

Linguistic Analysis of Airbnb's Eleven Registered Chinese Names ——Whether “爱彼迎” Has Advantages among the Others

Introduction

On March 21st of 2017, Airbnb, a company which provides homestay and vacation rental services, acknowledged their Chinese name “爱彼迎”, which touched off a debate. The company stated that they selected this name from over 1000 possibilities according to the pronunciation and company philosophy while the feedback from the public is less positive. Some people hold the opinions that the name “pronounces weird” or even “the pronunciation contains a vulgar implication associated with sex pills” (Chang, 2017). In fact, Airbnb actually registered 11 Chinese names but eventually chose “爱彼迎” as the official one. Our project tries to analyse the characteristic of 11 registered Chinese names from perspective of linguistics and find out whether the chosen one “爱彼迎” has more linguistic advantages.

Data and Method

This project collects Airbnb's 11 registered Chinese names (邀往, 邀世邻, 邀彼邻, 邀由伴, 心启遇, 彼心邻, 爱彼游, 爱彼行, 爱彼心, 爱彼迎, 家在四方) which stand out from initial 1000 alternatives (Tao, 2017). According to Airbnb's official website, these 11 names are fastidiously chosen based on their linguistic pattern.

There are mainly two methods employed in this project. In the first place, a quantitative method is achieved by counting and comparing the frequency of each name's characters so as to look into their characteristics. Apart from that, Chinese language, being different from Indo-European languages, has specific linguistic features which will directly influence branding naming (Chao, 1968). The linguistic components mainly include three parts: phonetically, a brand should be easy to pronounce and pleasant to be heard; morphologically, it should be simple to be seen and memorized; and semantically, it should leave out negative implication and convey a positive connection (Chan & Huang, 1997). So a qualitative method is carried out by analysing the names from the perspective of phonology, morphology and semantics.

Findings and Analysis

1. Phonological Characteristics

Table 1

	Syllable	Tone	Initial	Sihu	Final
邀往	2	T2+T3	0+0	K+H	[au]+[uan]

遨世邻	3	T2+T4+T2	0+[ɕ]+[l]	K+Q+H	[au]+[i]+[in]
遨彼邻	3	T2+T3+T2	0+[p]+[l]	K+Q+H	[au]+[i]+[in]
遨由伴	3	T2+T2+T4	0+0+[p]	K+K+K	[au]+[iou]+[an]
心启遇	3	T1+T3+T4	[ɕ]+[tɕ ^h]+0	H+H+K	[ɕin]+[i]+[y]
彼心邻	3	T3+T1+T2	0+[ɕ]+[l]	H+H+H	[i]+[in]+[in]
爱彼游	3	T4+T3+T2	0+[p]+0	K+H+K	[ai]+[i]+[iou]
爱彼行	3	T4+T3+T2	0+[p]+[ɕ]	K+H+H	[ai]+[i]+[iŋ]
爱彼心	3	T4+T3+T1	0+[p]+[ɕ]	K+H+H	[ai]+[i]+[in]
爱彼迎	3	T4+T3+T2	0+[p]+0	K+H+H	[ai]+[i]+[iŋ]
家在四方	4	T1+T4+T4+T1	0+[p]+0	H+K+H+K	[ai]+[ai]+[i]+[ɑŋ]

T1-55 T2-35 T3-214 T4-51 (Five-intonation notation)

K-Kaikouhu: low-vowel-medial finals

Q-Qichihu: i-medial finals

H-Hekouhu: u-medial finals

1.1. Syllable

A Chinese character has only one syllable, which consists of an initial and a final, while an English word can have more than one syllable. The articulation of Airbnb is [eə bi en bi] and has four syllables. Translating “Airbnb” needs four Chinese characters, but naming of Chinese brands prefers two or three characters. Among the eleven names, only one “家在四方” is made up of four characters. The rest of ten names omit the pronunciation of the second “b[bi]” so as to form a Chinese name with three syllables. Most of them follow Chinese preferable usage pattern of two or three syllables so they are more likely to be read and accepted by Chinese consumers.

1.2. Tone

Tones are related with pitches and distinguished by their intrinsic sonority. The high tones T1 and T2 have higher pitches than T3 and T4. All these 11 Chinese names have at least one high-tone character. Eight of the eleven names end with T1 or T2. For example, “遨[au]” has a high tone with a high pitch so it is more sonorous and more easily to be pronounced, which will play an essential role in advertising.

1.3. Pronunciation

Nine of the eleven registered names begin with a zero-initial Chinese character whose pronunciation is similar to air [eə]. There are five names with “彼[bi]” as the second character, and its pronunciation is similar to the first “b” [bi] in Airbnb. It keeps the phonological characteristics of English name. To cater for the pronunciation of “n” [en] in Airbnb, there are ten names chosen to end with a character which has a nasal. Keeping the phonological characteristics of Airbnb makes the Chinese translation recognizable so as to retain the regular Chinese customers.

1.4. Kaikouhu

Kaikouhu means the final doesn't have a medial and its essential vowel is not [i], [u], and [y] but [a], [o], [e], [ai], [ei], [ao], [ou], [an], [en], [aŋ], [eŋ] and [oŋ]. What's more, [a], [o] and [e] have more openness of the mouth (Li, Chen, & Xie, 1999). As a result, finals belong to Kaikouhu have a lower tongue position and can make the whole syllables more sonorous. Four out of eleven's last syllable have low-vowel-medial finals.

1.5. Initials and Finals

The words have the same initials or finals can make the language readable and fluent, and it is one kind of rhetoric (Zhou, 1984). At least two characters among each eleven name have the same or similar essential vowel. For example, the essential vowels of “彼[pi]”, “心[cin]” and “邻[lin]” are the same. What's more, the end rhyme of “心[cin]” and “邻[lin]” are also the same. Among the eleven ones, the last characters of “爱彼游” and “爱彼迎” have no initials, the medial of “游[iou]” and the essential vowel of “迎[iŋ]” is the same to the final of “彼[pi]”. If read faster, the two will sound like [ai][piou] and [ai][piŋ].

2. Morphological characteristic

English name formation can be flexible and creative through compounding, blending, clipping, etc. As for Airbnb, it is originated from Airbed & Breakfast. The form “airb” is a reduced version of the compounding word “airbed”, with the form “nb”, an abbreviation similar to an acronym (“and breakfast”) added for the brand name Airbnb.

However, Chinese does not have such a freedom in naming. Word formation in the modern Chinese is mainly through compounding, that is, through combining several existing words together (Chan & Huang, 1997). According to Chan and Huang (2001), Chinese usually compounds words from the List of Frequently Used Characters in Modern Chinese to form brand names.

2.1. Usage Frequency

Table 2-1

Character	Times	Usage Frequency(%)	Character	Times	Usage Frequency(%)
彼	6	0.0071	由	1	0.1603
爱	4	0.0505	四	1	0.1110
邀	4	0.0002	世	1	0.0907
心	3	0.2021	往	1	0.0695
邻	3	0.0064	游	1	0.0272
在	1	0.9258	遇	1	0.0155
行	1	0.2496	迎	1	0.0131
家	1	0.2958	伴	1	0.0102
方	1	0.2651	启	1	0.0091

In the above table, the second and fifth columns show the number of times that each word is used in the 11 names, while the third and sixth columns present the usage frequency based on CNCORPUS (2011).

Examined in the List of Frequently Used Characters in Modern Chinese, almost all characters are frequently used words, which have the advantage to be familiarized and advertised within the customers. On the contrary, some characters like “遨”, “彼” and “邻” are not commonly used according to the corpus compared with the rest of characters, which is preferred in the name formation of Airbnb. These words are all bound morphemes and cannot be used independently, such as “遨游”, “彼此”, and “邻居”, which are more widely used than the single words. In this way, these morphemes sound weird when they are not paired with the correct collocation.

2.2. Word Formation

Table 2-2

Grammatical Function	verbal	nominal
Proportion(%)	72.7	27.3

Chan and Huang (1997) concluded that the compounding structure of Chinese brand name should follow the pattern of modifier-noun, that is, the second component of the name is a noun and the first part is a modifier to this noun. Except the phrase “家在四方”, the rest translation versions are all compounding words. However, they do not follow the pattern of modifier-noun. Only the morphemes “心”, “爱”, “邻” and “家” are often used as nouns and most of them appear in the first part of these 11 compounding structures.

Brand names can be classified into verbal, nominal and adjectival function, and nominal words are the majority (Tang, 2011). However, of the eleven names of Airbnb, 72.7% are verbally dominated, with those words containing motion meaning, like “遨”, “遇”, “行”, “游” and “迎” in the latter part of the structure. The high proportion of verbal words make the Chinese names more dynamic, which corresponds with the brand’s idea. Moreover, dynamism that is reflected in the name also contains the company’s good wish for innovation.

3. Semantic characteristic

Apart from the consideration of phonology and morphology, semantic characteristic is another important component that cannot be missed out. Since every morpheme or every character in Chinese has its own meaning items, each name would have a unique connotation (Zhou, 2009). When a customer sees a company name, he would immediately conjure up a semantic association based on his life experience, which may influence his impression of that company positively or negatively. So while naming a company, people prefer a name with meaning corresponding to company philosophy and a positive semantic association. For example, “爱” is a Chinese word that conveys deep love, which reminds consumers of warmth of being at home and the affection between people. In addition to that, the positive meaning of “爱” and the logo of Airbnb which resembles a downward loving heart strengthen an intimate affection within potential customers’ minds. It echoes the theme of the company to provide consumers with loving and comfortable services when travelling and it may arouse potential consumers’ desire.

“爱” is a word that can occur alone, but there are several words that hardly stand on themselves in simplified Chinese. Once they form collocations, they can create friendliness and comfort as “爱” does. For example, “遨” is always in combination with “游”, and the collocation “遨游” means free travelling in vast space without restrictions, which not only

highlights the high-quality service of Airbnb, but also leaves customers a pleasant impression. Apart from “遨”, “邻” also hardly stands alone except with “居” in simplified Chinese, and the combination shows hospitality which is greatly cherished by travelers. The positive image that “邻” embodies makes it possible to attract customers’ attention. “彼” is of no exception since its common usage “彼此” also shortens the spiritual distance between travelers and enables them to be at ease.

In addition to the associated connotation produced by a single Chinese character, the sound of names also renders different implications. For example, Chinese people would easily associate the sound of “彼邻[bi][lin]” with the meaning of a famous line——“天涯若比邻[bi][lin]”, which means “to be with each other as close as neighbors though far apart” since this line has been deeply rooted in Chinese people’s minds. This pronunciation can help build a friendly and reliable image of Airbnb in Chinese customers’ minds, which would be a motivation for customers to choose this company. On the other hand, some connected pronunciations may lead to bad imaginations though each of the characters has no bad implication. In “爱彼迎[ai][bi][in]”, neither “彼[bi]” nor “迎[in]” has a negative meaning, but the connected pronunciation of “彼迎[bi][in]” sounds like “病[bi]”, which means “sickness” in Chinese, giving a bad impression to customers. The same situation also occurs in the case of “遨世邻[au][si][lin]”, which the last two combined characters sounds similar to “失灵[si][lin]” with the meaning of malfunction. People would be influenced unconsciously by this pronunciation and unwilling to choose it.

Conclusion

According to the analysis above, eleven Chinese names possess distinctive features. Phonetically, ten names sound like the English name “Airbnb”. Most choose two or three syllables and end with a high-tone syllable. Four choose Kaikouhu as the last final. Compared to the others, “爱彼迎” ends with Qichihu and may be wrongly read. Morphologically, they all contain frequently used characters; most are verbally dominated; some morphemes are collocated unsuitably. Semantically, most of the names embody words with positive meanings literally and deeply, while some entail negative connotations.

Among them, “爱彼迎” has linguistic advantages. It sounds similar to Airbnb, looks familiar to Chinese and interprets meaningfully. However, it still needs further polish, since awkward pronunciation, inappropriate collocation and negative semantic association may drive customers away.

Based on the shortcomings that “爱彼迎” has in terms of phonology, morphology and semantics, there is a need for companies to construct a linguistic strategy reasonably and thoroughly.

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