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The Semiotics of Minority Language Branding: a study of the Celtic languages.

Abstract

This paper investigates the role of minority language commodification in alcohol branding with a specific focus on Celtic languages and a particular emphasis on Cornish. The paper introduces the topic by exploring the on-going and significant connection between language, culture and food, taking phrases and rhymes from historic sources and comparing their use. The aim of the paper is to present a cross-disciplinary synergy between semiotics and cultural analysis to shed new light on marketing issues in the alcohol sector. The data section presents the first ever analyses of alcohol labels from four Celtic nations (N = 1,937) to illustrate what percentage of labels are in a nation’s own language. The paper explores unique branding positions in relation to the marketing theory on positionality, and positional innovation. The paper concludes with a discussion of Spolsky and Cooper (1991)’s third sign rule and the concept of linguistic landscapes in relation to alcohol labelling. Rigours analysis found that extensive use of a minority language in branding does not have to correlate with a large population of native speakers; but can function as an effective sign vehicle for branding niche cultures and locations.

Keywords: positional innovation, Cornish, Celtic, alcohol branding, labelling

0. Introduction

This paper explores the use of Celtic languages for alcohol branding, but with a specific focus on Cornish (Kernewek) and the triadic relationship between language, food and culture. The paper starts by exploring the ethno-linguistic connections between the Cornish language and cuisine, its connection to other Celtic languages, historical literature, and the food industry. The paper then introduces the concept of positional innovation and its connection to branding. Data from alcohol brands of four different Celtic nations are presented and discussed. The paper concludes by summarising the differing applications of identity branding through the use of minority languages, and how they may vary by context.

The process by which signifiers can be turned into saleable objects is related to what Heller (2008) refers to as the commodification of Language, or as Hornsby and Vigers (2012, 59) after Myhill (1999)
termed it language-and-economy. The commodification of language will be explored through the concepts of positionality and positional innovation. This concerns how a product or service can be sold to a new market by changing the branding position of that product, rather than its physical attributes (Francis and Bessant 2005). Examples of positional innovations are given in Table 1:

Table 1. Examples of Positional Innovation Adapted from Francis and Bessant (2005); Ruzich (2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Previous Position</th>
<th>Current Position</th>
<th>Reason for Positional Innovation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Starbucks</td>
<td>Coffee – functional product</td>
<td>Coffee- emotional experience</td>
<td>To give coffee and coffee shops an emotional connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucozade</td>
<td>Health Drink for illness</td>
<td>Isotonic sports drink</td>
<td>To create drinks that give energy for sport as opposed to health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryanair</td>
<td>N/a does not exist</td>
<td>Low cost air line</td>
<td>Allow flying to be something anyone can afford, not just the affluent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Labour</td>
<td>The Labour Party</td>
<td>New Labour</td>
<td>To detoxify the old brand (create trust) &amp; to give a legitimate reason for changes in policy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from the examples in Table 1. Positional innovation is an innovation category that lends itself willingly to marketing and branding as subjects, as it does not require a product to be altered. Lucozade for example, moved from a health-related market to a sports market without the chemical composition of the product substantially altering.

The paper will look at the Celtic languages with a particular focus on Cornish, and how it is culturally embedded in the brand semiotics of alcoholic beverages (Dequech 2003). Previously, Rowe and Taylor (2014) have looked at other Cornish food products and their relation to positional marketing as a form of innovation. However, this paper is based upon empirical data collected from online sources rather than a case study methodology.

1. The Celtic Language Family and Cornish

The Celtic language family as it exists today is formed of the remaining insular varieties of the Celtic languages, primarily spoken in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, a classification of these languages is given in Figure 1. Although there is a large diaspora of Celtic peoples, such as Irish Americans (Vann 2004), the geographical area where the languages are natively spoken is confined to the western fringes of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, See Figure 2. The only exceptions being the Scots’ Gaelic speakers of Nova Scotia Canada, and in Patagonia Argentina where a Welsh speaking community still exists (BBC 2017). Cornwall is a county located in the far
South West of the United Kingdom and one of the six (albeit smaller) Celtic nations (Jenner 1905) – see Figure 2. It is home to 532,300 people (Cornwall Council 2013c), of whom 73,200 self-identify as ethnically Cornish (Cornwall Council 2013a). The Cornish are recognised as a Celtic minority by the European Framework for Protection of National Minorities. In 2005, the UK government included the Cornish Language (Kernowek) under Part II of the European Charter for the Protection of Regional or Minority Languages. The rationale for choosing this minority language group was twofold; firstly, the author is literate in several of the languages and able to translate the others without hindrance due to their shared etymological and grammatical root. Secondly, there exists a large repository of alcohol branding data on the subject, which does not exist for other minority language groups.

Statistics do not currently exist for the exact number of speakers of Cornish. The 2nd Cornish National Minority Report states “conservative estimates put the number of fluent speakers at around 300, and those with some knowledge of the language at between 4,000 and 5,000” (Saltern 2011). The language is however, dominant in place names, toponyms, hydronyms and surnames in the region, including bi-lingual street signage in some districts. Hence it should be clear that Cornwall has a distinct ethno-linguistic heritage from its English neighbours. And so it follows that the majority of the topological features were named in the indigenous languages, and form a distinct linguistic and semiotic landscape (Nash 1997; Jaworski and Thurlow 2011; Gorter, Marten, and Van Mensel 2012). The connection between branding and semiotic landscapes is so salient in this case because of the nature of the sector under study. Alcohol branding frequently draws upon the place names and local folklore as signifiers. This can be easily demonstrated by considering how providence of origin has important legal implications for branding, for example, Cornwall has a number of legally recognised products under the European Union regulation No 510/2006 on Protected Geographical Indications and Protected Designations of Origin. Some of the notable produce being Cornish pasties- similar to an empanada or a calzone (DEFRA 2011b), Cornish Pilchards (a type of fish) (DEFRA 2011a) and Clotted Cream (Alexander 1997). Geographical designation can be of paramount importance for

![Figure 1 The Celtic language taxonomy adapted from MacAulay (1992)](image)
areas in terms of market share and brand protection, such as Champagne, France (Beverland 2006). More generally, the food and beverage sector in Cornwall is a key contributor to the Cornish economy. In 2011, the agri-food sector accounted for 63,700 jobs and was significantly more important in terms of employment provision in Cornwall than the rest of the UK. In economic terms it was estimated that the Cornish agri-food sector was worth £1.4billion in 2011 (University of Exeter Centre for Rural Policy Research 2011). The economic reliance upon tourism and agriculture/food sector is a commonly encountered phenomenon in other parts of the globe that have indigenous cultures. As such, it is my hope that while this paper focuses on very specific linguistic and geographical areas, the ideas contain within it are generalizable to many other situations and cultures whose financial success is dependent upon branding their cultural distinctiveness.

Figure 2 The Celtic Nations of the British Isles, adapted from National Geographic (2006)

2. Cornish Language and Food

Before exploring the data, I wished to enculture the reader with a flavour of the existing relationship between the Cornish language and cuisine. However one should note that throughout this paper different orthographic systems of Cornish will be used as a standard written form of the language was not agreed until 2008 (BBC 2008) hence the quotations are verbatim from their sources and respective spelling systems. The Cornish tongue gives us some interesting insights into the role of food in Cornish culture. The traditional industries of mining, fishing and farming helped to shape the
carbohydrate rich and simple culinary tradition that are found on the peninsula. The data concerning this is largely composed of folk-rhymes, letter fragments and speech documented by antiquarians. Such as this rhyme in relation to the virtues of cheese recorded by Pryce (1790):

“Ez kês? Es po neg ez. Ma sêz kêz Dro Kêz. Po neg ez Kêz drop eth ez”

“Is there cheese? There is or there isn’t. If there is cheese, bring cheese. Since there isn’t cheese, bring what there is” (Williams. Nicholas 1997)

There are other more disdainful references to carbohydrate rich food, for example the Cornish religious text *Passio Christii* dating from the 14th century (Norris 1859), which echoes Mathew 4.4:

“Mab den heb ken es bara bith ny’n jevas oll bêwnans”

“Man with bread only will never live all his life” (Sandercock and Chubb 1982, Line 65)

This religious theme continues with some sage advice, recorded by William Gwavas c. 1728 in how one should approach eating and drinking:

“Na wrewgh eva re, mès eva rag a’s sehas, ha hedna, moy bo le, a vedn gwytha corf in yehas”

‘Don’t drink too much, but drink for your thirst, and that, more or less, will keep body in health’ (Cornish Language Partnership 2007)

The phrase reflects an increasingly protestant view of consumption of the period over the less puritan religious traditions from which the older sayings spring (Averell. 1839). Religion and food also coincide in the use of curses, for example the play *Bywnans Meriasek* - the life of St Meriasek written in 1504 contains the line:

“Molleth du in gegen schant yy an dewes ha’n boys”

“God’s curse on the kitchen! The food and drink are meagre” (Edwards and Stokes 1996) Line 3928 -29

Which in turn gave rise the traditional saying “an Jowl yn agas kegin” – “[may there be] the devil in your kitchen!”. There is a connection between food and folklore in Cornish also, for example in a letter to William Gwavas in 1711 Oliver Pender related the phrase:

“An hern gwâv a vedn gwyll drog dha’n hern hav”

*The winter pilchards will harm the summer pilchards*

This being a reference to the notoriously difficult to predict shoal pattern of pilchards arriving off the Cornish coast, which was documented in the 16th to the 18th century as shifting from late summer to
The most famous rhyme in Cornish is perhaps the Pilchard Rhyme attributed to John Boson (1665-1720) and first printed by Borlase (1866). Due to the dependency of the local populous on catching this type of fish.

It needs to be asked, what do these fragmentary pieces of advice and phrases tell us about the ethnic relationship between the Cornish people and food? It is clear that one can see the religious tradition showing a more puritan approach to food and drink as we move from the 14\textsuperscript{th} to the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. Similarly, the subject of food in Cornish is interwoven with religious themes but also important enough to be embedded in curses. Through the language, one can see how the fortunes of the people waxed and waned and was intimately connected to the fishing industry. The question remains for the application of Cornish as a language-and-economy brand position, how does one translate this into contemporary uses? The answer I feel is explained through the concept of positional marketing, which shall be outlined in the following section.

3. Positional Marketing as Innovation

The OECD define innovation as an iterative process initiated by the perception of a new market and/or new service opportunity for a technology based invention which leads to development, production and marketing tasks striving for the commercial success of the invention (OECD 1991). More succinctly Tidd and Bessant (2009) state that innovation is driven by the ability to see connections, to spot opportunities and take advantage of them. Going beyond this Bessant et al. (2005, 1366) went on to say: “Innovation represents the core renewal process in any organization. Unless it changes what it offers the world and the way in which it creates and delivers those offerings it risks its survival and growth prospects.” The concept is such that it is not just about creating new markets but also about finding new ways to serve established markets. The framework within which positional innovation occurs is called the 4 Ps. The ‘4 Ps’ typology was developed by Bessant and Tidd, and in brief it characterises all forms of innovation space in which businesses operate. These are outlined in Tidd and Bessant (2009):

- Product: What a business offers the world
- Process: How businesses create and deliver that product
- Position: Where a business targets its products and the story it tells about them
- Paradigm: How a business frames what it does

For the purposes of this paper, I am concerned singularly with the concept of position, which one can observe is intricately related to the ideas of brand orientation. There is of course other similar concepts in sociological literature, such as Hirschman’s ‘symbolic innovations’, which are: “those
which result from the reassignment of social meaning to an existing product” (Hirschman 1982, 537). This came from a sociological context and was used in conjunction with reference group theory1, but as a concept, it has all the hallmarks of positional innovation. The term symbolic innovation has all but disappeared in favour of positioning. Positional innovation is one of the lesser-studied members of the innovation family. Bessant (2003) characterises positional innovation as a change in the context in which an innovation is applied. A classic illustration of this is Häagen-Dazs repositioning ice-cream as a luxury item at a time when ice-cream was seen as a product for children (Tidd and Bessant 2009). However there is a disparity in the study of innovation in that the majority of papers focus on the innovation of processes, products, or paradigms leaving the study of positions to play the laggard (Francis and Bessant 2005). In many ways, the definition of innovation and positional innovation in particular bear resemblance to Peirce’s often quote definition of a sign: “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign” (Peirce 1955, 99).

What Peirce has called signs we have designated position, and applied within a commercial context. Apart from the work of Francis and Bessant (2005), Tidd and Bessant (2009), Tidd and Bessant (2011), the literature that explicitly names positional innovation as a concept is predominantly Financial Times newspaper reports such as Kim and Mauborgne (1999b, 1999a, 1999c, 1999d). Beyond this the concept is referenced by Rowley, Baregh, and Sambrook (2011) and alluded to by Strathdee (2005), March-Chorda and Yague-Perales (2002). As such I felt that is was important to highlight this lesser used marketing theory, especially given its structural homology to semiotic concepts. Historically if we consider Schumpeter (1934), his concept of economic innovation has defines innovation without a consideration of the social or positional dimension, but focuses on process, product and paradigms. We can see that positional marketing forms part of the rise in use of social science/ creative industries in innovation that started to occur at the of the fin de 21ème siècle (Cavalli 2007). And the rise of the use of semiotics in marketing more widely (Umiker-Sebeok 1987; Floch and Orr Bodkin 2001; Oswald 2012). There are few works that discuss marketing topics in relation to multilingualism, except the excellent work by Kelly-Holmes (2009). Specifically in relation to Celtic languages, Campbell, Bennett, and Stephens (2009) investigated the role of Irish in the construction of brand identity. From an Irish perspective once more, Strachan and Nally (2012) explored the cultural meanings of advertising in the Irish Revival period. It can be seen that in the limited literature which addresses Celtic language branding, most of it is relates to the Republic of Ireland. I hope to expand this by bringing more data in relation to other Celtic nations. The following data section of Celtic language alcohol brands attempts to shine a light how the semiotics of place and landscape can be explained through positional marketing.

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1 The idea that groups can be used to explain similar behaviour patterns (Cochran, Beeghley, and Bock 1988)
4. Methodology

Alcohol labels were taken as a cross-cultural linguistic unit that can be used to compare how different languages in the UK are adapted to market alcohol. Beer labels were analysed in Cornwall, Wales and the Isle of Man, and whisky labels in Scotland respectively. The labels were broken into 5 categories of product names: purely in a Celtic Language (Cornish, Welsh, Scottish or Max Gaelic), a mixture of English and a Celtic Language (Anglo-Celtic), English only, Numeric, and neither a Celtic language or English (Other). The raw data can be found in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Each Language</th>
<th>Cornwall</th>
<th>Wales</th>
<th>Isle of Man</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celtic Language</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>10.45%</td>
<td>1.92%</td>
<td>71.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-Celtic</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>7.71%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>10.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>82.9%</td>
<td>79.33%</td>
<td>79.81%</td>
<td>13.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.12%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4.91%</td>
<td>1.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numerical</td>
<td>0.18%</td>
<td>0.51%</td>
<td>0.86%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Labels (n)         | 538      | 1172  | 104         | 123      |

In total 1,937 labels were analysed, sadly due to the low population level of the Isle of Man only 104 beers were found to originate from the island. Similarly, in Scotland as the convention is to name whisky after the distillery, or the year (hence the numeric category) this also reduced the number of observable labels to 123. The data was sourced from two online repositories of beer labels, Quaffle.org and Beermad.org in addition to validate sources whisky and beer guides were used. The data in these sources contains historical information dating back to the 1980s, which helped to create an accurate historically informed depiction of the market place up to the year 2012. The data from Table 2 is shown visually in Figure 3.
Figure 3 Percentages of alcohol labels in their respective Celtic language and nations
5. Discussion

The data shows that the use of Scottish Gaelic in Celtic only labels is by far the highest in frequency; it then declines in use as we pass into the Anglo-Celtic and English labelling categories. This result is in many ways counter-intuitive as by number of speakers Welsh far exceed all the other languages combined (Kandler, Unger, and Steele 2010) but yet Welsh does not differ significantly from Manx Gaelic or Cornish in all the label categories as shown in Figure 3. The UK census data in 2011 puts the number of Welsh speakers at 562,000, approximately 19% of the population (BBC 2012). Whereas the number of Scottish Gaelic speakers stands at 58,000 accounting for 1.1% of the population of Scotland (National Records of Scotland 2013) almost exactly 1/10th of the size of the Welsh speaking population.

Figure 4 Whisky labels: whisky bottles typically have more textual descriptions than iconic representations of animals or places (see Figure 5)

There are a few possible explanations for this, firstly it is much more common to name whisky after toponyms or hydronyms, which due to their historical root in the highlands and islands of Scotland tend to be in Gaelic, whereas for production of beer, place-names in labelling is much less common. Equally, it is not uncommon to name whisky after other geographical features such as the water sources that a distillery uses, which even in non-Gaelic speaking areas often retain an original Gaelic name. What is clear from whisky historians is that whisky drinking is a multisensory experience composed of narratives, stories of places, histories and local culture (Hopkins 2010; O’Connor and Grunnér 2015). Some of which can be reflected in the brand name and label, but certainly not all of it.

Another possible explanation as to why the number of Anglo-Celtic and English labels were most prevalent in the largest Celtic language (Welsh) is due to the fact that the signification of ‘Celtic-ness’ can be expressed in other ways than the brand name of a product. For example in 2011 Okell & Sons Ltd, of the Isle of Man used straplines on their products such as “Premium Celtic Ale” and “Smoked
Celtic Porter” they also incorporate the Isle of Man’s emblem which is based on a Celtic triskel, all of which were in addition to the name of the product which remained in English (The Ormskirk Baron 2011). There is an interesting transition that can be identified in this brewery however if we return to the data in 2014, the seemingly contradictory use of English to express Celticness did not last. The brewery now only makes 50% of its products in English only labels, and 17% with Manx only labels (Okells & Sons Ltd 2014), illustrating that the situation is not always fixed.

Figure 5 An example of beer labels on their pumps, displaying a variety of animal motifs, colours, and approaches to graphic art.

The branding of products to indicate ethno-regional origins is only a minority issue in terms of the Cornish linguistic landscape (Gorter, Marten, and Van Mensel 2012), but given that food production and tourism are the central pillars of Cornwall’s economy (Cornwall Council 2013b) the issue is of significance. The use of a minority languages to indicate authenticity is addressed by Spolsky and Cooper (1991, 84) in their third rule of signs, this states that the producer of a sign will write in a language which they wished to be identified with regardless of their level of fluency in it. Something Blackwood and Tufi (2012) also noted with use of Corsican in branding food products. The third sign rule is well demonstrated in the lowland distilleries of Scotland such as Glen Scotia that still use Gaelic in their whisky labels, despite Gaelic not being spoken in that area since the 16th century (Ferguson 1905). Others such as Glengoyne in Stirlingshire were originally named in Scots English only to be changed into a Gaelic form at a later date (Lamond and Tucek 2007). A process I saw echoed at Okell & Sons on the Isle of Man. This shows how the slow Celticism of alcohol labels occurs at different rates in different Celtic nations, and the rate at which it happens is not directly connected to the number of speakers of that Celtic language. How long this sign process evolution will take in Cornwall remains unknown. Since 2012, the number of beers that have been produced has not shown any significant increases in the use of the Cornish language. However, the continued use of local themes and dialect is present. If the figure of 5,000 speakers of Cornish in Saltern (2011) is
correct, it means only 0.9% of the population in Cornwall speak their own language. It may be the case that Spolsky and Cooper (1991)’s third sign rule is only be applicable when a language has a high enough fraction of speakers in a given population. Otherwise Celtiness in this case is projected by other linguistic and semiotic processes such as those used by Okell & Sons on the Isle of Man.

6. Limitations to this Work

The approach to data analysis in this paper is glottocentric, focusing on the relationship between signified and signifier. Some such as Cobley (2013); Cobley (2015) treat this approach as passé and also potentially ill-conceived for applications in cultural analysis. Quite rightly there are superior analytical approaches that one could have taken, the primary candidate being multimodal semiotics, that allows one to talk about the grammar of visual design simultaneously with text (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996). The multimodal approach of Kress and van Leeuwen as a form of discourse analysis would have also been a productive approach to analysing this particular area of branding (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). A multimodal approach to alcohol brand analysis would have proved more fruitful, however the data available in open access sites, are typically incomplete in terms of visual data. Even if a picture of a label accompanied the description and name, low-resolution photos often prevented the author from discerning the details, and small icons or text.

There are textual data sources that would permit this, such as illustrated beer guides (Evans 2013; Tierney-Jones 2013; Beaumont and Webb 2014) and whisky bibles (Broom 2014; Murray 2016) or trade magazine from the alcohol industry. However, this method is more laborious, as the online databases have built-in search functions allowing sub-analysis by region, name or key terms. Which is regrettably not possible when using books as a primary data source. Expanding the scope of this work for future research, would involve a multimodal analysis from the visual data sources listed in this paragraph.

7. Conclusion

It is clear that the alcohol sectors in each Celtic nation are at a different stage of development in regards to how their language is used as a medium to communicate identity in product labels. However, what has emerged from the data is that commodification of languages is just as much about projecting and constructing an image in the eyes of others as it is about coming to understand how an ethnic group views themselves. That is to state the sign process indicates that the alcohol is marketed for the purposes of export, as well as to a local audience. Initially, one may have thought the position of being in a minority linguistic landscapes in relation to the omnipresence of English in branding, would create an automatic situation where the linguistic niche related to the indigenous Celtic
language. It would seem that signification of a distinct position can be linked to other non-English signifiers, such as romance languages or numeric signs. However, in areas such as Scotland where there is clear economic capital to be made by drawing from the semiotic landscape, a much clearer relationship between the minority-majority dichotomy can be observed. There are obviously challenges as well as opportunities that comes with branding based on insular knowledge and minority culture. However, it is my hope that by demonstrating the inter-sectoral linkages between tourism, the natural environment, and branding; minority language branding can help to sustain these cultures by making them economically relevant. In addition, I hope that this paper adds to the existing conceptual, methodological and empirical research on marketing semiotics, and can offer lessons in terms of new product development in this area for tourism and beverage production companies.

8. References


