedster much slower in pronunciation than in driving.
- *Campo Sports* [1982] – the name constitutes an awkward combination of *Campo* suggesting camping, i.e. leisure and staying in one place and *Sport* which stands for dynamics and motion.

5. Conclusions

The history of brand names, although limited in terms of number of car models and time span, i.e. slightly over 100 year provides a good insight into the changing patterns of branding and their linguistic dimension. The latter, while not explaining the reasons of the changes, proves to be a useful tool for describing and analysing the nature of the changes in the branding policies.

Enclosure 1 Connotations of sounds

Own study based on:

http://www.stanford.edu/class/linguists34/unit_08blackberry.htm. Accessed: 2005-11-29)
 Kall 2001: 151
 Usunier and Shanier (2002: 214)

sound/ feature	a	e	i	o	u	b	d	f	g	k	l	p	r	s	t	v	z
<i>slowness</i>						+	+					+			+		
<i>speed</i>								+						+		+	+
<i>large</i>	+						+		+							+	+
<i>small</i>			+					+		+				+	+		
<i>pleasant feelings</i>											+			+		+	
<i>unpleasant feelings</i>							+			+		+	+		+		
<i>dynamism</i>		+	+														
<i>slowness and heaviness</i>	+			+	+												
<i>round shapes</i>	+			+	+												
<i>sharp shapes</i>			+							+							

Enclosure 2 Opel car names and their connotation – A summary

(as suggested by the author, without nicknames, digital systems and niche models)

Model /year of launch	Invented / Transferred	Connotations	Language as a source of name / connotation
Ascona [1970]	Transferred – geography, a town name	Travel, holiday & leisure, free time good weather	Italian
Agila [2000]	Transferred – fauna – eagle	Agile and brisk – <i>agile</i> (English) and <i>agil</i> (German)	Spanish
Admiral [1964]	Transferred – navy	Prestige, recognition	English, German
Antara [2002]	Transferred – Arabian name, upholstery fabric, star – <i>Antares</i>	<i>Antares</i> (a star) – conceptually similar to Astra	Arabic, English, Latin
Astra [1990]	Transferred – astronomy – star	Success and achievement <i>Per aspera ad astram</i>	Latin
Blitz [1930]	Transferred – weather	Speed and power	German

Calibra [1980]	Invented	(High) <i>caliber</i> – good performance, top class (English) <i>Calibrated</i> – checked to follow measure accurately – high quality, standard to be compared with	
Combo [1985]	Transferred – music, a group of musicians	Music, fun, friends	English
Commodore [1967]	Transferred – navy, supreme commander	Prestige, recognition	English, German
Corsa [1982]	Transferred – sport – race	Sport, competition, fun	Spanish
Diplomat [1964]	Transferred – diplomacy	Prestige, recognition, elegance	English, German
Frontera [1991]	Transferred – geography, politics, etc	Freedom, crossing frontiers, no limits	Spanish – <i>border</i>
Insignia [2007]	Transferred – military and other organisations	Recognition, membership, rank	Insignia – symbols showing a membership in an organisation, usually a military one.
Kadett [1936]	Transferred – army, student of a military school	Youth, diligence, bravery	German
Kapitän [1938]	Transferred – army, an officer	Prestige, bravery	German
Manta [1907]	Transferred – fauna (fish) and geography (towns in Italy and Ecuador)	Warm seas, holiday, sea hunting	English, Italian, Spanish
Meriva [2002]	Invented	Merriness, joy merry – cheerful and happy (English)	
Monza [1978]	transferred – geography and sport – a city with a famous care race track	Car race, competition	Italian
Monterey [1994]	Transferred – geography – a city	Mexico, travel, adventure, hot weather, holiday	Spanish
Movano [1998]	Invented	Power and organisation to move people and things from one place to another, move (English)	

Olimpia [1935]*	Transferred – geography, sport and mythology – an ancient town where the Olympic games started	Sport, competition, mythology	Greek
Omega [1994]	transferred – a letter in the Greek alphabet	Knowledge, education, perfectness – <i>Alfa & Omega</i>	Greek
Rekord 1953/1960	Transferred – any performance better than ever before	Achievement, excellent, unbeaten performance	German
Regent [1928]	Transferred – social position	Wealth, position	English
Senator [1978]	Transferred – parliamentary system	Prestige, knowledge, power	English, German
Signum [2000]	Transferred – semiotics – sign		Latin
Tigra [1994]	Transferred fauna – tigress	Power, predacity but also nice cat, <i>tigress</i> (German)	German
Vectra [1988]	Invented	<i>Vector</i> (English), power, science	
Vivaro [2001]	Invented	Attractive, exciting, lively, <i>Viva Maria!</i> (Spanish, English)	
Zafira [1999]	Invented	<i>Zephyr</i> – a gentle wind wind (English)	

* including combined names: *Olympia Rekord* [1953–1960] and *Olympia KadettB* [1967– 1970] the latter indicated in: www.kadett-b-und-olympia-a-club.de/deutsch/deutsch.html 2008-10-18.

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