

Naming and Framing as a Means of Balancing Product Innovation with Fair Speak: The Case of Foods

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Abstract: The name found on the packaging of commercial food products is decisive not only for its cognitive, but also for its legal identity. Consumers should be able to check if what they are buying is e.g. *ham*, *spam*, or *bacon*, while companies should not gain unfair competitive advantages by selling an “apple cider” which is really a soda pop. However, consumers and their organizations regularly disagree with the name chosen by the manufacturer and sometimes take formal action against it. Today such disputes are mostly settled by case-by-case common-sense judgments made by lawyers and government officials regarding the likeliness that someone might be misled. The workshop suggests a new theoretical framework for analysing the psycholinguistic and cognitive dimensions of potentially misleading food naming and presents a series of experimental results supporting the assessment of the actual misleading potential of specific food naming solution on empirical grounds. The aim is to provide better knowledge support for both legal decision-making and the best practices of the food industry itself.

Workshop Overview

What’s in a (food) name?

“Having a word for it” is not just a matter of putting labels on objects and events in the infinite variety of reality. It is a matter of categorizing them, (re)identifying them at each new encounter, making sense of them, and encompassing them into our minds by relating them to our personal preferences, values, and goals. Some would argue that this is tantamount to creating them, at least as potential candidates for human cognition (Piaget 1926; Gumperz & Levinson 1996; Cohen & Lefebvre 2005).

This is also true of commercial products, including food products. For the latter, a generic name (and not just a brand name) on the packaging is mandatory according to both US and EU (European Union) law. The rationale is that consumers should be able to check if what they are buying is e.g. *ham*, *spam*, or *bacon*, while companies should not gain unfair competitive advantages by selling an “apple cider” which is really a soda pop. Notably, for foods any misconception in such regards may not only lead to disappointed consumers, but ultimately obscure decision-making essential to public health. In turn, consumers and their organizations regularly disagree with the name chosen by the manufacturer and sometimes take formal action against it. A review of 821 Danish administrative cases on misleading food naming and labelling showed that 27% of the instances of alleged misleadingness concerned the product’s name (Smith et al. 2011).

While the formal basis for resolving such conflicts is given by law, the specifics to which the legal rules must be applied in individual instances are communicative and cognitive rather than legal by nature: It is a matter of what the words mean, and how consumers can be expected to understand them. In turn, this cannot be determined in isolation from other

cognitive phenomena such as knowledge, categorization, conceptual systems, and sensory memory. Nevertheless, today decisions on such matters are not based on any empirical evidence or explicit theorizing beyond the sphere of jurisprudence, but on case-by-case common-sense judgments made by lawyers and government officials regarding the likelihood that someone might in fact be misled. However, the increasing diversity of the food market and the accelerating globalization of rules and practices in this and related fields has fostered an increasing call for harder evidence to underpin the legal decision-making and best practices of the food companies themselves (Macmaoláin 2007; Incardona & Poncibò 2007; Trzaskowski 2011).

The cross-disciplinary Danish research project “Spin or fair speak: When foods talk” headed by Viktor Smith (www.fairspeak.org) was formed to contribute to this end. A major focus is on relating real-life disputes on food naming to relevant theory and experimental evidence gained, in particular, in psycholinguistics and cognitive linguistics (Libben & Jarema 2006; Benczes 2006), and to use the resultant insights as a basis for setting up new experimental designs capable of testing the misleading potential of specific food naming solutions. The naming aspect is seen in close connection with the total symphony of labelling elements on the packaging which also includes texts, figures, images, colours, etc. While such elements have a communicative potential in their own right, they also serve as an essential framing for the name, biasing its possible interpretations.

The aim of the present workshop is to present selected results of the above-mentioned project as a basis for discussing key challenges in present-day and future food naming practices with colleagues bringing in their own expertise on and experience on such issues from different markets, cultures, professional foci, and academic traditions.

Established food names: What do they mean, and who is to decide?

A key observation is the fundamental difference in the cognitive nature of the conflicts depending on the stage the product named has reached in its life-cycle, spanning from simple product repetition to genuine product innovation. Thus, there are some cases where all interested parties (consumers, consumer organizations, manufacturers, authorities, gastronomic experts, etc.) agree that the name exists and entitles consumers and others to have certain expectations to the equally familiar product carrying it, but disagree profoundly on which expectations that is exactly. For example, is being a real *macaroon* (or *mead* or a *smoothie*) a matter of what the products looks, tastes, and smells like, and how it feels in the mouth? Or is it a matter of ingredients and how they have been processed? Some would say that this ought to be two sides of the same coin, but it not always is. Moreover, only in a minority of cases (e.g. chocolate or fruit juices) will there be legally binding food standards available to settle the matter. To what extent will consumers still rely on the knowledge of experts of some sort when making their choices (and if so: which?) and to what extent is it fair to expect them to do so?

The problem is particularly evident in cases of product (d)evolution where well-known products gradually change their original characteristics, whether to reduce costs or, more nobly, to lower the fat content or otherwise enhance the nutrition value. On the workshop we present two major empirical studies approaching such conflict scenarios from the position of a cognitive reinterpretation of Putnam's (1975) hypothesis of “division of linguistic labour” (Smith, Møgelvang-Hansen & Hyldig 2010; Smith et al. 2013). The studies offer new and, in some respects, unexpected experimental evidence on some of the questions raised above, while opening other issues in need for continued investigation and discussion.

Novel food names: What will they come to mean, and can we predict it?

The situation is entirely different when we turn to the naming of entirely new product types. Clear-cut examples include a caviar-like product made from seaweed or “rice” made from grained cauliflower. In such cases, the manufacturer will usually have taken the full consequence of having created an entirely new product by providing it with an equally new name. In most cases, however, the name will be coined through a combination of well-known elements into a more complex unit such as *seaweed caviar*.

There is a widespread belief among all actors that such composite names can have only one “objective” and “linguistically correct” reading, the question being which. However, experience from general psycholinguistics indicate that composite names will often display a wide array of possible interpretations some of which are potentially misleading while others offer fair guidance. Which one will prevail can be determined only at a subsequent stage, when a sufficient number of recipients have crystallized a fully developed concept of the product. Here the “literal reading(s)” of the name will merely serve only as one potential cues while other decisive factors are the general world knowledge accessible to the recipient when performing the conceptual blend required and, not least, additional cues provided by the context. In the case of commercial food products, this is tantamount to the framing provided by texts, figures, and images on the surrounding labelling.

We shall present recent empirical results (Zlatev et al. 2010; Smith, Barratt & Zlatev, 2014) which show, among other things, that a name like *Amazonas chicken* tends to be interpreted as an indication of the physical origin of the product when encountered in isolation (with may potentially lead it to be misleading) whereas a picture of a ready-made dish and a Danish-sounding brand name can easily overturn this interpretation, and induce another: the specification of a new exotic recipe.

Interest to the specific Sponsors:

The workshop will address a field of business activity where the choice of words is a matter of permanent debate and regularly gives rise to legal conflicts, namely names for commercial food products. The workshop will present and discuss the result of an extensive Danish investigation of 821 real-life cases these issues and suggests a new theoretical approach for dealing with them, drawing on insights and methodological tools from psycholinguistics and cognitive science and original experimental studies targeting the potential misleadingness of individual naming solutions.

Workshop format

The workshop organizers (Alex Klinge and Henrik Selsøe Sørensen, and Viktor Smith) will introduce the key issues and present selected findings from their research so far. On that basis, the audience will engage in an open discussion and perform hands-on exercises based on authentic naming and framing cases presented by the organizers.

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