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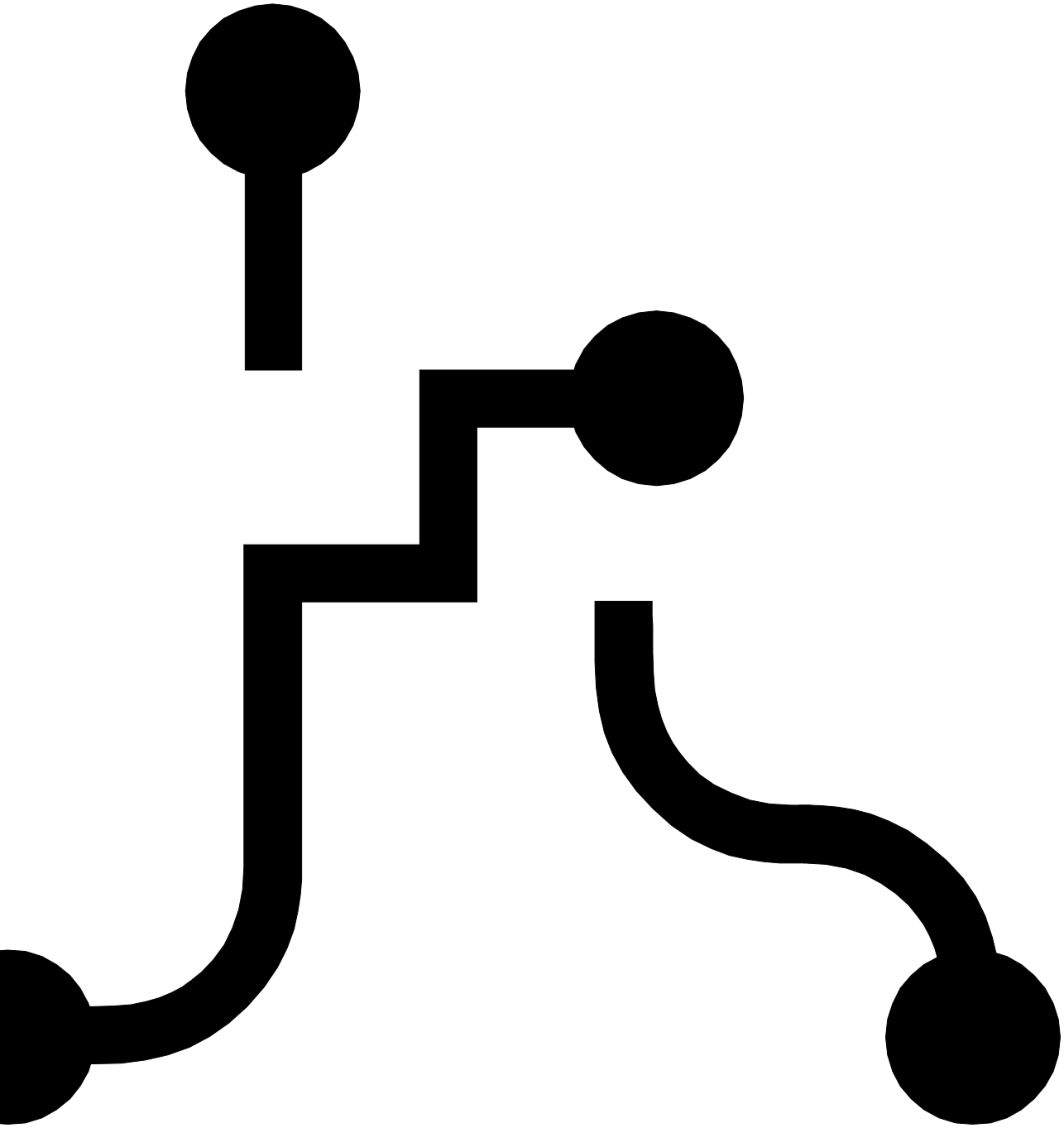

The Semiotics of Minority Language Branding: A Study of the Celtic Languages

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of minority language commodification in alcoholic drinks' branding, with a specific focus on Celtic languages and a particular emphasis on Cornish. The topic is introduced by exploring the ongoing and significant connection between language, culture and food, taking phrases and rhymes from historical sources and comparing their use. The aim is to establish cross-disciplinary synergies between semiotics and cultural analysis and to shed new light on marketing issues in the alcoholic drinks sector. The methodology section features the first ever analysis of alcoholic drinks' labels from four Celtic national minorities (N = 1.937) that illustrates what proportion of labels exists in each minority's language. The paper further explores unique branding positions in relation to the marketing theory of positionality, and positional innovation. It concludes with a discussion of Spolsky and Cooper's (1991) third sign rule and the concept of linguistic landscapes in relation to alcoholic drinks' labelling.

Keywords: positional innovation, Cornish, Celtic, alcoholic drinks branding, labelling

0. Introduction

This paper explores the use of Celtic languages for alcoholic drinks branding, 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. 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 on empirical data collected from online sources, rather than a case study methodology.

Then I introduce the concept of positional innovation and its connection to branding. 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.

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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. 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). Lucozade, for example, as may be gauged from the examples in Table 1, moved from a health-related market to a sports market without altering substantially the chemical composition of the product.

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

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

Data from alcoholic drinks brands of four different Celtic national minorities are then 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.

1. The Celtic Language Family and Cornish

The Celtic language family, as it exists today, has been formed from 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 portrayed in Figure 1. Although there is a wide 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 are the Scots' Gaelic speakers of Nova Scotia Canada, and a Welsh speaking community that still exists (BBC 2017) in Patagonia, Argentina.

Cornwall is a county located in the far South West of the United Kingdom and one of the six (albeit smaller) Celtic national minorities (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 the Protection of National Minorities. In 2005, the UK government included the Cornish Language (Kernewek) 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 roots. Secondly, there exists a large repository of alcoholic drinks branding data on the subject, which does not exist for other minority language groups.

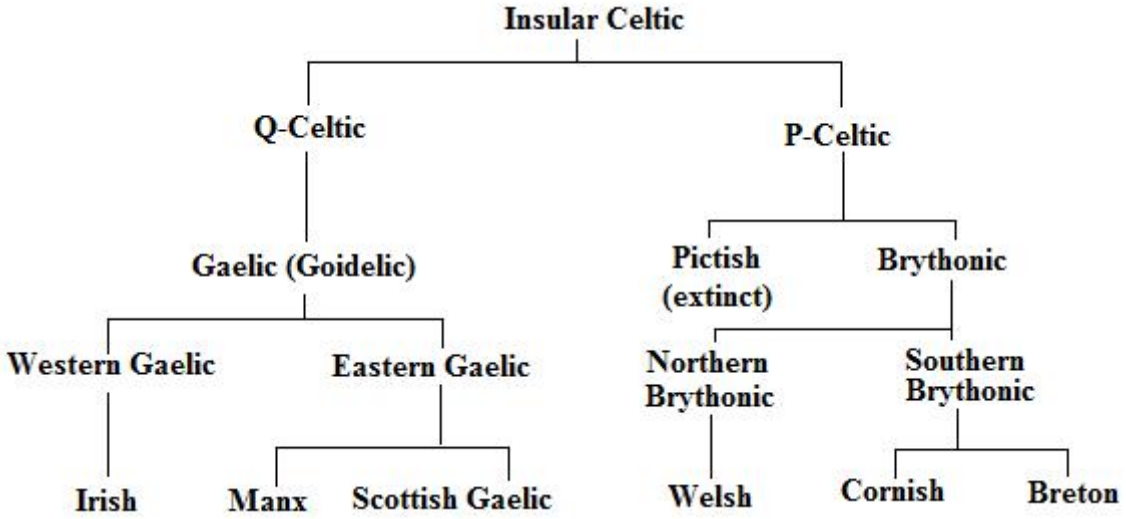

Figure 1. The Celtic language taxonomy (adapted from MacAulay [1992])

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 particularly salient in this case because of the nature of the sector under study. Alcoholic drinks branding frequently draws upon place names and local folklore as signifiers. This can be demonstrated by considering how the place of origin has important legal implications for branding. For example, Cornwall has a number of legally patented products under the European Union regulation No 510/2006 on Protected Geographical Indications and Protected Designations of Origin. Some of the notable produce are Cornish pastries- 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 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 presented therein are generalizable to many other situations

and cultures whose financial success is dependent upon branding their cultural distinctiveness.

Figure 2. The Celtic National Minorities of the British Isles (adapted from National Geographic [2006])

2. Cornish Language and Food

Before exploring the data, I would like to treat the reader with a flavour of the existing relationship between the Cornish language and cuisine. The Cornish language offers some interesting insights into the role of food in Cornish culture. The traditional industries of mining, fishing and farming helped shape the carbohydrate rich and simple culinary tradition of the peninsula. The relevant data largely concern folk-rhymes, letter fragments and speech documented by antiquarians, such as this rhyme regarding the virtues of cheese, as recorded by Pryce (1790):

"Ez kēs? Es po neg ez. Ma sēz kēz Dro Kēz. Po neg ez Kēz 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 bìth 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, on 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 yv 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 to the traditional saying **"an Jowl yn agas kegin" –** *"[may there be] the devil in your kitchen!"*. There is also a connection between food and folklore in Cornish. For example, in a letter to William Gwavas in 1711 Oliver Pender used the phrase:

"An hern gwâv a vedn gwyl drog dha'n hern hav"

"The winter pilchards will harm the summer pilchards"

This is a reference to the notoriously difficult to predict pattern of pilchards arriving off the Cornish coast, which was documented between the 16th and the 18th century as shifting from late summer to early December (Culley 1971, 51). The most famous rhyme in Cornish, due to the dependency of the local populace on catching this type of fish, is perhaps the Pilchard Rhyme attributed to John Boson (1665-1720) and first printed by Borlase (1866).

It merits asking, what do these fragmentary pieces of advice and phrases tell us about the ethnic relationship between the Cornish people and food? A more puritan religious approach to food and drink may be gleaned as we move from the 14th to the 18th century. Similarly, the subject of food in Cornish is interwoven with religious themes, but also 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 lies with the concept of positional marketing, which is outlined in the following section.

3. Positional Marketing as Innovation

The OECD defines 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 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 (not to be confused with the 4Ps as traditionally considered in marketing). The '4 Ps' typology was developed by Bessant and Tidd (2009), and concerns all innovation territories where businesses operate, as follows:

- 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 solely with the concept of position, which is intricately related to brand orientation. There are, of course, more concepts in the relevant literature, such as Hirschman's 'symbolic innovations' that *"result from the reassignment of social meaning to an existing product"* (Hirschman 1982, 537). Although this concept springs from a sociological context and has been used in conjunction with reference group theory[1], it displays the defining features of positional innovation. The term symbolic innovation has all but disappeared in favour of positional innovation. The latter is one of the lesser-studied members of the innovation family. Bessant (2003) characterizes positional innovation as a change in the context where an innovation is applied. A classic illustration of this is Häagen-Dazs ice-cream's repositioning 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 quoted 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, Baregheh, and Sambrook (2011) and alluded to by Strathdee (2005), March-Chorda

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

and Yague-Perales (2002). As such, it seems to me that there is scope for highlighting this less used approach, especially given its structural homology to semiotic concepts. Historically, if we consider Schumpeter (1934), the concept of economic innovation does not have a social or positional dimension, but focuses on process, product and paradigms. We may discern that positional marketing forms part of the progressive inroads of social sciences/ creative industries into innovation that begun at the fin de 20ème siècle (Cavalli 2007), the same period as semiotics' growing popularity in marketing (Umiker-Sebeok 1987; Floch and Orr Bodkin 2001).

There are few works that discuss marketing topics in relation to multilingualism, apart from 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, 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 relates to the Republic of Ireland. I hope to expand this by bringing more data in relation to other Celtic national minorities. The following section attempts to shed light on how the semiotics of place and landscape can be addressed through positional marketing.

4. Methodology

Alcoholic drinks' labels were taken as a cross-cultural linguistic unit that can be used to compare how different languages in the UK adapt to the alcoholic drinks market. Beer labels were analysed in Cornwall, Wales and the Isle of Man, and whisky labels in Scotland. 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 relevant output is displayed in Table 2 and in Figure 3.

Table 2. (%) of beer and whisky labels by territory

% of each language	Cornwall	Wales	Isle of Man	Scotland
Celtic Language	3.9%	10.45%	1.92%	71.54%
Anglo-Celtic	11.9%	7.71%	12.5%	10.57%
English	82.9%	79.33%	79.81%	13.01%
Other	1.12%	2%	4.91%	1.63%
Unknown	0%	0%	0%	3.25%
Numerical	0.18%	0.51%	0.86%	0%
Labels (n)	538	1172	104	123

In total 1.937 labels were analysed. Due to the small population 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), the number of observable labels was restricted to 123. The data was sourced from two online repositories of beer labels, Quaffle.org and Beermad.org. In addition, other reliable sources, such as whisky and beer guides were used. The data from these sources that contain historical

information dating back to the 1980s helped create a historically accurate and informed portrayal of the marketplace up to the year 2012.

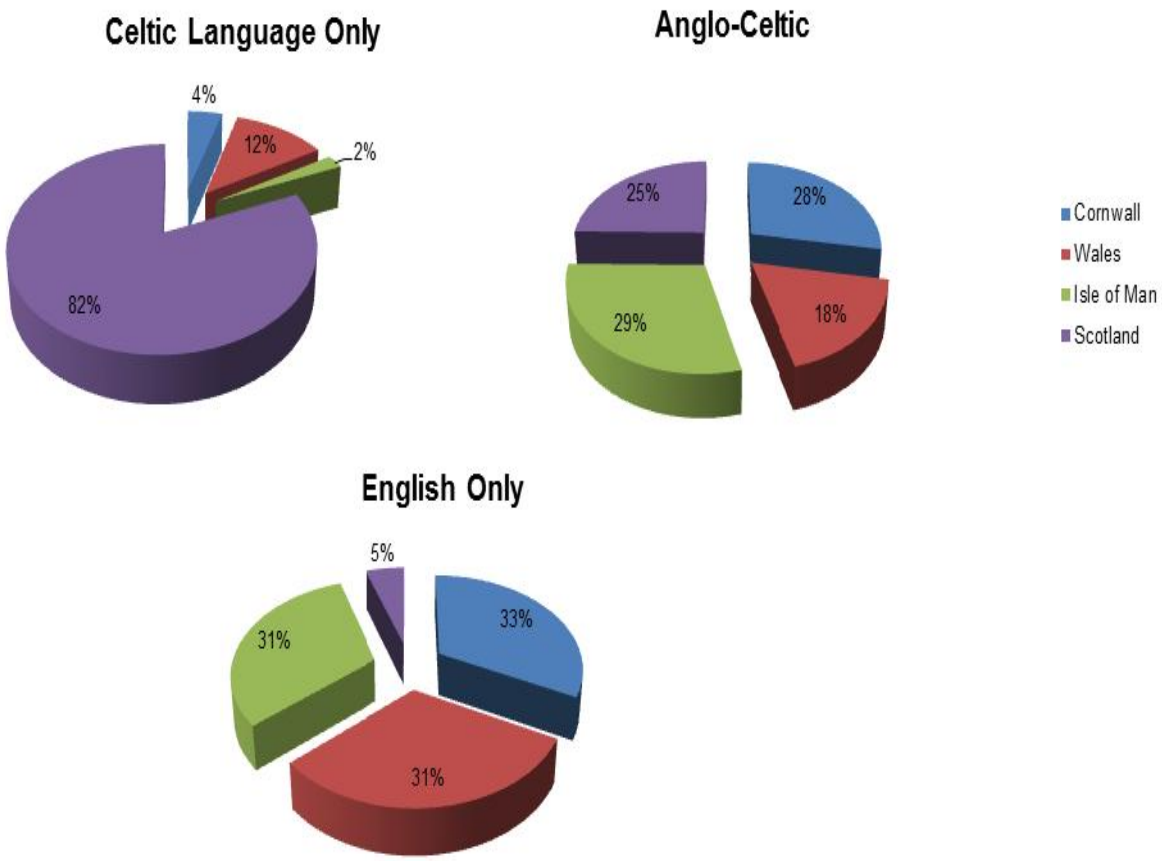

Figure 3. (%) of territories by alcoholic drink label in each language

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 move onto the Anglo-Celtic and English labelling categories. This result is in many ways counter-intuitive, as by number of speakers Welsh by far exceeds all the other languages combined (Kandler, Unger, and Steele 2010). Yet, Welsh does not differ significantly from Manx Gaelic or Cornish in all the label categories as shown in Figure 3. The 2011 UK census data puts the number of Welsh speakers at 562.000, approximately 19% of the population (BBC 2012), whereas the number of Scottish Gaelic speakers is 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.

Whisky labels typically have more textual descriptions than iconic representations of animals or places. 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

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

the Highlands and the islands of Scotland tend to be in Gaelic, whereas beer labelling with place-names in is much less common. Furthermore, it is not uncommon to name whisky after other geographical features, such as the water sources used by a distillery 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.

Secondly, another possible explanation as to why the number of Anglo-Celtic and English labels were most prevalent in the largest Celtic language (Welsh) rests with the fact that the signification of 'Celtic-ness' can be expressed in ways other 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 incorporated 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). An interesting transition can be identified in the history of this brewery. If we look at the 2014 data, the seemingly contradictory use of English to express Celticness did not last. The brewery now only makes 50% of its products with English only labels, and 17% with Manx only labels (Okells & Sons Ltd 2014), illustrating that the situation is not always fixed.

Figure 5. Examples of pump beer labelling, 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 language to indicate authenticity is addressed by Spolsky and Cooper (1991, 84) in their third rule of signs which states that the producer of a beer label will use a language with which consumers may identify, regardless of their level of fluency in it. This was also noted by Blackwood and Tufi (2012) with the use of Corsican in food products branding. 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 encountered at Okell & Sons on the Isle of Man. This shows how the slow Celticisation of alcoholic drinks' labels occurs at different rates in different Celtic national minorities, 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 use of local themes and dialect persist. If the figure of 5,000 speakers of Cornish in Saltern (2011) is correct, it entails that only 0.9% of the population in Cornwall speak their own language. It may be the case that Spolsky and Cooper's (1991) third sign rule is only applicable when a language has a sufficiently high fraction of speakers in a given population. Otherwise, Celticness in this case is projected by other linguistic and semiotic processes such as those used by Okell & Sons on the Isle of Man.

6. Research limitations

The approach to data analysis in this paper is glottocentric, although more comprehensive analytical approaches could have been adopted, such as Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996) multimodal semiotics. The multimodal approach to alcoholic drinks brands analysis would have been more fruitful, however the data available in open access sites are typically incomplete in terms of visual data. Even where label pictures accompany the description and the name, their low-resolution analysis prevents researchers from identifying details, such as small icons or text. There are textual data sources that would enable this analysis, such as illustrated beer guides (Evans 2013; Tierney-Jones 2013; Beaumont and Webb 2014) and whisky bibles (Broom 2014; Murray 2016) or trade magazines from the alcoholic drinks industry. However, online databases have built-in search functions that allow for sub-analyses 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 in future research would involve a multimodal analysis of the visual data sources listed in this section.

7. Conclusions

It is clear that the alcoholic drinks sector in each Celtic national minority is at a different stage of development as regards how language is used as a medium to communicate identity in product labels. However, as has emerged from the data, the 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 say, the sign process indicates that the alcoholic drinks are marketed for exports purposes, as well as for local audiences.

Although one might think that the position of being in a minority linguistic landscape in relation to the omnipresence of English in branding entails a linguistic niche related to an indigenous Celtic language, it appears that the signification of a niche position can be linked to other non-English cultural terrains, such as romance languages or numerical signs. In areas such as Scotland where there is clearly cultural capital to be sourced by drawing on the semiotic landscape, a much clearer relationship between the minority-majority dichotomy can be observed. There are obviously challenges as well as opportunities concerning branding based on minority cultural heritage. By demonstrating the inter-sectoral linkages between tourism, the natural environment, and branding, minority language branding can help sustain these cultures by making them economically viable. Finally, this paper contributes to the existing conceptual, methodological and empirical research in brand semiotics, by offering cultural/linguistic insights in terms of new product development for beverage production companies.

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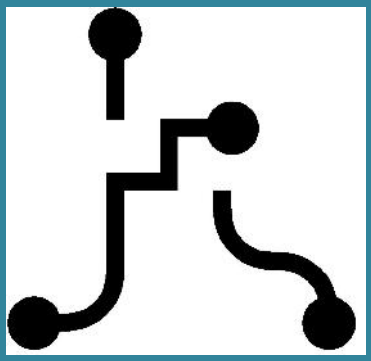

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