

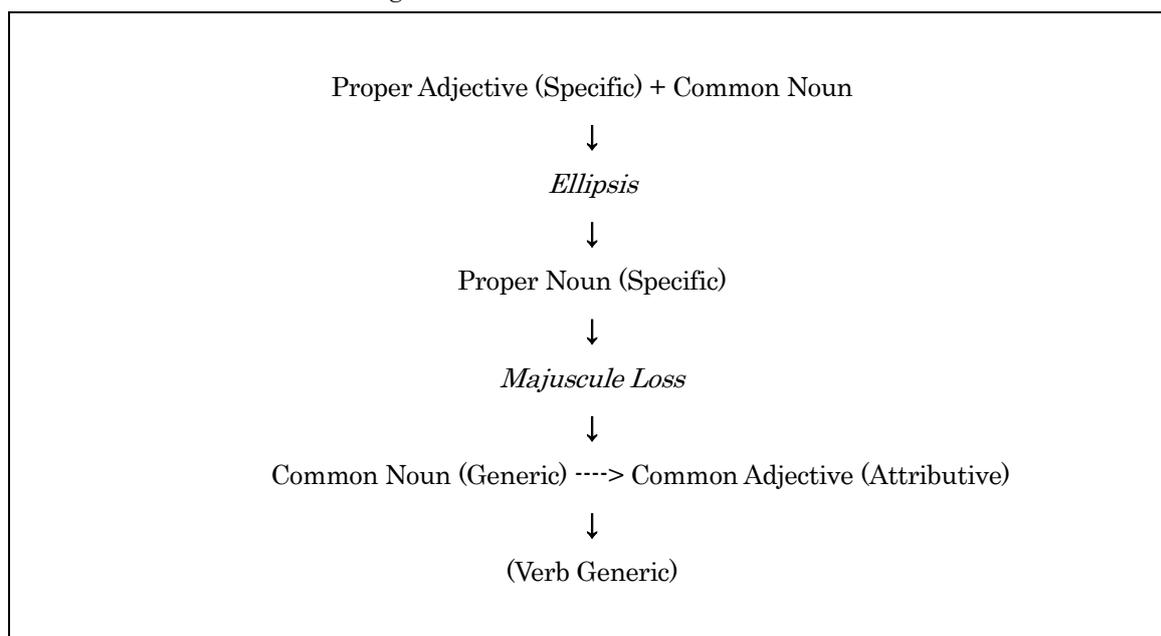
A Revised Analysis on the Significance of Capitalization in Brand Name Words¹⁾

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0. Preliminaries

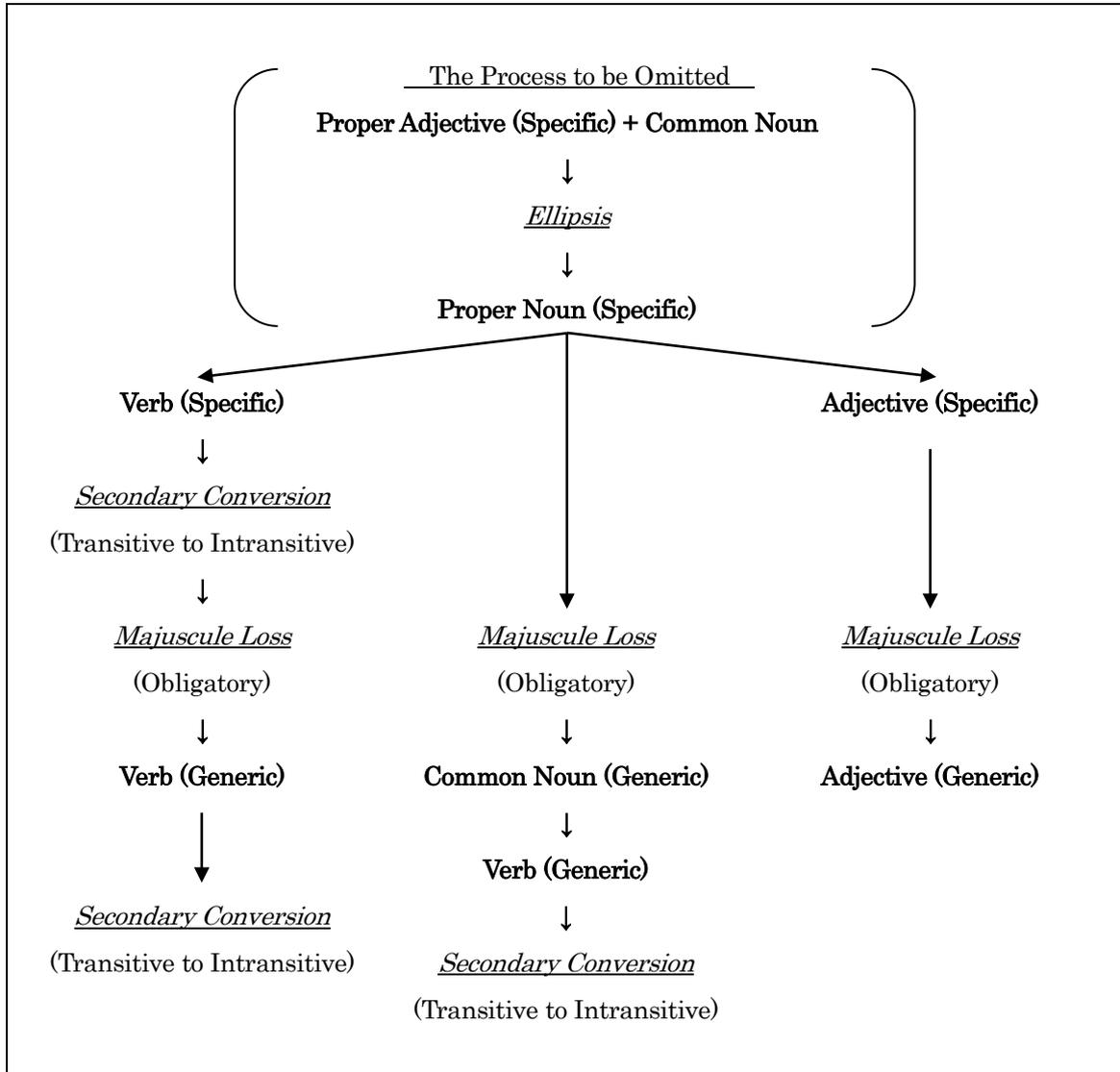
Brand name nouns in American English can be used as common nouns, verbs and sometimes adjectives. The linguistic changes that brand name words go through were first revealed by a theory called “genericization” (Clankie 2002) as in Figure 1. It explains how a brand name changes its part of speech to a common noun, acquiring a generic meaning to represent a group of the same kind of product. The theory also describes possible derivations to verbs and adjectives.

Figure 1: The “Genericization” Process



In Takenaka (2011, 2012), some revisions and modifications have been made to Clankie’s (2002) theory as shown in Figure 2. In creating the new theory to fit possible linguistic changes which have not been investigated in detail yet, the process of “Majuscule Loss” (loss of capitalization) seems significant and also obligatory for brand name nouns to acquire generic meaning.

Figure 2: The Modified “Genericization” Processes



In this paper, the validity of this assumption will be examined first, followed by a presentation of the revised theory of “genericization.” Finally, some problems for further research will also be made clear.

1. The Results of the Fieldwork on the Cases of *Xerox* [xerox], *Hoover* [hoover], and *TiVo* [tivo]

As described in Figure 1, Clankie (2002) presupposes in his theory of the “genericization” processes that “Majuscule Loss” necessarily occurs before the conversion from “Proper Noun (Specific)” into “Common Noun (General).” After that, the further conversion from “Common Noun (General)” into “Verb Generic” is realized. However, some brand name nouns directly undergo the conversion to a verb with its capitalization retained; therefore, Clankie’s theory must be modified in this respect as in Figure 2. Then, what linguistic significance does the

capitalization or “Majuscule Loss” have related to the processes of “genericization”?

In the following section, let us go through the results of the fieldwork concerning the three familiar brand name words (cf. Takenaka, 2011): *Xerox* [*xerox*], whose verbal usage is cited in many dictionaries, *Hoover* [*hoover*], whose verbal usage is also cited in many dictionaries and which has further developed semantically, and *TiVo* [*tivo*], whose verbal usage is generally not cited in dictionaries. Data were collected from 98 people with a wide range of socioeconomic and geographic attributes. Comparing the results of each familiar brand name word obtained from them, we will reconsider the question raised above.

1.1. The Purpose and Methodological Procedure

In the fieldwork, the example sentences of the three brand name words were prepared to verify the following:

When a brand name word is utilized as a noun with an indefinite article or a verb, is there any difference in acceptability between the case with its capitalization and the case without it? In addition, is there any difference in meaning between the two cases? Furthermore, when some additional contextual elements are added and the occurrence of the “genericization” is implied, is there any difference in acceptability between the case with its capitalization and the case without it? Finally, is there any difference in meaning between the two cases?

The following five scales in judgment were set up: (scale 1) wholly natural or quite acceptable, (scale 2) slightly unnatural but acceptable, (scale 3) dubious or marginal, (scale 4) somewhat unnatural or rather unacceptable, and (scale 5) wholly unnatural or unacceptable. As was pointed out in Greenbaum and Quirk (1970:7), we ask the respondents to judge the illustrative sentences not by the alternative choice between “acceptable” and “unacceptable,” but by the gradual criteria below:

As already stated, our techniques aim at exploring all these facets of acceptability, but this is not a matter of whether a form is acceptable or not. Acceptability is gradable and we are concerned with the extent to which a sentence is unacceptable. But of course we also want to know the precise point at which it is unacceptable, and in what respect it is unacceptable.

With regard to research on difference in meaning, we adopted a descriptive way in which respondents are required to write in a semantic statement if any difference in meaning is felt.

The following are the illustrative sentences judged in the questionnaire:

- (1) a. They leased a *Xerox* at a reasonable rate per month.
b. They leased a *xerox* at a reasonable rate per month.
- (2) a. He *Xeroxed* the documents for an afternoon meeting.
b. He *xeroxed* the documents for an afternoon meeting.
- (3) a. He *Xeroxed* the documents with a new Epson printer that has a photocopy function.
b. He *xeroxed* the documents with a new Epson printer that has a photocopy function.
- (4) a. He bought a new *Hoover* to clean up his room.
b. He bought a new *hoover* to clean up his room.
- (5) a. He *Hoovered* up his room.
b. He *hoovered* up his room.
- (6) a. He *Hoovered* his room with a new vacuum cleaner.
b. He *hoovered* his room with a new vacuum cleaner.
- (7) a. He bought a new *TiVo* to record his favorite TV shows.
b. He bought a new *tivo* to record his favorite TV shows.
- (8) a. He *TiVoed* his favorite TV shows.
b. He *tivoed* his favorite TV shows.
- (9) a. He *TiVoed* his favorite TV shows with a new Sony video recorder.
b. He *tivoed* his favorite TV shows with a new Sony video recorder.

The fieldwork was conducted both on the web and in the classroom at Castro Valley High School in the State of California. As for the former fieldwork, the questionnaire was available on the web from September 20th to October 20th in 2011. In this fieldwork, we received cooperation from fifteen adult respondents who varied in their age, occupation, state they were from, and gender. The range of age was from 21 to 72. Their social status included a homemaker, a retired teacher, a college student, graduate students, teachers at high school or university, as well as workers for an industrial corporation. As far as their birth places are concerned, they were from the States of Washington, California, Michigan, Nebraska, New Jersey, Florida, and

Massachusetts. However, we do not expect a regional variation in the data, since the products with brand name nouns are sold across the country and the information about them are shared in the society where the media is fully developed. Men and women respondents were well balanced in number.

On the other hand, the latter fieldwork was carried out on October 3rd, in 2011.²⁾ The questionnaire was given to the target high school students from three different classes on paper and the survey was conducted for about 15 minutes under the supervision of a high school teacher, who explained enough about the purpose of the questionnaire. As for the high school student respondents, they are all sophomores or seniors, aged from 14 to 17. See Table 1 and Table 2, which show the lists of adult respondents and high school student respondents who gave the acceptability judgments and comments on the difference in meaning if any.

In what follows, we will discuss the results obtained from adult respondents in Table 1 first, and then compare them with those from high school student respondents in Table 2.³⁾

Table 1: A List of Adult Respondents

No.	Age	Occupation	State	Gender
1	21	College Student	FL	M
2	24	Student	WA	F
3	26	Student	WA	M
4	26	Office Clerk	WA	M
5	29	Economist	WA	M
6	29	Instructor (University)	MI	F
7	33	Communications manager	CA	F
8	40	Financial industry	CA	M
9	40	Account Manager	NJ	F
10	41	Homemaker	MA	F
11	44	ESL Teacher	MI	F
12	45	Teacher	NE	F
13	46	Teacher	CA	M
14	46	Accountant	CA	F
15	72	Retired ESL director	MI	F

Table 2: A List of High School Student Respondents

No.	Age	School Year	State	Gender
16 - 44	14 - 15	Sophomores	CA	M: 9 F: 18 No Ans.: 1
45 - 98	16 - 17	Seniors	CA	M: 22 F: 42 No Ans.: 4

1.2. The Results of the Fieldwork on *Xerox* [xerox]

First, let us present a list of the responses from all the respondents concerning *Xerox* [xerox] as in Table 3, where SD stands for standard deviation.

Table 3: The Results of *Xerox* [xerox] (Adult Respondents)

No.	(1a)	(1b)	Meaning	(2a)	(2b)	Meaning	(3a)	(3b)	Meaning
1	3	5	same	5	1	same	5	1	same
2	2	3	different	2	3	different	4	2	different
3	3	2	different	3	2	different	4	4	different
4	3	3	different	5	2	same	5	3	same
5	1	3	different	3	2	same	4	2	same
6	2	5	different	1	2	same	2	1	same
7	3	3	same	2	1	same	3	2	same
8	2	4	same	4	3	different	4	4	same
9	1	2	same	1	1	same	1	1	same
10	1	5	same	1	5	same	5	5	same
11	1	5	different	4	1	different	5	5	same
12	2	4	different	3	2	different	4	3	different
13	1	3	different	1	2	different	4	1	different
14	2	2	different	2	2	different	5	5	different
15	1	1	different	3	1	different	3	1	different
Mean	1.9	3.3		2.7	2.0		3.9	2.7	
SD	0.8	1.3		2.0	1.1		1.2	1.6	

Table 4 : The Results of *Xerox* [xerox] (High School Student Respondents)

	(1a)	(1b)	Meaning	(2a)	(2b)	Meaning	(3a)	(3b)	Meaning
Mean	2.0	2.5	same: 55 different: 25 No Ans.: 3	2.7	1.9	same: 55 different: 22 No Ans.: 6	2.8	2.3	same: 56 different: 22 No Ans.: 5
SD	1.2	1.2		1.4	1.2		1.4	1.4	

1.2.1. Acceptability and Difference in Meaning of *Xerox* [xerox]

We will examine the case of the noun usage in *Xerox* [xerox] in Table 3 in detail. The average scores of acceptability were 1.9 for 1a and 3.3 for 1b, respectively and 1a was judged as more acceptable than 1b. We found a significant difference between the scores of acceptability in 1a and 1b ($p < 0.05$). Against our expectation that both sentences would be judged as perfectly

natural, however, four respondents marked unacceptable in 1b. The main reason for the acceptability judgment is that although “a Xerox” with capitalization is normally interpreted as a specific product, “a xerox” is preferably interpreted as a copy made by a photocopier. Thus, it feels strange to refer to the lease of a produced copy as respondent No.6 commented. There was a respondent (No.11) who rejected the interpretation that “a xerox” refers to a photocopier in general, whereas there were other respondents (No.8 and No.9) who showed relatively low acceptability scores in “a xerox” meaning a photocopier. When the expression of “a + brand name word” is heard in colloquial English, “a Xerox” seems to be preferred over “a xerox” in general.

On the other hand, when it comes to acceptability in the verbal usage, the average scores were 2.7 for 2a and 2 for 2b and 2b had higher acceptability scores than 2a in reverse. However, the difference in acceptability is not so great and we didn't find a significant difference here. This result is corresponding to Clankie's prediction that “Mujascule Loss” is obligatory before the conversion into a verb and reveals that a lower case is more common when the verbal use appears in colloquial English. There was a respondent who did not admit the verbal use with a lower case, though admitting that there is no difference in meaning between the two sentences. Special attention should be paid to the fact that the number of respondents who judged the sentences as having no difference in meaning increased in the verbal use even though more respondents find some difference in meaning in the case of noun use (No.4, No.5, No.6).⁴⁾

If the contextual elements which imply the “genericization” process are added, the average score for the example with capitalization becomes 3.9, which shows very low acceptability, compared to the case of the example with a lower case, whose average score is 2.7. Although we found a statistically significant difference between the two average scores ($p < 0.05$), some comments should be added for the result. As for the respondent who rejected both examples, his judgment was based on the wrong assumption that we cannot make a copy with an Epson printer, neglecting the additional description of an Epson printer *with a photocopier function*. On the other hand, we have to be aware of the respondent who admits “genericization” regardless of capitalization or a lower case. (No.6, No.9) With regard to the difference in meaning, it is intriguing that the number of respondents who chose the answer “same” has increased from 7 in 2a and 2b to 9 in 3a and 3b.

Compared to the overall result of the high school student respondents which is all statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), we can find a similar tendency in the judgments of each acceptability as seen in Table 4: They show higher acceptability in the brand name noun with capitalization than the one with a lower case, whereas they show lower acceptability in the brand name verb with capitalization than the one with a lower case. As far as the number of high school students who admit the meaning difference in each pair are concerned, the number of respondents who chose the answer “same” has increased in the case of the verbal use. Thus,

the results of high school students support those of adult respondents, whose population parameter is relatively small.

1.3. The Results of the Fieldwork on *Hoover* [*hoover*]

Similarly, Table 5 and Table 6 show a list of the answers obtained concerning *Hoover* [*hoover*] first as follows:

Table 5: The Results of *Hoover* [*hoover*] (Adult Respondents)

No.	(4a)	(4b)	Meaning	(5a)	(5b)	Meaning	(6a)	(6b)	Meaning
1	1	5	same	5	5	same	5	5	same
2	4	2	different	4	2	different	4	2	different
3	2	1	different	4	4	different	5	5	different
4	1	4	same	5	5	same	5	5	same
5	1	4	same	4	4	same	5	4	same
6	1	3	different	5	5	same	5	5	same
7	2	5	different	5	5	same	5	5	same
8	2	5	same	5	5	same	5	5	same
9	1	2	same	1	1	same	2	1	same
10	1	1	different	5	1	same	5	1	different
11	1	5	different	5	5	same	5	5	same
12	1	4	different	5	5	same	5	5	different
13	1	5	different	5	5	same	5	5	different
14	1	4	different	5	5	different	5	5	different
15	1	3	different	4	4	same	4	4	same
Mean	1.4	3.5		4.5	4.1		4.7	4.1	
SD	0.8	1.5		1.1	1.5		0.8	1.5	

Table 6 : The Results of *Hoover* [*hoover*] (High School Student Respondents)

	(4a)	(4b)	Meaning	(5a)	(5b)	Meaning	(6a)	(6b)	Meaning
Mean	1.9	3.1	same: 44 different: 36 No Ans.: 3	3.7	3.3	same: 54 different: 21 No Ans.: 8	3.8	3.5	same: 54 different: 18 No Ans.: 11
SD	1.4	1.4		1.5	1.6		1.4	1.6	

1.3.1. Acceptability and Difference in Meaning of *Hoover* [*hoover*]

As for the result in Table 5, the acceptability of *Hoover* [*hoover*] became very low except for

the case of noun use with capitalization. The main reason for this is concerned with the problem of register. Indeed, there is a respondent who knows the existence of the product and admits both uses in the United States (No.9), but since this word is preferably utilized in British English or Australian English (cf. *CIDE*, s.v. hoover), the severe judgment was given especially in its verbal use.

The average score for each example was as follows: 1.4 for 4a, 3.5 for 4b, 4.5 for 5a, 4.1 for 5b, 4.7 for 6a, and 4.1 for 6b.⁵⁾ We found a significant difference between 4a and 4b ($p < 0.05$), whereas there were no significant difference between 5a and 5b, and between 6a and 6b. We can see a similar tendency in the meaning difference in the case of *Xerox* [*xerox*]: In the noun use, 10 respondents found a difference in meaning, whereas only 3 respondents recognize the difference in the verbal use. In the case of 6a and 6b, the number of the respondents who recognized the difference in meaning was 6, which is still smaller than that of the noun use. The reaction of respondent No.2 was peculiar in that from 4a to 6b he showed low acceptability in *Hoover* with capitalization but relatively higher acceptability in *hoover* with a lower case. It seems to him that the product *Hoover* itself is not so familiar, though the capitalization helps its interpretation as a brand name word. The reaction of respondent No. 9 also looks exceptional and showed permissive judgments for all examples.

Here, too, the results of high school students in Table 6 showed almost the same tendency as those of adult respondents: In the results of high school students, we found a significant difference between 4a and 4b ($p < 0.05$), but no significant difference between 5a and 5b, and between 6a and 6b. Moreover, a lower case is preferred to capitalization in the verbal use, though the acceptability of both cases is relatively low. As for the meaning difference, 36 respondents judged “different” in the noun use, but only 21 respondents recognized the difference in the verbal use. This result also supported the results of adult respondents.

Although the judgment of *Hoover* [*hoover*] was restricted in American English, this word was one of the representative brand name words that went through all the processes of “genericization” proposed by Clankie (2002), and is widely used in British and Australian English.

1.4. The Results of the Fieldwork on *TiVo* [*tivo*]

As with the other two words, let us summarize the responses for *TiVo* [*tivo*] in Table 7 and Table 8:

Table 7: The Results of *TiVo* [*tivo*] (Adult Respondents)

No.	(7a)	(7b)	Meaning	(8a)	(8b)	Meaning	(9a)	(9b)	Meaning
1	1	5	same	1	3	same	4	4	same
2	2	4	same	2	4	different	4	2	same
3	1	3	same	5	5	same	5	5	same
4	1	3	same	5	5	same	4	5	same
5	1	2	same	2	1	different	2	2	same
6	1	3	different	1	1	same	1	1	same
7	1	2	same	1	1	same	3	3	same
8	2	3	same	2	3	same	3	4	same
9	1	2	same	1	2	same	1	2	same
10	1	5	same	1	1	same	5	1	same
11	1	5	different	4	1	same	5	5	same
12	1	2	different	1	2	different	3	3	different
13	1	5	different	2	4	different	5	5	same
14	1	4	different	1	4	different	5	5	same
15	1	3	same	3	4	same	3	4	different
Mean	1.1	3.4		2.1	2.7		3.5	3.4	
SD	0.4	1.2		1.5	1.5		1.4	1.5	

Table 8: The Results of *TiVo* [*tivo*] (High School Student Respondents)

	(7a)	(7b)	Meaning	(8a)	(8b)	Meaning	(9a)	(9b)	Meaning
Mean	1.7	3.5	same: 51 different: 25 No Ans.: 7	2.4	3.3	same: 56 different: 20 No Ans.: 7	2.8	3.3	same: 53 different: 19 No Ans.: 11
SD	1.3	1.3		1.6	1.5		1.6	1.6	

1.4.1. Acceptability and Difference in Meaning of *TiVo* [*tivo*]

As for adult respondents in Table 7, the average scores of the noun use was 1.1 for 7a and 3.4 for 7b, and 7a was much higher than 7b in acceptability. We found a significant difference between 7a and 7b ($p < 0.05$). However, five respondents did not permit “a tivo” at all. In addition, the respondent No.13 pointed out that *tivo* was old-fashioned and DVR (Digital Video Recorder) should be used in this context.

As far as the verbal use is concerned, the average scores of acceptability were a little lower than those of the noun use: 2.1 for 8a and 2.7 for 8b. The two respondents (No.3 and No.4) never permitted the verbal use at all, whereas the respondent No.11 admitted “tivo” in colloquial

English but rejected *TiVo* with capitalization. As for 9b, the context requires the verb which went through “genericization” in meaning, but for the respondent No.13, *tivo* cannot assume that role and was regarded as unacceptable. Similarly, the respondent correctly grasps the difference in meaning between *TiVo* and *tivo* in the verbal use. However, *tivo* was considered as almost unacceptable because *tivo* didn’t signify an action for No.2.⁶⁾

Finally, the additional contextual elements makes the average scores 3.5 for 9a and 3.4 for 9b and became lower than 8a and 8b. As was already pointed out, *tivo* cannot carry the proper verbal sense for some speakers (No.13), whereas there are respondents who accept both sentences (No. 6 and No. 9). The respondent No.11 mentioned correctly our intended reason for unnaturalness in 9a and feels a semantic clash between two products involved in case of *TiVo* with capitalization. (No.2)

With regard to the results of high school students in Table 8, we found a significant difference in three pairs, respectively ($p < 0.05$). In the verbal use as in 8 and 9, the acceptability of the brand name words with capitalization is higher than that with a lower case. The number of high schools students who judged “different” was decreased in the verbal case. Thus, the results of high school students were corresponding to the results of adult respondents in the case of *Tivo* [*tivo*] as well.

2. Significance of Capitalization and Majuscule Loss in Brand Name Words

Although the responses obtained from the fieldwork varied more greatly than expected owing to the different social backgrounds and linguistic views, we can draw out a general tendency from the results.

As for the noun use, the sequence of “a (n) + N (Brand Name with capitalization)” requires the interpretation that the noun phrase stand for a specific product and as long as the existence of the product is recognized, the phrase makes sense. On the other hand, when the meanings are changed, majuscule loss occurs. Rather than interpretation as a specific product, it will be understood as a class noun progressing in “genericization” or as a common noun which has a derivational meaning depending on the context. However, there are brand name nouns that reject both interpretations when they are used with a lower case, resulting in low acceptability as observed in the results of the fieldwork for some speakers.

A brand name word with capitalization generally represents an action conducted with a specific product as a primary sense in the verbal use. In the case of a verb with a lower case, it focuses on the action itself rather than a meaning of the action with a specific product. Therefore, if additional context which suggests the action with a specific product is introduced, a semantic clash as well as an orthographic clash tends to occur and a verb with a lower case will be preferred if its verbal use is permitted.

However, notice that more people find no meaning difference in the case of *Xerox* [*xerox*] even though they notice some difference in meaning in the noun use. The reason may be that in the verbal use the action is focused on and the meaning of what brand of product they will use will be grasped as a secondary meaning. Furthermore, it should also be noted that compared to the case of the verbal use with capitalization, the verbal use with a lower case is very limited in use, considering the results of the fieldwork on *hoover* and *tivo*. Many people seem to have a resistance for that use.

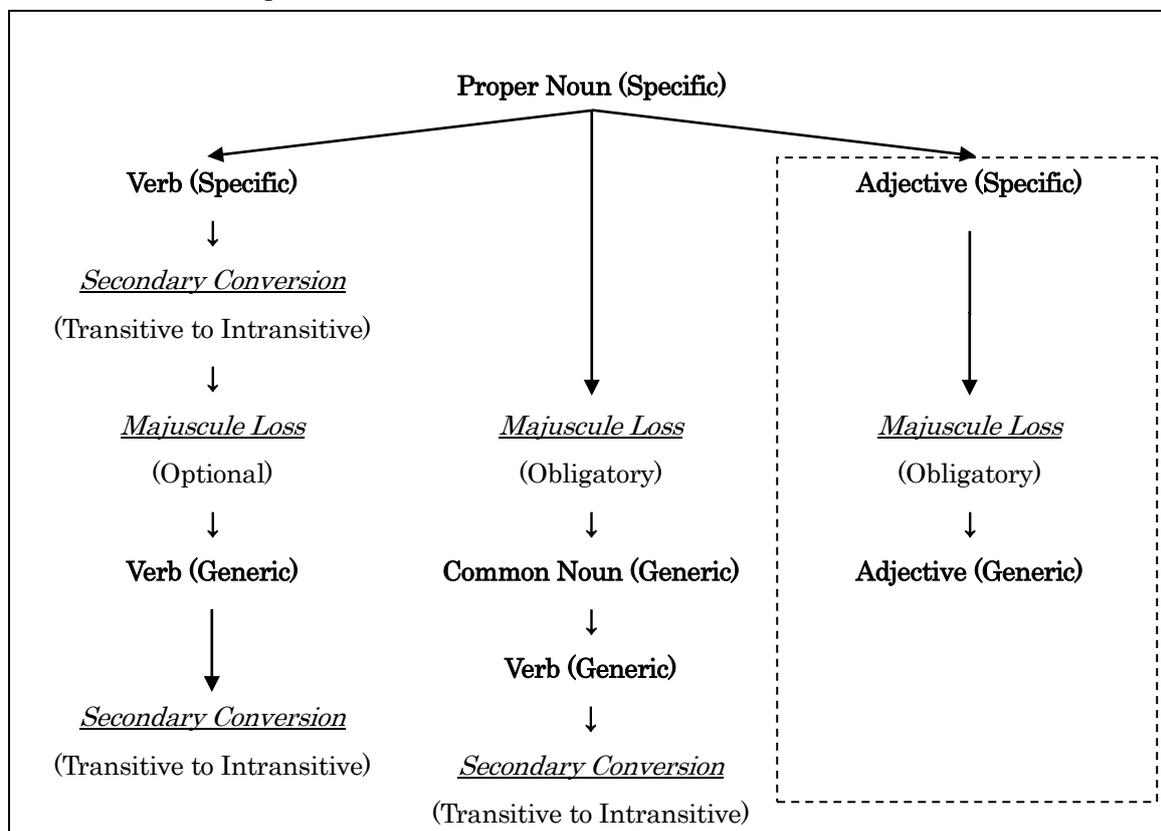
From the above discussions, we may say at least the following three points are essential with regard to the significance of capitalization and its loss in brand name words:

- (10) (i) In the noun use, a brand name word with capitalization implies a specific product and does not signify a general meaning as a class word. On the other hand, a brand name word with a lower case tends to indicate a class noun meaning or other derivational meanings, with the meaning of a specific product fading away.
- (ii) In the case of a brand name word, “Majuscule Loss” is not a prerequisite condition for conversion into a verb. Rather, the conversion happens with its capitalization retained. The meaning of conducting an action with a specific product will be primary, but the part of a specific product is not semantically emphasized because the meaning is focused on the action itself.
- (iii) Few brand name nouns develop their verbal use with a lower case, and many people have a resistance for it.

As point (i) in (10) indicates, it is clear that brand name nouns have to go through majuscule loss when they obtain generic meaning and act as class nouns. However, reflecting the results shown in (ii) and (iii) above, majuscule loss must be set as an optional process in the course of the semantic change from “Verb (Specific)” to “Verb (Generic),” admitting that a verb with a lower case primarily signifies a generic sense. As for the process of conversion to adjective, it is difficult to generalize since its majuscule loss as brand name nouns that go under the process are very rare and lack enough examples to examine. Therefore, this process is surrounded by the dash line in Figure 3 below to show that further research is needed. Considering the few examples presented in Clankie (2002), it seems that majuscule loss is an obligatory process for brand name adjectives to acquire generic meaning [from “Adjective (Specific)” to “Adjective (Generic)”], as they don’t share the same linguistic features as verbs that enable the process “optional.”

Now that the significance of the process “Majuscule Loss” is clear, Figure 2 can be revised as follows (“Majuscule Loss” between “Verb (Specific)” to Verb (Generic) is optional):

Figure 3: The Final Revision of the “Genericization” Process



3. Summary and conclusion

In Clankie (2002), “Majuscule Loss” was just presented as one process in “genericization,” but we have to deliberately deal with how the existence of capitalization or its loss is concerned with the status of grammatical and semantic changes in brand name words along with the consideration of their novelty and popularity. In particular, we have to examine a larger corpus to investigate the conversion into verbal use with capitalization or without it, and make its linguistic status clear.

In conclusion, necessary modifications to his hypotheses are summarized as follows:

- (11) (i) The “genericization” processes should start from the stage of Proper Noun (Specific) rather than that of “Proper Adjectives (Specific)” in linguistic terms. (Cf. Takenaka 2011, 2012)
- (ii) “Majuscule Loss” is an optional, or rather, a selective stage in the processes of

“genericization.”

- (iii) The conversion process to “Common Adjective (Attributive)” is very rare and thus difficult to generalize.
- (iv) There are cases where brand name nouns are directly converted into verbs without going through the process of becoming a common noun.
- (v) With regard to the “genericization” process in the verbal use, the secondary conversion process from a transitive verb to an intransitive verb should be included. (Cf. Takenaka 2012)

Brand name nouns will be a good source of investigation on the linguistic change because most of them are relatively easy to trace back chronologically: We can pursue how brand name nouns are formed and how they change syntactically and semantically along with the diachronic line. The findings from investigations on brand name nouns could be applied to broader linguistic phenomena. Brand name nouns are strongly connected to the cultural and social backgrounds where they are used. It is hoped that the analysis of brand name nouns will contribute to further linguistic and cultural studies of the English language.

Footnotes

- 1) This article is a revised version of Takenaka (2011) and was also submitted to Graduate School of Integrated Arts and Sciences, Hiroshima University in 2012 as a part of the author’s doctoral thesis.
- 2) The fieldwork was carried out on the website and on paper. The latter survey was done in corporation with my former colleague as a special part-time instructor at the Center for Foreign Language Education at Shimane University, Mr. Steven Sheriff, who is a high school teacher in the United States now and gave his students the questionnaire in his classes.
- 3) There are various ways to elicit the potential linguistic competency from native speakers. See Greenbaum and Quirk (1970) for the detailed methodologies.
- 4) However, respondent No.8 made a reverse judgment.
- 5) As for this result, it would not be a valid linguistic piece of evidence because the acceptability itself is very low.
- 6) The answer of respondent No. 15 shows that the verbal use of “tivo” tends to be resisted

in general.

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