

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences

journal homepage: <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/kjss>

How Thai businesses utilize English in their product names

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 April 2016

Received in revised form 6 October 2016

Accepted 7 October 2016

Available online 12 April 2017

Keywords:

brand naming,
code-mixing,
Thai local products

ABSTRACT

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

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Introduction

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

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

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

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Peer review under responsibility of Kasetsart University.

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

One Tambon One Product (OTOP)

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

Table 1
Product level rating

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

Source: Community Development Department (2012)

Significance of the Study

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

Methods

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

Results

Food

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

Table 2
Naming patterns of Thai OTOP food

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

With respect to English language usage in the naming patterns, we found the following:

1. The names use English common nouns to represent the products, such as *Seafood* (fish sauce) and *Container* (ice-cream). These names are sometimes not associated with the product and may lead to customer confusion if they have not seen the package or do not have prior knowledge about the product.
2. The names use English compound nouns, such as *Golden Bee* (honey), *Be Live Rice* (germinated brown rice), *Banana Brand* (Thai jasmine rice), *Diamond Brand* (jasmine rice vinegar), *Nine Tamarind* (dried tamarind), and *Embryo Rice* (multigrain cereal). It is clear that businesses are sometimes relatively limited in terms of English word choice, and the results reveal how English word usage can be influenced by the Thai language, as well as how Thais use English, as evidenced by 'Nine Tamarind.' Thais believe that the number nine which has a similar sound as 'kaao' meaning progress or walking forward in Thai symbolizes prosperity and continuous development; however, having nine pods of tamarind requires the plural form of 'tamarinds' instead of 'tamarind,' according to the rules of standard English grammar.
3. The names use initials such as *SR Rice* (germinated brown rice), *KCF* (Chinese herb boiled egg), *D Food* (soft cake), and *PPC* (aloe vera in syrup). These abbreviations usually stand for product ownership; for instance, the product name 'KCF' originates from the owner's name, 'Kasemchai Farm Group Co., Ltd.'
4. The names include a code-mixing of English and Thai words. The Thai words are usually proper names of a person (anthroponym), product type, or proper name of a place (toponym). For example: *Dahra* (anthroponym) *Crispy Banana Chips*; *Pa Pien* (anthroponym) *Banana*; *Maegate* (anthroponym) *Masaman Curry Paste*; *Phu Chid Fah* (toponym) *Vineyard*, and; *Hom Thong* (type of banana) *Banana*. Most names derived from Thai owners' names usually include kinship terms such as 'pa' (meaning 'aunt'), 'mae' (meaning 'mother'), and 'nong' (meaning 'younger sibling'). Moreover, a toponym is sometimes used in product names; for example, 'Phu Chid Fah Vineyard' is a location in Nakhon Ratchasima, and this proper name represents the origin of the product in order to promote the community where the product is made. 'Hom Thong Banana' is the only product in this category that was named by product type (Hom Thong), which is usually known as 'Cavendish Banana' or 'Gros Michel Banana' in English. These Thai words are mainly comprehensible for Thai customers, but not necessarily for international consumers, although the name is spelled out using the Roman script on the package.
5. The name uses English initials followed by Thai script. 'SP ป๋นศรี' (Chinese dried shredded pork) is the only business name among OTOP food products that utilizes Thai script (indicated by the anthroponym 'ศรี') to represent ownership. The word 'ป๋น' means 'aunt,' so the product name translates to 'SP Aunt Sri' in English.
6. The names include a word which is a modification of an English word in such a way that the new word has no apparent meaning in English. Some examples are

Collargette Capsule (a collagen capsule) and *Algena* (a dietary supplement from spirulina algae). 'Collargette' is modified from the word 'collagen.' Collagen is popular as a dietary supplement in Thailand and there are many product names using the word 'collagen.' We suspect the modification is primarily for brand recognition. This may also be true of 'Algena', which is modified from the word 'algae'. To Thais, the sound of the word 'Algena' might be considered more pleasant than 'algae'. Both examples here are probably unintelligible for those who only hear the name without seeing the actual product.

Drinks

The data comprised 68 business names of Thai OTOP drinks. As Table 3 shows, more than half (54%) of the Thai beverages are named with English or code-mixed names, which is the highest among the studied naming categories of Thai OTOP products. The English words used to represent beverage brands or products are frequently related to 'drinks,' such as 'coffee' (n = 5), 'tea' (n = 9), 'milk' (n = 2), and 'juice' (n = 1). Since these words represent the products, the potential international customer can instantly associate the name with the type of product. These English words are basic enough to be understood by most Thais.

The findings show that Thai OTOP drink names using English have the following naming patterns:

1. The names use basic English common nouns, which are understood locally and globally, such as *Espresso* (roasted coffee) and *Diamond* (juice). From the name 'Espresso,' consumers can easily recognize what type of product they are purchasing. On the other hand, some of the product names do not represent or inform customers as to the type of product they are buying—for example, 'Diamond,' which is the name for OTOP passion fruit juice. This shows that Thai product names in English are sometimes not associated with the products themselves.
2. The names use English compound nouns that frequently contain at least one English word related to the product, such as *Coffee Bun* (coffee), *Coffee Farm* (coffee), and *Big Herb* (herbal tea). Since Thai coffee and tea have such a high potential for export, naming the products with English terms would be a good strategy to ensure that foreign consumers easily recognize the product.
3. The names start with initials, such as *J House* (Malva nut juice) and *A&P Orchard* (mangosteen juice). These abbreviations normally stand for product ownership. For example, 'A&P Orchard' is the brand name for Asia & Pacific Quality Trade Co., Ltd. and A&P are the initials used by the company.

Table 3
Naming patterns of Thai OTOP drinks

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Thai name	32	47.06
English name	13	19.12
Code-mixing	23	33.82
Total	68	100.00

4. The names contain a code-mixing or a hybrid of English and Thai words, usually using a Thai anthroponym or toponym to represent the product along with English words. Some examples are *Doi Saket Coffee* (roasted coffee), *Thamsing Coffee* (instant mixed coffee), *Ko-rach Milk* (milk), and *Jatuphon Thai Tea* (tea). In order to show the product ownership, the product name is usually combined with the product owners' personal names (anthroponym) or the origins of the product (toponym). For example, 'Ko-rach Milk' is from Nakhon Ratchasima, which is usually abbreviated to 'Ko-rach.' Using the Thai toponym with the English word, 'milk,' this product would be easily understandable to customers worldwide, and its name can also promote the product's place of origin.

Clothing and Accessories

As Table 4 shows, the data included 490 business names of Thai OTOP clothing and accessories, of which 458 products (94%) carry entirely Thai names, with only 20 English names, and 11 code-mixed names. The naming patterns found are as follows:

1. Among OTOP clothing and accessory products, only two product names use one single English word—*Messenger* (shoes) and *Tostell* (handbags). Most other products employ English compound nouns in their names, such as *Working Motor* (boots), *Bat Home* (shoes), *Fiber Lotus* (shirts) and *Home Pearl* (pearl necklace). Although some English terms are used to name products, Thai perceptions or beliefs still have a good deal of influence on product name choices. In particular, brand names for shoes are all in English and are linked to the Thai perception of shoes as vehicles that take one to any destination. 'Working Motor' is a good example of this point; it is a brand of shoes made in Thailand, and the product carries the logo of a tractor on the package to emphasize the Thai perception of shoes.
2. Initialism can be seen in the names of products such as *A & B Quilts* (quilt handbags), *KS Leather* (leather handbags), and *K & N Gems* (jewellery). These initials normally stand for product ownership. For example, 'KS Leather' is derived from the product owner's name, 'Kriangsak.'
3. Some clothing and accessories are named using code-mixing of English and Thai words: *Chattong Thai Silk* (silk); *Surin Thai Silk* (silk); *Wijitchareon Handmade Shoes* (shoes), and *Onanong Gold* (jewellery). Usually, the Thai words used to name the product are an anthroponym or toponym to inform the consumer of ownership or the origin of the product. For example, in the case of 'Surin

Thai Silk,' the origin of the product appears in the brand name as 'Surin,' which is a province in Thailand where the product originates. Finally, all Thai proper names appear in Roman script on the products, for example *Wijitchareon* and *Onanong*.

Handicrafts and Ornaments

The data consisted of 70 names of Thai OTOP handicrafts and ornaments. Table 5 shows that over three-quarters (77%) of the product names in this category are in Thai, whereas around only 3 percent are named entirely in English. Those entirely in English use compound nouns. Such names include *Artificial Flower Handmade* (handmade flowers) and *Heritage Art* (carved wood). Twenty per cent of the names are code-mixed or hybrids of English and Thai. Examples are *Pratuang Lacquerware* (lacquerware), *Atchara Design* (decorative egg shells), *Kohkred Earthen Pottery* (pottery), *Aranyik Handcraft* (daggers), and *U-Thong Quilts* (quilts). Once again, we see significant use of Thai anthroponyms and toponyms, and it appears that all such names are written in Roman script, rather than Thai script. For example, 'Kohkred Earthen Pottery' carries the origin of the product in its name. 'Kohkred' is a district in Nonthaburi province, famous for its pottery.

Inedible Herbs

As Table 6 shows, the data comprised 153 Thai OTOP inedible herb product names. Most products (71%) in this category carry Thai names, whereas 21 percent use only English names, and 8 percent have code-mixed names using Thai and English. The observed patterns for product names using English can be summarized as follows:

1. The names use English common nouns such as *Phlegming* (cough syrup) and *Sesame* (body lotion). However, some herb products are named using English anthroponyms, such as *Alice* (goat milk soap) and *Nathan* (whitening serum), which are not necessarily familiar names to Thais but may sound attractive and modern to Thai consumers, and are probably more appealing to the global market than Thai personal names. The origin of the herb product named 'Nathan,' which is pronounced as/nay-thən/in standard English, is not related to the English anthroponym. Instead, the name comes from the Thai expression 'น'ทาหน'ว/naa-taa-naa¹, meaning 'appealing to put on the face.' This particular product name is actually pronounced as/naa-taan/, which is how Thais usually mispronounce the English personal name.
2. The names use at least two English words. Some examples are *Sport Mate* (hair tonic), *Herb Care* (rice milk

Table 4
Naming patterns of Thai OTOP clothing and accessories

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Thai name	458	93.47
English name	21	4.09
Code-mixing	11	2.24
Total	490	100.00

Table 5
Naming patterns of Thai OTOP handicrafts and ornaments

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Thai name	54	77.14
English name	2	2.86
Code-mixing	14	20.00
Total	70	100.00

Table 6
Naming patterns of Thai OTOP inedible herbs

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Thai name	111	72.55
English name	31	20.26
Code-mixing	11	7.19
Total	153	100.00

body scrub), *Quick Step* (toothpaste), and *Modern Way* (herbal shampoo). It appears that these English product names do not particularly promote customer understanding of what the product is. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of these products print the usage descriptions on the packaging.

- The names contain a code-mixing of English and Thai words, which normally use a Thai anthroponym. Examples include *Petchlada Herbs* (silky hair coat) and *Nutcha Spa & Beauty* (rice milk scrub).
- The names use homophones, sharing the same pronunciation, but having different meanings between English and Thai. Examples include *D-Care Soap* (soap), *Coco D* (body lotion), and *D Touch* (detergent). In Thai, 'D' means 'good,' which is pronounced exactly the same as the English letter 'D'/dee/. Using the homophones of the letter 'D' on product names not only sounds international for global markets, but it also reaffirms the products' quality to Thai customers.
- The only herb product name that has deviant spelling is '*Poom Mild*' (potpourri), which is mispronounced as/poom-mai/by native Thai speakers. In fact the Thai script name on the product is pronounced 'poom-mai'. The word 'poom-mai' in Thai means 'bush,' but this product is actually a mixture of dried, naturally fragrant plant materials. Its name is spelled out in Roman script, but the spelling is different from the original pronunciation, presumably using the word 'mild' in order to signify the product quality.

Discussion

Thailand has positioned itself as the 'Food Hub of Asia' and the 'Kitchen of the World' (Murray, 2007). Thus, Thai OTOP food and drink products are no longer aimed solely at local customers, but also at global consumers. Although English is not used as an official or second language in Thailand, the power of English can be seen in Thai product naming patterns. However, the influence of 'Thainess' can still be seen in most Thai OTOP product names. This study demonstrates that Thais are creative in their English usage in order to give the sense of identifying with and belonging to a modern global society.

Not all names used for Thai products are effective. Some are not intelligible to English speakers. In some cases, Thai entrepreneurs violate English grammar rules and use Thai structures instead. For example, some names use a modifier after a noun, as is the case with 'Mineral Water Phetsuwan.' This naming pattern is well understood by Thais. This type of name additionally expresses a culturally specific grammar, as Snodin (2014) also found in her study of

English naming and code-mixing in Thai mass media. It can be said that language creativity can be seen in Thai product naming, yet these names still show 'Thainess' or Thai identity. Lastly, one major problematic area apparent from the data is that several product names are not associated with the type of product, for example, the name *Banana* for rice, *Diamond* for vinegar and passion fruit juice, *Seafood* for fish sauce, *Container* for ice cream, *Sport Mate* for hair tonic, *Working Motor* for shoes.

Conclusion

Language barriers are evident in Thai business naming practices. Some Thai entrepreneurs' lack of English language skills might put them at a disadvantage at the international level. It seems that OTOP manufacturers may not have thought about creating a trademark for their products, unlike other Thai exporters who tend to create short and catchy brand names for their products. If the Thai government sees the high potential for export, as is claimed for these OTOP products, apart from support regarding product development, how Thai entrepreneurs use English in naming their products might be another area that needs support from professional bodies. As Chiarakul (2014) points out, one limitation for Thai entrepreneurs is their English language skills. If Thai entrepreneurs claim that their products are directed toward more international customers and intend to use English as a lingua franca to communicate to their prospective consumers, they should take into consideration how to name their products which possess semantic appropriateness for achieving international intelligibility whilst making the English names unique and reflective of Thai culture. Names are known to be a crucial element for brand communication, and are used as the first tool to convey product information to consumers.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the Department of Foreign Languages, Kasetsart University, Bangkok, Thailand.

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