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How Thai businesses utilize English in their product names

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigated the names given to Thai local community products and provides a description of the use of the English language in naming products in Thailand. The business names of Thai local products under the program One Tambon One Product (OTOP) were selected for analysis, focusing on language characteristics and semantic appropriateness by using onomastics to some extent. The data consisted of 1,304 names from five product categories—food, drinks, clothing and accessories, handicrafts and ornaments, and inedible herbs, as provided in the database of tambons and OTOP products. Thai product names in English, some of which only Thais can understand, show language creativity, reflecting Thai identity within English usage in the local setting. One problematic area concerns the lack of semantic appropriateness of some English names, as the names are sometimes not relevant to the product type. Thai entrepreneurs need support in naming their products to achieve international intelligibility if their products are to be marketed to international customers.

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Introduction

One of the first things that companies need to do in aiming to export their products is to internationalize their brands (De Mooji, 2004). Usually, a business will direct brand naming at a group or target audience with the purpose of ensuring positive customer reception of the product, while at the same time reflecting the identity of the business, brand, or even product itself (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Most product names in Thailand are composed of a trademark name (business name) and a product name (Boonpaisarnsatit, 2005; Thammachoto, 2012). The global spread of English has led to code-mixing of English with local languages all over the world (Kirkpatrick & Sussex, 2012). In the Thai context, code-mixing is finding increasing use in the naming of products.

In Thailand, the English language has never been recognized as an official language, nor is it needed in general, everyday life among Thais. However, it is still utilized as the lingua franca when communicating with foreigners. Thus, English is ‘the language of others’ to Thais (Watkhaolarm, 2005, p. 155). The use of the English language in business and brand naming in Thailand makes sense, especially when a company is aiming for the international market. According to the Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995), successful communication relies on so-called ‘optimal relevance’. In the case of product naming, Thai entrepreneurs who wish to market their products effectively must select names with optimal customer relevance.

In this study, we analyzed the English-Thai code-mixing features used in local Thai product names. It is useful to study the use of the English language for Thai product names within this ever-changing environment, especially given the growth in the use of English in the region. English is the working language of the Association of South East

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Asian Nations (ASEAN) following the opening of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 (Chiarakul, 2014). The findings from the study should help in understanding how English is used in business or brand naming in Thailand. The research should also help shed light on the relationship between ‘Thainess’ (or Thai identity) and English language usage within the country. There are few studies regarding the Thai variety of English (Glass, 2009; Snodin, 2014; Watkhaolarm, 2005). With this research, we attempted to fill this gap by exploring the usage of English in local community product names that are part of the One Tambon One Product Program (OTOP).

One Tambon One Product (OTOP)

The term ‘OTOP,’/o-top/, is a local entrepreneurship stimulus program in Thailand (Community Development Department, 2014). As its name suggests, the central aim of the program is to encourage locals to improve their products in terms of both quality and marketing. The term ‘tambon’ refers to a sub-district in Thai. The One Tambon One Product policy is that each district must have at least one quality product. It is modeled after the Japanese One Village One Product program (OVOP). The OTOP program is very similar or equivalent to the French Appellation d’origine contrôlée (AOC) and the Italian Denominazione di Origine Controllata e Garantita (DOCG). Not every kind of local product will be recognized as an OTOP product. An OTOP product must be based on the following principles: (1) representing both local uniqueness and global standard; (2) demonstrating self-reliance and creativity, and; (3) developing human resources in the community. These principles ensure that the products are borne from the local culture and clearly reflect the Thai identity. The OTOP project was launched in 2001 with the primary aim to satisfy local markets. However, in 2004 the selection process of the OTOP Product Champion was launched (Government Public Relations Department, 2004), which has significantly affected the OTOP program. As shown in Table 1, the higher the star rating, the more likely the products will be directed toward international customers. Therefore, we expect that the use of English naming or English code-mixing will be more prevalent in the higher tier OTOP products. Thus, in this study, we set our scope to the five-star products of the OTOP market.

Table 1
Product level rating

Stars	Score	Product Level
5	90–100	Product has an international quality standard and a high export potential
4	80–89	Product has national quality standard which can be enhanced to reach international standards
3	70–79	Product is of average quality and may be enhanced to reach 4-stars
2	50–69	Product has below average quality but may be enhanced to reach 3-stars. Periodic quality assessments required
1	Below 50	Product quality is poor and unlikely to be improved

Source: Community Development Department (2012)

Significance of the Study

There have been a number of studies on English naming in Asia, such as in Singapore (Tan, 2004), Hong Kong (Li, 1997), and China (Sercombe, Young, Dong, & Lin, 2014). However, these studies focused only on personal names. Other studies regarding product and business naming in the countries where English is used as a foreign language include studies in Brazil (Thonus, 1991) and Italy (Dunlop, 1989). In the case of Thailand, where English is a foreign language, research on English naming of local products remains scarce. There have been two studies by Boonpaisarnsatit and Srioutai (2011) and Thammachoto (2012). However, the focus of these studies was limited to exported food brand names and the product labels of one particular sub-district, respectively. The current study investigated the language characteristics and semantic appropriateness of all OTOP products in Thailand that claim to have international standard quality.

Methods

Business names from the Thai OTOP program were selected for analysis. The aim was to explore the patterns of English naming and code-mixing used in Thai products. The data consisted of 1,304 Thai OTOP business names from five product categories (ThaiTambon.com—a database of tambons and OTOP products): food (523 items), drinks (68), clothing and accessories (490), handicrafts and ornaments (70), and inedible herbs (153). These products were officially announced as the five-star OTOP Champion Products in 2012 by the Community Development Department, Ministry of the Interior. The data were taken from the Thai tambon website (www.thaitambon.com), which collaborated with the Community Development Department, Ministry of the Interior, to provide a public database of OTOP products. All data were selected for the analysis of product names and the use of English employed in their business names using onomastics to some extent. In one case, in order to clarify the meaning of a product name, a phone interview was conducted with the product owner.

Results

Food

The data comprised the business names of Thai OTOP food—the five-star Champion Products of 2012. As Table 2 shows, most of the products (89.3%) were named in Thai, followed by a code-mixing of English and Thai (5.54%), while only 27 products (5.16%) were named entirely in English.

Table 2
Naming patterns of Thai OTOP food

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Thai name	467	89.30
English name	27	5.16
Code-mixing	29	5.54
Total	523	100.00

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