



Naming Across Borders: Language, Identity and Strategy in Immigrant-Owned SMEs in South Africa

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Abstract: Objective: This study explores how foreign-owned small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in South Africa use naming practices to navigate complex sociolinguistic terrains. **PriorWork:** While research exists on branding and cultural identity, there is limited literature on naming practices in African and post-migration contexts. This study contributes to that gap by positioning business onomastics as both a cultural and commercial strategy. **Approach:** The study adopts an interpretivist methodology, using qualitative interviews and document review. It proposes that naming practices are not only branding choices but also identity negotiations. **Results:** Findings reveal that 50% of businesses adopted English names, 30% used local South African languages, and 20% retained names from their countries of origin. The predominant motivation for choosing English or local names was to avoid being identified as foreign-owned and to build trust with local consumers. Naming was also described as a symbolic act of “belonging” in the host country, reflecting both emotional and cultural significance. **Implications:** The research highlights the importance of naming practices for branding, identity negotiation, and policy frameworks that support inclusive entrepreneurship. It emphasizes the role of business names in cultural integration and in shaping inclusive business environments. **Value:** This research is particularly relevant in the context of increased migration, cultural integration, and the decolonization of business spaces in post-apartheid South Africa. It calls for more inclusive branding strategies that reflect the diversity of both business owners and their consumer bases

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1. Introduction

Business naming is a critical but often underappreciated element of market entry, branding, and identity formation. In the context of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), particularly those run by immigrant entrepreneurs, naming a business can reflect a complex interplay of personal, cultural, and strategic considerations. Nowhere is this complexity more apparent than in South Africa, a country celebrated for its cultural diversity and linguistic plurality. With the initial eleven official languages (before the inclusion of Sign Language) and a legacy shaped by both colonialism and indigenous heritage, South Africa presents a unique case for exploring how language, identity, and business intersect. Moreover, South Africa is a destination of choice for immigrants who seek employment and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Naming a business in a foreign country must carefully consider how the business name will be received by local consumers. The choice of language—be it English, a local language, or one from the entrepreneur’s country of origin—can influence public perception, market access, and customer trust. While global corporations often rely on professional branding teams to navigate these issues, immigrant-owned SMEs typically approach naming with limited resources and highly personal motivations.

Existing literature has documented the advantages of both global and local branding strategies, highlighting tensions between standardisation and localisation (Schuiling & Kapfere, 2004). However, less attention has been paid to how SMEs, particularly those owned by immigrants, resolve these tensions through naming practices in linguistically diverse environments. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how ten foreign-owned SMEs in South Africa have selected their business names, and how these names function as tools for identity negotiation and market positioning.

Through this inquiry, the study contributes to the growing field of business onomastics and sheds light on the socio-political and economic factors that shape naming decisions in multicultural societies. By focusing on the lived experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs, it provides a grounded understanding of how language and

enterprise intersect in ways that reflect both strategic pragmatism and cultural negotiation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Names and Identity in General

Aldrin (2016) says that the notion that names and identity are closely intertwined has long been seen as self-evident in onomastic literature, and during recent decades, the identity approach has become increasingly popular. However, although a close relationship between name and identity is often stated as a fact, it has not been methodologically proved. One of the main functions of a name is to single out and identify whom/what it refers to. Therefore, naming is always a question of assigning identity. Theories of identity have been widely used and each field of study has developed its own understanding of the concept and its significance for different aspects of human behaviour. Therefore, identity can be defined and used in many different ways. However, a crosscutting issue with most theoretical approaches is the notion that identity is a complex concept, which has aspects that are to some extent contradictory. Depending on how these contradictions are viewed, different theories would emphasise certain aspects of identity over others. When we think about our own identity, we often do this in terms of “who we really are”, which is a deep, personal, and sometimes even mystical sense of one’s self. But, identity is also related to “identification”, that is, how others look upon us and are able to single us out from a group (Joseph, 2004). These two perspectives, the inner personal perspective and the outer “people” perspective of identity, may overlap, but may also stand in sharp contrast. They may influence one another, but are not the same. In onomastic studies, this means that the name-giver, name-carrier, and name-user may hold different views of identities connected to a certain name. It also means that identity seen from the perspective of name-users, and identity seen from the perspective of researchers, are not the same thing. Furthermore, identity contains both an aspect of “sameness” and an aspect of “difference”. We partly identify ourselves and others on the basis of the similarities we see in other people, for example female, young, and foreign. However, we also identify ourselves on the basis of what makes us unique and what differentiates us from those whom we do not want to align with, in terms of for example, personality traits or group membership. Based on this distinction, researchers sometimes differentiate between personal and social identity. Personal identity signifies an individual’s personal and

unique experience of his or her own self in terms of all the individual traits he or she possesses (Edwards, 2009). Social identity focuses on how this sense of self is based on the social relations and social groups that the individual engages in. One complicating factor is that over a life-time and when interacting in different contexts and with different people, our identities tend to change and differentiate. At the same time, it is possible for most of us to perceive ourselves as being one and the same (Edwards, 2009).

2.2. Names in the Context of Language and Identity

Most theoretical approaches acknowledge language as being important for identity creation. Some theories view language primarily as a medium which enables the expression of identity to themselves and to others (Taylor & Spencer, 2004). Other theories claim that identity is actually constituted in language (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). It has even been argued that identity is a major function of language (Joseph, 2004). Regarding names and identity, there is to date no coherent onomastic theory. Some researchers view the relationship between name and identity as primarily symbolic. For example, Vom Bruck and Bodenhorn (2006) see naming as “the recognition, rather than the imposition of personhood”. Other researchers argue that names have a real impact on identity formation and perception. Alford (1988) describes naming as a way to help shape identity. From the perspective of the name-giver, naming can be seen as a communicative act that serves an identity function. From this point of view, the question arises about whose identity is communicated and towards whom it is directed.

The relationship between names and identity can be viewed differently in different cultures of the world. It is also evident that the choice of a name can act as an expression of cultural identities. Several studies have shown that the naming of children among immigrants and couples of “mixed” cultural backgrounds is often handled through mixing names from different cultural spheres in order to create a complex and flexible identity, or through the use of international names (Sue & Telles, 2007). Many immigrants do change their own names on arrival in the new country, or later as a result of, for example, misspellings, mispronunciations, or discrimination based on the name. While it is sometimes taken for granted that name choice in a multicultural environment reflects the degree of cultural assimilation, Bursell (2011) argues that it can also serve other functions, such as a pragmatic passing strategy in order to provide anonymity and facilitate public interaction.

2.3. Names, Perceived Identity and Perceived Legitimacy

Names “in general arouse widely-held images” in terms of positive or negative generalizations about individuals. Another interesting new topic in this area concerns how people may try to avoid such unjust treatment through selective presentation of identity and to what extent such a strategy may also affect their own sense of identity (Kaplan & Fisher, 2009). The semiotics of naming—that is, how names signify meaning and value to the public—has a significant impact on perceived legitimacy. In business, names perceived as “too foreign” may alienate local consumers or invite scrutiny, while names that are overly assimilated may lead to accusations of inauthenticity or cultural erasure (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Thus, naming can be seen as a strategic compromise between visibility and invisibility, familiarity and distinction.

Brand semiotics literature (e.g., Mick, 1986; Kapferer, 2008) also suggests that names carry connotative meanings that affect consumer attitudes. In multicultural markets, consumers may subconsciously associate certain languages or phonetic structures with quality, affordability, or exoticism. This can create incentives for entrepreneurs to rebrand or adapt names to align with desired brand images or mitigate prejudice (Klink, 2001).

2.4. Commercial Names, Corporate Names, and Commodification

Puzey (2016) talks about the linguistic landscape as a wealth of onomastic source material, especially in terms of more transient naming practices, and there is a particular value of the linguistic landscape as a starting point for research into less established names, including commercial names such as those of shops, cafés, and restaurants. In her exploration of company names in Turku, Sjöblom (2008) demonstrates that the meaning of a business name is only partly derived from its linguistic elements. Commercial names draw on a variety of multimodal semiotic resources, with visual, aural, and kinaesthetic modes in addition to the linguistic mode. The business sector is increasingly conscious of the value of these multimodal resources and how to use them (Sjöblom, 2008). Concerning the choice of languages, Edelman (2009) points to the particular problem of classifying names according to language. When a language choice can be identified, it may “convey meanings that are not present in the actual words that the name includes” (Sjöblom, 2008). Languages, for example, may be commodified to suggest fashion or stylishness,

while “global” languages and scripts are frequently used to index notions of cosmopolitanism.

Sjöblom (2016) avers that commercial names are names whose function is to steer the choices of consumers and investors and whose use has economic objectives. An important feature is that there is usually a legal owner of a commercial name who outlines its rights and limitations of use. A typical commercial name refers to a business or to various products, and its purpose is to help the name owner with marketing and sales. This means that the convention when speaking about language and names in marketing research differs from that in linguistics. The varying legislation in different countries also has an impact on terminology. Even personal names can carry, if not monetary, at least symbolic and social capital which can indirectly support a person’s prosperity. After 1994, when South Africa became a full democracy, company and brand names in African languages emerged in addition to previous English and Afrikaans names because there was a need for the black population to raise their economic power (Neethling, 2010).

2.5. The Sociolinguistic Complexity of the South African Market

South Africa presents a uniquely complex linguistic landscape, initially with eleven official languages before the inclusion of Sign Language and comprising a richly diverse cultural population. This multilingual and multicultural environment creates significant challenges for businesses, especially foreign-owned enterprises when selecting brand or business names. Choosing a name that resonates with local consumers, yet remains consistent with global identity, is a strategic balancing act.

South Africa’s branding complexity is exemplified by international marketing adaptations. For instance, Google had to localise its branding strategy to better integrate into the South African context. Similarly, Danone adapted its branding when entering the Chinese market, customising brand names while preserving ties to its global identity. These cases highlight that brand localisation is often essential in multicultural environments and that a “one-size-fits-all” approach is rarely successful (McDonald & Roberts, 1990).

2.6. Global Branding Strategies: Standardisation, Localisation, and Adaptation

Brand naming in international contexts generally follows one of three major strategies: standardisation, localisation, or adaptation (Francis, Schipper & Vincent, 2002). A standardisation strategy seeks to maintain a consistent brand identity across markets, yielding benefits such as cost savings, brand uniformity, and greater brand equity on a global scale (McDonald & Roberts, 1990). Conversely, localisation prioritises alignment with local cultural and linguistic expectations, enabling businesses to better connect with consumers in specific markets. This strategy is particularly relevant in contexts like South Africa, where linguistic sensitivity and cultural nuance can determine customer trust and business success. The adaptation approach represents a hybrid strategy-modifying certain elements of a brand name to address linguistic, legal, or perceptual barriers in a target market while retaining some level of global consistency. As McDonald and Roberts (1990) suggest, marketers often find partial adaptation necessary to achieve greater congruence between the brand and its intended market.

2.7. Language as a Marker of Identity and Strategy

Business names are more than functional identifiers. They are powerful expressions of cultural identity, values, and strategic intent. Hanks et al. (2006) describe names as “badges of cultural identity,” underscoring the symbolic and communicative role they play. Scholars such as Alm (2003), Friedrich (2002), and Jung (2001) further argue that in global and post-colonial contexts, English is often used to signal modernity, sophistication, and economic aspiration. In South Africa, the historical legacy of colonial apartheid and post independence xenophobia reinforces this trend. Many businesses, particularly those owned by foreigners opt for English or Western-sounding names to project legitimacy, reduce perceived foreignness, and appeal to middle-class and urban consumers. This naming behaviour aligns with broader global patterns where English functions as a “prestige language” in commerce.

2.8. Differentiating Large Firms and SMEs in Naming Practices

A growing body of literature highlights stark contrasts between large corporations and small businesses in how they approach naming. Large firms often hire branding experts and follow structured, research-based naming processes (Abimbola & Vallaster, 2007; Berthon et al., 2008). In contrast, small and medium enterprises

(SMEs)—particularly those run by immigrant entrepreneurs—tend to adopt intuitive, experiential, or culturally motivated naming strategies. Naming decisions in SMEs are frequently shaped by personal histories, cultural heritage, and the socio-political environment of the host country. For foreign-owned SMEs in South Africa, adopting English or local names can be a conscious attempt to “blend in,” avoid xenophobic sentiments, or enhance the business’s public image. Thus, naming functions as a strategic and often defensive linguistic act within a competitive and sometimes exclusionary market.

2.9. Systemic and Contextual Barriers to Immigrant Entrepreneurship

Foreign entrepreneurs, particularly those operating in developing countries, encounter a diverse range of challenges that hinder their ability to establish and sustain successful ventures. These obstacles are often rooted in both personal and systemic factors, encompassing social, cultural, economic, and institutional dimensions. One major challenge involves gender-based barriers, particularly affecting female immigrant entrepreneurs. Research shows that women face a combination of internal challenges such as limited self-confidence or business experience and more difficult external barriers, including restricted access to markets, funding, and business networks (Panda, 2018). Cultural and societal norms often discourage women from entering entrepreneurial spaces, framing entrepreneurship as a male-dominated domain. These norms lead to additional hurdles such as managing work-life balance, coping with discrimination, and operating without adequate familial or community support (Rani & Sinha, 2016; Cho, Moon & Bounkhong, 2019). Moreover, many women entrepreneurs in emerging economies lack the necessary education and training, further narrowing their opportunities for growth and success (Cho et al., 2019). Mehtap, Caputo and Pellegrini (2017) highlight how traditional beliefs, particularly in conservative cultural settings, also restrict women’s economic participation, citing Muslim women who face limited access to finance, rigid gender roles, and a heightened fear of failure.

Beyond gender-specific challenges, foreign entrepreneurs in general struggle with structural and institutional barriers. These include high rates of unemployment, language difficulties, unrecognised qualifications, and a lack of relevant work experience in the host country (Aaltonen & Akola, 2012; Gautam, 2020; Basu, 2011). For instance, immigrants in countries like New Zealand often find their

professional credentials undervalued, and language barriers restrict their ability to communicate with clients, suppliers, and government institutions (De Vries, 2012; Omisakin, 2017). These barriers push many immigrants toward self-employment, often out of necessity rather than choice (Gautam, 2020). However, even in self-employment, access to capital—both financial and human—is a persistent issue (Azmat, 2013).

In the South African context, foreign entrepreneurs face a unique and heightened set of challenges. Xenophobia and Afrophobia, directed particularly at African immigrants, remain critical threats. Violent attacks in 2008 and 2015 serve as stark reminders of the dangers immigrant business owners face, with many losing their assets and being forced to close shops or flee for safety (Ngota, Mang'unyi & Rajkaran, 2018; Mothibi, Roelofse & Tshivhase, 2015; Khosa & Kalitanyi, 2014). According to Tevera (2013), such hostility is not only physical but also institutional, manifesting in the exclusion of immigrants from essential services like healthcare, education, and housing. Furthermore, derogatory language such as the term “makwerekwere” used by some locals, reflects deep-rooted prejudice and social exclusion (Zegeye, 2012). Other systemic issues include limited access to local business networks, restrictive government regulations, high crime rates, and a lack of funding opportunities (Skinner & Hunter, 2003; Fatoki, 2014; Muchineripi, Chinyamurindi & Chimucheka, 2019).

In summary, foreign entrepreneurs must navigate a web of interrelated obstacles, from discrimination and social exclusion to institutional deficiencies and economic instability. These barriers not only limit their entrepreneurial potential but also undermine their ability to contribute meaningfully to the host country's economic development.

2.10. Business Onomastics in Migration Contexts: A Research Gap

Despite the evident significance of naming in business identity and market integration, there remains limited academic focus on business onomastics in migration and foreign entrepreneurship contexts, especially within Africa. The experiences of immigrant-owned SMEs navigating linguistic and cultural barriers through naming strategies are underrepresented in existing literature. This study addresses this gap by investigating how foreign-owned SMEs in South Africa use naming to manage identity, access local markets, and negotiate legitimacy. In

multilingual societies like South Africa, name choices carry symbolic and strategic weight. Choosing between English, local languages, or names from one's country of origin can significantly affect customer trust, market positioning, and long-term business sustainability (Inskip, 2004; Berthon et al., 2008).

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist research paradigm, which aligns with the aim of understanding the subjective meanings that entrepreneurs attach to business naming practices in a multicultural and multilingual environment. Interpretivism acknowledges the socially constructed nature of reality and is particularly suited to exploring complex sociolinguistic phenomena such as language, identity, and naming strategies. This philosophical orientation enables a nuanced interpretation of how foreign business owners in South Africa perceive and use naming as a communicative and strategic tool within the sociocultural marketplace.

A qualitative approach was employed to facilitate in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences, cultural background, and personal reasoning behind business naming decisions. This approach allows for rich, descriptive data and the generation of meaning through participants' own narratives. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate given the exploratory nature of the topic and the need to uncover cultural, emotional, and symbolic meanings that may not be observable through quantitative methods. The study utilized a case-based, exploratory research design involving semi-structured interviews with ten purposively selected foreign-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in Johannesburg, South Africa. This design enabled the researchers to develop contextual understanding and trace patterns across multiple cases while maintaining sensitivity to individual and cultural differences. Participants were drawn from diverse sectors such as retail, hospitality, beauty services, and logistics, and represented countries including Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia. This diversity allowed for broader insights into cross-cultural naming practices and their strategic implications.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board by the first author. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the voluntary nature of participation. Anonymity and

confidentiality were guaranteed through pseudonyms and secure data storage. Informed consent was obtained in writing before interviews commenced.

4. Results and Discussions

This study explored the relationship between business naming, identity, and strategic positioning among ten immigrant-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in Johannesburg, South Africa. The research utilized a qualitative interpretivist design, employing semi-structured interviews with 20 open-ended questions. The participants included business owners originally from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, DRC, Pakistan, Ethiopia, and Somalia, all of whom are currently running businesses in urban and peri-urban areas in Johannesburg. The study aimed to investigate the linguistic and cultural dynamics influencing business naming practices and how these choices intersect with identity formation and strategic market considerations. For ethical reasons, the names of the SMEs are not revealed in this discussion.

4.1. Business Naming Patterns and Language Use

An analysis of responses from ten foreign-owned small and medium enterprises (SMEs) operating in South Africa revealed three major trends in business naming practices and these are shown on the table below.

Table 1. Business naming trends

Language category	Number out of 10	Percentage
English	5	50%
South African local (Zulu, SeSotho)	3	30%
Immigrant language (Shona, Swahili)	2	20%

This distribution indicates a strategic leaning toward linguistic assimilation or localization, likely influenced by market considerations.

4.2. Reasons Behind Naming Decisions

From open-ended responses, several themes emerged as highlighted in the table below:

Table 2. Reasons behind naming decisions

Language choice	Reason
English names	The desire for inclusivity and wide market reach Avoiding ethnic or cultural profiling (hidden identities) Perception that English increases customer trust
South African local language names	Cultural respect and local integration A desire to connect emotionally with target market Strategic intent to portray local identity despite immigrant ownership
Immigrant language names	Preserving cultural identity Representing pride in origins

As shown in table 2, SMEs that chose to use English names acknowledged that English provides neutral branding which positions them to operate seamlessly across South Africa's diverse linguistic landscape. This is reflected in the following response from a participant;

Using an English name helped us look more professional and familiar to South African customers.

Another participant who was responding based on South African local names noted that;

We wanted the name to sound local so that people can relate to it and not see us as outsiders.

The least percentage of participants were those who chose to use names that are in their languages of origin. While their reasons gravitated towards cultural pride and preservation, they admitted to challenges in pronunciation and customer confusion which then limited their brand reach. For instance, one participant said;

The name is meaningful back home, but people here find it hard to pronounce or understand, which has affected our recognition.

4.3. Perceived Strategic Impacts

Regarding the strategic role of naming, participants believed their business name gave them a competitive advantage by helping them fit into the local market or signal

trustworthiness. They explicitly considered customer perception and market accessibility when naming the business. 80% of the participants rated the importance of customer understanding of the name as either “very important” or “somewhat important.” Notably, most of those who used local South African or English names linked their decision to strategic positioning and brand accessibility, rather than cultural preservation.

4.4. Naming as a Response to Xenophobia

An important theme that emerged across all naming categories was the perception of xenophobia or foreigner stigma. Several participants who opted for English or local names reported doing so out of concern over being negatively perceived as foreign-owned businesses. Fear of discrimination, suspicion, or reduced patronage were mentioned as factors influencing name selection. Thus, naming serves not only as a brand and identity marker but also as a form of self-protection and social negotiation in a competitive and sometimes exclusionary environment.

4.5. Identity and Brand Conflict

Interestingly, businesses that retained origin-based names expressed strong alignment with personal and cultural identity but reported more branding challenges in the South African context. Conversely, those with localized or English names reported a weaker cultural reflection but better market acceptance.

This tension illustrates a trade-off between cultural expression and business pragmatism. As such, naming decisions were shown to be not only about language preference but also a reflection of branding strategy, market integration, and risk mitigation.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the strategic importance of naming practices among foreign-owned SMEs operating in South Africa. The majority of businesses (50%) opted for English names, while 30% used local South African languages and only 20% retained names from their countries of origin. The most commonly cited reason for selecting English or local names was to avoid being identified as foreign-

owned and to promote better integration with the South African market. Respondents emphasized the importance of customer familiarity, trust, and relatability in influencing naming decisions. This confirms that naming is not just a branding exercise but a deliberate strategic move influenced by cultural sensitivities, market perceptions, and the need for social acceptance. The use of neutral or locally appealing names emerged as a survival strategy to navigate potential xenophobic attitudes and improve market penetration.

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