

THE POLITICS OF ROMANIAN BRAND NAMES: THEN AND NOW

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Abstract: The present study aims to analyse, from a socio- and psycholinguistic perspective, the issue of brand names, as reflected in Romanian public space. This branch of trade names, which also includes names of firms, companies, businesses and the products or services they sell, promotes a special kind of naming pattern, one that observes certain distinguishing criteria in its development. Moreover, brand names function as socioeconomic markers that reveal the status and dynamic of the society in which they are employed. By adopting a diachronic approach to their research, the present paper focuses on the peculiarities and the evolution of Romanian brand names from the period before the Revolution of 1989 until today.

Keywords: brand names, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics.

Introduction

In an age in which communication happens at the speed of clicks and keyboards, the issue of language analysis becomes a reflection of one's mobility and flexibility within, without (i.e. in general), and between contexts of use. Whether diachronic or synchronic, an approach will take into consideration aspects determined by the transcultural (Blommaert 2011: 4), intercultural and cross-cultural (within a society) dimensions of language contact (Trudgill 2000: 115), as prescribed by the widespread fame of the phenomenon of globalization. It is in this biased landscape of rapid and radical mutations and transformations that the study of linguistic materials renders language as being in motion (both literally and metaphorically), and defines its elements as diagnostic indexes of the social, psychological, political, economic, technological and cultural changes that shape a society. Since this function is performed by all the linguistic compartments, it only comes natural that the field of onomastics should behave in a similar way. Although all categories of denomination are subject to and, therefore, reflect linguistic diversity and superdiversity, our interest is currently directed at trade names, in general, and brand names, in particular¹, to their peculiarities and development as meaning carriers (Corbu

¹ This paper is part of a more consistent study in the field of onomastics, developed within *Onomastics in the Contemporary Romanian Public Space: Socio- and Psycholinguistic Research*, a research project within the "Human Resources" program (PN II), built for the stimulation of young independent research teams (TE), code 3/2010, contract number 57/2010, funded by CNCISIS with 600000 lei/3 years (2010–2013), project manager: Assoc. Prof. Oliviu Felecan.

2009: 61), in their quality of socioeconomic markers that alert on the status and dynamics of the society they represent, in this case, the Romanian contemporary space.

Brands and branding

The supercategory of trade names refers to that branch of the onomastics in the public space, which includes names of companies/ firms, brands and products. Their denominative status assigns these constructions to the class of proper names, defined by Van Langendonck (2007: 6–7) as follows:

A proper name is a noun that denotes a unique entity at the level of “established linguistic convention” to make it psychosocially salient within a given basic level category [pragmatic]. The meaning of the name, if any, does not (or not any longer) determine its denotation [semantics]². [...] Proper names do not have asserted lexical meaning but do display presuppositional meanings of several kinds: categorical (basic level), associative senses (introduced either via the name bearer or via the name form), emotive senses and grammatical meanings.

As all proper names, this particular variety greatly depends on the linguistic and extralinguistic contexts in which it is used, and at semantic level, the relation between the significance of trade names and their primary referent is determined by the recursive property of the name (in time and space), by its frequency and diversity in use: “A proper name does not ‘refer’ to anything independently of the circumstances in which it is uttered or written; and the notion that it does, or could do, is generated by a metalinguistic abstraction” (Pablé 2009: 155). Moreover, any time a proper name is attributed to a referent, the latter belongs to a certain (sub)class of entities, an affiliation which establishes the types of existing denominations. Thus, according to the entity designated, we are able to find names of persons (male/ female), names of countries, names of cities, of rivers, of institutions etc., each corresponding branch highlighting the diversity of the onomastic system of a language, and of the manifestations of the name-giving act in that particular language.

Structurally, denominations in the public space have a multireferential potential (for example, *Dacia* may refer not only to the Romanian car company but also to the brand it established and to the products made under this license), and they essentially represent multidenotative proprial lemmas, whose homonymous nominal derivatives identify different yet related realities. Van Langendonck (2007: 236) identifies five categories of

² At formal level, a significant result of these pragmatic-semantic implications of proper names resides in the possibility of their occurring in restrictive appositional structures, in which the denominating sequence is accompanied by a classifying element, as one can see in structures like *the City of London*, in English, and *Orașul București*, in Romanian (the fixed position of the terms is determined by the presence of the classifying constituent). Such situations should not be mistaken for open appositional structures, in which the members are mobile (and often graphically isolated). The constructions in questions can contain longer descriptive expressions and can, therefore, include more information: *Berlusconi, the prime minister of Italy*; *Mihai, fratele meu* (the structures *the prime minister of Italy* and *fratele meu* do not indicate the primary class to which the referent of the proper name belongs, namely “male person”, and, respectively, “member of the Berlusconi family”; they point to an associated meaning, a secondary property, determined by the communicative context) (see Van Langendonck 2007: 77; Bidu-Vrânceanu et al. 2005: 64).

possible referents for a such a lexical structure: the founder of a company (*Guban founded the famous Romanian shoe factory.*), the company itself (*Guban is a shoe factory.*, *Guban = “the factory/ company founded by Guban”*), the brand (*Guban is an old brand.*, *Guban = “the brand created by the Guban company”*), the product (*Guban are very good leather shoes.*, *Guban = “the product/ shoes launched on the market under the Guban brand*), distinct exemplars of the product (*Maria has bought a pair of Guban last week.*, *Guban = “an exemplar of the Guban product”*). Each of the uses above (from company to exemplars) derives from the preceding variants, based on a specific metonymical process, thus proving the unity of the lexical element (*Guban*), and underlining the specifics of the trade name in use. When the lemma identifies a company, a brand or a product, its function is that of a proper name; however, if the referent is an exemplar perceived contextually in a particular way, the lexical element functions as a common noun, as it refuses the presupposition of uniqueness within the discursive universe, imposed by proper names, at least in their prototypical form (154).

The study of trade names is a relatively recent aspect of onomastics, because these denominations have only begun to vary substantially along with the development of market economy and of marketing strategies, namely when they became a subtle instrument of social, political and economic manipulation. The peculiarities of the name-giving act in this space could be considered to derive from the concept of *brand*, a word of Germanic origin, attested in Old English with the meaning of “fire, flame; firebrand, piece of burning wood, torch”. In Medieval English the word designated “a distinctive mark, an identifying mark made by a hot iron”³. In the beginning of the 19th century, along with the changes brought about by the industrial revolution, *brand* received the meaning it is widely known for today: “a particular make of goods; the product made by a certain company, under a certain name” (Rivkin and Sutherland 2009: 22). For the name of a company, of a brand or of a product to be imprinted onto the collective memory – as if it had been made by a hot iron – it has to make a good impression on the customers, to create impact and impose prestige, as it represents the vehicle through which its referent has the potential to become a local, national or international landmark, and in this case, the name gains the status of identifying symbol, even for other peoples and generations. When fulfilling this role, trade names are meant to facilitate the recognition and acceptance of their referent’s identity, especially in the economic and social landscape they target. In this respect, a name is carefully selected and advertised so that it is eventually established in consumers’ minds in association with the “trade” it designates. For this to happen, the names created have to display certain linguistic features that enable it to stand out in the overflowing media landscape (Bergien 2005: 289–90).

As denominative pattern, trade names present a number of distinguishing characteristics. In order to observe the laws regulating intellectual property rights, trade names have to conform to the principle of singularity within a given area, which is why they employ in their creation all word-formation mechanisms, internal (derivation, compounding, acronymy, clipping), and external (foreign borrowings, calque formation).

³ See *Oxford Etymology Dictionary*, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=brand&searchmode=none>.

The attribution of trade names is always directed at a material entity; it is, nonetheless, an official act, similar to the act of giving surnames or forenames, but having no religious dimension. The choice of a trade name and its being attributed to a particular entity are activities that present motivations on several levels: economic, social, psychological, as well as linguistic and cultural; the denomination depends on the marketing strategies involved in the promotion of its referent, but also on its meeting the (phonological, lexical, semantic and pragmatic) requirements of advertising techniques. Broadly speaking, trade names aim to institutionalize the values and the beliefs of a culture (Corbu 2009: 69), which is what they fail to achieve if the entities they refer to cannot be identified by the receivers in a given community, or if those receivers do not have access to the same meanings associated to the name by the onomastic actants. According to Abbott (2002: 195), trade names (and proper names, in general) “may be used to refer to entities which are either part of the discourse context or part of the common ground shared by speaker and addressee.”

As linguistic act, the process of name-giving is an act of creation, singular in its manifestation, “care nu reproduce exact niciun act lingvistic anterior și care numai prin limitele pe care i le impune necesitatea intercomunicării sociale ‘seamănă’ cu acte lingvistice anterioare, aparținând experienței unei comunități” (Coșeriu 1995: 26)⁴. The finality of this performance is to create signs that do not behave solely as names, i.e. as semiotic sequences meant to distinguish between objects that carry out similar functions, but also as symbols (arbitrarily and conventionally chosen to serve in their referent’s place), and as indexes (since they point to an entity, to its existence and location in time and space, e.g. when someone uses a name, we tend to think of the entity it designates) (Sebeok 2002: 28). As names, such structures are defined extensionally, whereas in their role of symbols and indexes, they convey an intension that is derived associatively: the meaning is not lexical but presuppositional, highlighting issues ranging from basic level category to grammatical behaviour and emotive associations (See above Van Langendonck 2007: 6–7), which cannot occur in the absence of a receiver. Brand names are *intentional* signs because they are created in order to be used and remembered by an addressee, and the community it stands for (Coșeriu 1997: 63). Their semiotics reveals a double meaning, one precodified by the sender, and one derived by the receiver as a result of his own experience with the brand or of the ones shared with (or learned from) other users (Corbu 2009: 61).

Romanian brands: then and now

The onomastics in the Romanian public space has not always been as significantly varied as it is today, in the context of globalization. Before 1989, namely before the fall of the communist regime, the situation was essentially congruous in all the states that (had) belonged to the Eastern bloc. The public space was subject to severe supervision, in-depth scrutiny and thorough indoctrination; thus, the trade names being promoted (practically the only ones existing in these countries) were bland, colourless, inexpressive, recurrent, corresponding to the brainwashing bureaucratic system which liked its subjects as limited

⁴ [Which does not faithfully replicate any anterior linguistic act and which, only due to the limitations imposed onto it by the necessity of social intercommunication, is “similar” to other preceding linguistic acts, belonging to the experience of a community] (my translation).

as they go, and responding to a human being's primary needs (Rzetelska-Feleszko 2005: 595–596). As linguistic structures, trade names began to develop along with the opening of the borders, a practice that became programmatic during the 1990s, and they are finally receiving the attention they well deserve, both from individuals that are concerned to have their trade enter local/ global markets best foot forward, and from researchers in various fields (linguistics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, marketing, politics, history, geography etc.), who are interested in identifying the peculiarities this naming pattern presents in relation to the other onomastic categories (anthroponyms, toponyms, etc.).

The strongest external linguistic and cultural influence in the field of Romanian trade names was performed via the English language, and the changes it determined became immediately conspicuous in the case of names of shops, public houses, companies and agencies, branches which proved highly flexible, so that giving up a name such as *Drogherie* for another like *Beauty Shop* was not meant to be to the detriment of the company (especially in what concerns the economic implications of such advertising strategies); on the contrary, an option of this kind invites potential customers to have a taste of the cosmopolitan atmosphere, and of the (supposedly) first-class products. In matters of brand names and branding, the last two decades have marked the reconsidering of norms and precepts in all the fields of human activity and knowledge, so that “În tot spațiul post-comunist, în primii ani de „libertate“, oamenii au trăit euforia accesului nesperat la „paradisul interzis“. Dacă până la căderea regimului, alternativele puteau fi cu greu percepute (normalitatea românească putea fi redusă, spre exemplu, la Dacia, televizorul Diamant și Eugenie), tendința imediată a fost de respingere a acelor produse care simbolizau, în subconștient, un standard de subsistență impus, și nu ales”⁵ (Panaitache, n.d.: Istorii comuniste comune, nostalgii capitaliste comune). Therefore, the Romanian public space was soon flooded with international brands that sought to open subsidiaries in the country, with local brands bought by international companies or re-examined according to standards imposed by the process of globalization, thus implementing elements of the Western culture into the Romanian one, because they were considered to convey a more consistent affirmation of prestige. According to Dumitru (2011: para. 1–3), many national brands disappeared because they were not able to cope with the competition described by a free market economy, and lost ground to the cheaper alternatives coming from abroad. Others disappeared immediately after the Revolution, when the Romanians were more than happy to give up the products they had been forced to use during the regime, in want of alternatives. There were, however, fields in which the feeling of localism prevailed, so that older brands continued to exist with the original Romanian name, and new brands were mainly designated through similar traditional denominations. Such fields tend to pay forward the stereotypical (almost mythical) tradition of genuine Romanian quality, and aim to counterbalance the Americanophile note generally reflected in trade names. Brands

⁵ [Throughout all the post-communist space, during the first years of “freedom”, people experienced the euphoria of this unexpected “prohibited paradise”. If until the fall of the regime, alternatives were hard to imagine (the Romanian normality boiled down to Dacia cars, the television set Diamant and Eugenia biscuits), the immediate tendency was to reject those products that subconsciously served as symbols of a standard of living that was imposed, not chosen] (my translation).

of flour (*Băneasa, Dobrogea, Făina lui Enache*), of mineral water (*Azuğa, Biborțeni, Borsec, Bucovina, Buziaș, Carpatina, Dorna, Izvorul Alb, Izvorul Minunilor, Izvorul Moldovencei, Oaș, Poiana Negri, Roua, Tușnad* etc.), of sunflower oil (*Ardealul, Raza Soarelui, Spornic, Untdelemn de la Bunica*), of dairy products (*Brădet, Calitatea, Dalia, Ibănești, Napolact, Penteleu, Rarăul, Rucăr, Stâna*), of beer (*Azuğa, Bucegi, Ciucaș, Noroc, Stejar, Timișoreana*), or of wine (*Băbeasca Gri, Busuioaca de Bohotin, Fetească, Haiduc, Lacrima lui Ovidiu, Miorița, Pandur, Roșioara, Sânge de Taur, Tămâioasa*) are likely to still be designated through Romanian names⁶. A belief shared by most Romanians is that products resulting from basic, traditional activities, such as agriculture and animal rearing, should bear Romanian names, as they refer to a series of occupations deemed archetypal by Romanians today and of days of yore, and the structures that designate such products are able to trigger emotive associations of this kind⁷.

Along with these, there is yet another group of brands: those that controlled the Romanian market during the communist regime (the monopoly they effected was due to their being the only ones of their type allowed to function), and which were re-invented during the past 15 years, by armies of specialists who speculated the nostalgia⁸ and the curiosity they represented for a segment of the population (Ioniță 2009: para. 1). With the products and recipes changing, the constant element is marked by the nominal constituent, whose symbolic and indexical values were thus cultivated. The context becomes crucial in the case of these names, as it determines the common ground which language users turn to when having to decode the denominating sequence. Brand names like *Borsec, Clujana, Dacia, DERO, Eugenia, Farmec, Guban, Napolact*, and *ROM* trigger a much wider chain of associations than the latest and trendiest denominations (Popa 2005: 78), because they have a history in which at least two cultural and idiomatic instantiations of a community partake: one including the experience of the initial referents of the names mentioned, and another underlining the longing for the intimate, deeply individualised condition which allowed for that experience (Coșeriu 1995: 58). The semiotic charge these proprial lemmas build up on facilitates their being used so that they are able to generate current connotations that “block the usage of old ones” (Kryukova 2005: 751), since the affective associations related to the present usage of the name are not the same as those conveyed by its initial one, i.e. the frustration of having no other choice but the one of the referent in question. While these brand names were meaningfully employed as “a means to construct social order in the environment” (Bergien 2005: 297), they today function as diagnostic indexes which reflect the social and economic order within a community (and by extrapolation, without

⁶ On analysing the English influence on the Italian language and culture, in the areas of Pisa and Livorno, Mercatanti (2005: 653) mentions it did not affect to the same extent the things Italy is famous for: food, wine, restaurants, namely the field referred to by “agroturismi”.

⁷ Even in this case, there is a considerable number of borrowings from foreign languages, either as a result of the expansion of a brand’s market in Romania, or as a negative reflex of the proneness to imitate Western models, especially starting with the 1990s.

⁸ The concept used to define the sense of longing and nostalgia for life under the socialist system in former communist countries of Eastern Europe, is the German *Ostalgie*, Ostalgia, namely the nostalgia for aspects of life (including brands associated to certain products) from East Germany (the German Democratic Republic), expressed particularly by people who were young during those years.

it, as well). Thus, such Romanian trade names do not only designate but also display an advertising potential explored as a result of the associative senses derived from their form, their original referents and the experience that relates individuals to those referents; brand names of this kind aim to persuade potential customers of the authenticity and reliability of their denotata, in a landscape of corporatism and large-scale consumerism (Panaitache n.d.: Unde se găsesc acele lucruri care ne aparțin?).

Of the greater picture, we mention the following brand names as representative, with respect to the features presented above:

(1) *Azuga* – the name of one of the most famous Romanian beer brands during the communist regime, deriving from the homonymous toponym (the name of the city in which the initial product was made). The associative meanings generated by this name relate to one's passage from boyhood to manhood (+ masculinity, + tradition, + maturity).

(2) *Borsec* – the name of one of the most renowned mineral water varieties in Romania, deriving from a toponym (*Borsec*, a city in the county of Harghita, in Transylvania). The associated meanings pertain to tradition and prestige (+ dynamic, + high class).

(3) *Clujana* – the name of a shoe factory in Cluj-Napoca, which could have derived from the noun denoting the inhabitant of the area in question, or from the homonymous corresponding adjective of origin, with the definite article clitic (*Cluj* > *clujean*, *clujeană* > “an inhabitant of the city of Cluj-Napoca or the county of Cluj” / “related to Cluj-Napoca or to Cluj” > **Clujana*). This company produced very good leather shoes, thus the meanings associated to its name are that of tradition, quality and prestige.

(4) *Dacia* – the name of a Romanian car company, deriving from the name of the former Kingdom of Dacia, from the antiquity. The connotations this denomination entails relate to authenticity, prestige, resistance, and power. There is, however, a downgrading attitude towards the products the car company in question made during the communist regime; this is why they are referred to not by the name of the brand but by the number of the model (e.g. *the 1300*), so as to clearly distinguish them from the present modern variants.

(5) *DERO* – the name of a brand of detergents, an acronym of *Detergenți România*, the detergents factory in Ploiești, Romania. The associations this name triggers build up around the great assistance this product provides in one's household (+ feminine).

(6) *Eugenia* – the name of a variety of biscuits with cocoa cream filling, deriving from the homonymous female forename, *Eugenia*. The associative meanings relate to availability and accessibility. Though a proprial lemma, it developed an appellative use, today referring generically to any given product of this kind.

(7) *Farmec* – the name of a brand of cosmetic products, deriving from a common noun meaning “charm, magic, enchantment”. Thus, the meanings associated to it relate, in a minimalist way, to what worldwide famous similar brands aim to convey: feminine attraction and mystery, in this case combined with tradition and authenticity.

(8) *Guban* – the name of a shoe company in Timișoara, Romania, deriving from the surname of the company's founder. The products made by *Guban* were of very high quality, but also very expensive; though not affordable, they were bought for their endurance. Thus, connotations like “tradition”, “prestige”, “first-class” were and still are implied by the name.

(9) *Napolact* – the name of a company of dairy products in Cluj-Napoca, Transylvania, being a blending of the initial parts of the name of the region in which the brand was founded, *Napoca*, and the object of its trade, *lactate* (dairy products). The associative meanings related to it pertain to tradition, authenticity, as well as prestige.

(10) *ROM* – the name of a variety of chocolate, an acronym of *Romania*, the name of the country in question. Although the connotations advertisers wanted this name to trigger relate to authenticity, the formal similarity of the denomination with the noun denoting “Gypsy person” has enabled this brand to be portrayed ironically, subverting the prestige it attempts to presuppose.

All these brands have contemporary alternatives that display a modern, usually foreign name, and associations that give one the feeling of being in line with Western trends. What makes them special is the way in which their denomination spans spatiotemporal and cultural coordinates, thus becoming both symbols of the identity they designate and indexes of the society in which they function. Apart from the appellative function they all perform when they refer to an exemplar of the products nurtured by the corresponding companies, some of them, such as *DERO* and *Eugenia*, are commonly used today instead of the classifiers denoting their basic level category, “detergent” and “biscuits” (they behave like basic level terms). This was possible due to the characteristics the proprial lemmas manifest: *frequency* (the names are learned, recognized and used by many individuals throughout the country), *familiarity* (they reflect the long-lasting relationship between brand and customers), *concreteness and imagery* (their concrete referent evokes images that are easily remembered), *meaningfulness* (they develop word associations), *definability* (their referent can be traced down without difficulties), and *pronounceability* (they display those phonological structure that makes them easily learned and reproduced) (Taylor and Taylor 1990: 149). Moreover, the meaning of these naming structures, though not lexical *per se*, is conceptual in that it highlights “what is permanent about its relation to the world, rather than its referents, the objects or events to which it refers on particular occasions” (Hudson 2001: 80): the associations are defined by a certain nostalgia for a state of things past.

Conclusions

Society today is defined by a complex web of transcultural and cross-cultural flows that first and foremost leave their marks on language. Within the Romanian contemporary space, one that is still convalescent after the chronic effects of the communist regime, the public landscape develops in a rather hectic manner, as it becomes increasingly strenuous to decide whether to adopt and adapt exterior, foreign input, or to foster and encourage local attributes. The study of language is, naturally, performed vertically rather than horizontally, as language is observed in motion, and the linguistic sign cultivates its emblematic function, especially in the field of onomastics, where it aims to compensate in matters of associations and connotations what it lacks at the level of lexical meaning. As proprial lemmas, names designate their referent, while also triggering meanings that have been ascribed to their referent, and to them, implicitly (Frankel 2004: 80). While assenting to the view that “The act of naming is an act of power. (...) names can be highly meaningful, setting parameters for how we define and understand everything from social issues to corporate identities”

(Guenther 2009: 412), we mention that, behaving as such, brand names in the Romanian contemporary landscape do not only identify but they as well advertise their denotata, especially when they tend to perform as cultural mediators, i.e. when they ensure the transition between a past and a present that seem to only have in common the name itself and a certain generation of individuals still making use of it, with the melancholic air of remembering one's youth. Brand names like *Borsec*, *DERO*, *Eugenia* or *ROM*, and many others of their kind, are linguistically represented socioeconomic markers that diagnose the status and the dynamics of the society in which they function. As names and as symbols, they prove to be "manipulating, influencing, defining, conveying nuances of meaning and personal intention" (Trudgill 2000: 105).

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