# Phonaesthemes and sound symbolism in Swedish brand names

## Åsa Abelin *

Department of Philosophy, Linguistics and Theory of Science, University of Gothenburg, Box 200, S-405 30 Göteborg, Sweden

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Phonaesthemes are used in brand names to different degrees.
- Certain phoneme combinations are overrepresented for certain product types.
- Pictures of real objects prime phonaesthemes with corresponding meanings.
- Results from corpus studies mirror results from assessment and priming experiments.

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the prevalence of sound symbolism in Swedish brand names. A general principle of brand name design is that effective names should be distinctive, recognizable, easy to pronounce and meaningful. Much money is invested in designing powerful brand names, where the emotional impact of the names on consumers is also relevant and it is important to avoid negative connotations. Customers prefer brand names, which say something about the product, as this reduces product uncertainty (Klink, 2001). Therefore, consumers might prefer sound symbolic names. It has been shown that people associate the sounds of the nonsense words *maluma* and *takete* with round and angular shapes, respectively. By extension, more complex shapes and textures might activate words containing certain sounds. This study focuses on semantic dimensions expected to be relevant to product names, such as mobility, consistency, texture and shape. These dimensions are related to the senses of sight, hearing and touch and are also interesting from a cognitive linguistic perspective. Cross-modal assessment and priming experiments with pictures and written words were performed and the results analysed in relation to brand name databases and to sound symbolic sound combinations in Swedish (Abelin, 1999). The results show that brand names virtually never contain pejorative, i.e. depreciatory, consonant clusters, and that certain sounds and sound combinations are overrepresented in certain content categories. Assessment tests show correlations between pictured objects and phoneme combinations in newly created words (non-words). The priming experiment shows that object images prime newly created words as expected, based on the presence of compatible consonant clusters.

## 1. Introduction

The area of sound symbolism has been studied since Plato's Cratylus, but only marginally so within mainstream linguistics. However, interest in sound symbolism has surged in recent years, especially in how it relates to language learning; it has even been claimed that sound symbolism is fundamental to language. The area of marketing and branding, too, has seen more and more studies on how to create names that offer strong associations with the products they represent.

Unlike regular words, which normally evolve on their own, trade names are specifically designed by marketers, for the purpose of selling a product. Marketers freely acknowledge using sound symbolism when naming products (Boslet, 2006). According to representatives of one Swedish advertising agency, when creating new brand names, sound symbolism is too important to ignore: "Tonality is about the feeling the name conveys. Do you want the name to sound hard or soft, feminine or masculine, academic, luxury or cheap? To find the name's tonality one must be clear about how the brand's personality and inner core looks". Nationally and internationally famous Swedish brand names include

* Tel.: +46 31 7865233.
  E-mail address: asa.abelin@gu.se.

ABBA, ABSOLUT, IKEA, Spotify and VOLVO. Is the success of these companies due in part to the sound symbolism of their names? Of course, names with a Latin origin, such as ABSOLUT and VOLVO, may have further associations.

A general principle of brand name design has been that effective names will be distinctive, recognizable, easy to pronounce and meaningful. The potential emotional impact of the names may also be considered, especially for names of medicines. Thus, the meaningfulness of brand names is crucial. By law,[1] however, a trade name is only allowed to identify its product, not describe it. Might the use of sound symbolism be a way to imbue a brand name with an implicit description of a product?

The nonsense words *maluma* and *takete* (and similar pairs, such as *bouba* and *kiki*) have proven connections to round and angular forms (cf. Köhler, 1929; Ramachandran and Hubbard, 2001). Thus, it seems plausible that pictures of more elaborate forms and textures might also prime words that included certain sounds. This could be relevant for the creation of brand names, since if consumers perceive a brand name as fitting a product, they will experience the quality of the product more positively.

This study investigates the occurrence of phonaesthemes – a type of sound symbolic entity – in Swedish brand names. The overall aim is to explore the use and the psychological reality of phonaesthemes in brand names and to investigate to what degree physical objects might be perceived as connected with phonaesthemes, as suggested by the *maluma–takete* effect. Thus, the study asks to what extent phonaesthemes in Swedish brand names are overrepresented in names for different types of products and whether experimental studies mirror those results. The study uses new methods to investigate this topic, and phonaesthemes themselves are quite unexplored in connection with brand names.

A related topic is that of sound branding: the way that manufacturers of cars or motorcycles engineer the sounds of engines, door locks, indicators, etc., according to the image they want the product to convey. Sound branding, however, will not be explored here.

This study makes several important contributions. First, consumers prefer brand names with predictable content; thus, they prefer brand names that convey relevant product information. They might therefore also prefer sound symbolic names since these could reduce product uncertainty (cf. Klink, 2001). Furthermore, a study focusing on the Swedish language is particularly relevant, partly because Swedish has not been examined in this way before, and partly because studies on brand names and sound symbolism have rarely treated other languages than English. Finally, the study has relevance for the general discussion on the iconic and indexical aspects of language, as they are embodied through the interaction of our senses with the environment.

The study is novel for its investigation of Swedish phonaesthemes in brand names, through corpus studies and through experiments designed to use pictures of real objects.

*Research questions*

Are certain phonemes or phoneme combinations overrepresented among certain product types? Do pictures of real objects prime phonaesthemes with corresponding meanings? Do the results from corpus studies agree with the results of assessment tests and priming experiments, and if so, how?

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Phonaesthemes and sound symbolism

*Phonaesthemes* are consonants and consonant sequences that convey certain sense-related meanings in a language (cf. Abelin,

1999). Phonaesthemes constitute a type of sound symbolism and are realized systematically within complete (typical) morphemes. Examples include fl-[2] in *flicker, flutter, flow,* and *flip-flop*, which conveys the meaning of movement or even fast movement; gl-, having to do with light phenomena, as in *glimmer, glitter, glow*; and str-p in *stripe, strap*, meaning a line having breadth (Bolinger, 1950). In sound symbolic phonaesthemes the relation between expression and content is of a type that is experienced as motivated by the typical speaker of a language. Sound symbolism itself has various definitions. Jakobson and Waugh (1979) defined it as "an inmost, natural association between sound and meaning". Here, *sound symbolism* will be used as a general term for an iconic or indexical relationship between sound and meaning, and also between sound and sound (onomatopoeia). The term phonaestheme usually refers to the language-specific connection between a consonant sequence and a certain meaning, which is usually sensory-based. Other definitions of phonaestheme include "a marginal set of vocables which are semantically fluid, more expressive than cognitive" (Jakobson and Waugh, 1979) and "the grouping of similar meanings about similar sound" (Bolinger, 1968). Phonaesthemes are productive (Abelin, 2012; Bergen, 2004) and they can play a part in the creation and recognition of new words.

### 2.2. Maluma and takete

Köhler's 1929 studies have been repeated in several variations on the classic experiment in which subjects match the imaginary words *maluma* and *takete* with either of two figures—one with round contours and one with spiky contours. The overwhelming majority of subjects choose the word *takete* for the spiky contour and *maluma* for the rounded contour. Cross-modal semantic priming has also been shown to function between pictures and words (e.g. Kircher et al., 2009). In the present study pictures of different real objects are tested. A variant of Köhler's experiments, which examined the influence of consonant sound symbolism on object recognition, was performed by Aveyard (2012). The method consisted of participants listening to a word ostensibly from a foreign language (a non-word) followed by two objects on screen: a rectilinear object and a curvilinear object. The task involved judging which of the two objects was properly described by unknown non-words: "hard" non-words (with three plosives) and "soft" non-words (with three non-plosives). The results showed that congruent sound-symbolic non-word–object pairs produced higher task accuracy than did incongruent pairs.

This research paradigm has been extended to the connections between words, shapes and flavours. Spence and Gallace (2011) performed a series of experiments designed to highlight the cross-modal correspondences that exist between the cocoa content of various chocolate products and both visually-presented shapes and nonsense words. The method consisted of having participants make evaluations on paper-based line scales, anchored at either end with either a nonsense word or simple outline shape. Participants tasted the chocolates and indicated whether their perception of the flavour better matched one or other of the items. The results demonstrate that certain chocolates (with 70% and 90% cocoa content) were more strongly associated with angular shapes and high-pitched pseudo-words, such as 'tuki' and 'takete'. Extra creamy milk chocolate (30% cocoa) was more strongly associated with rounded shapes and lower-pitched pseudo-words, such as 'maluma'. These results demonstrate that the phenomenon of

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[1] Many of the regulations in trademark law are common within the European union.

[2] Initial consonant clusters, such as fl- refer to phonemes. For reasons of readability phonemes are not marked with slashes. Where the text refers to speech sounds they will be within brackets, [ ], and when the text explicitly refers to graphemes they will be within angle brackets, ⟨ ⟩.