

What's in a name?

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Names can provide a clue to a person's background, and with certain names come certain preconceptions. But could a parent's choice of name for their child be influenced by evolution? Scientists from Queen Mary, University of London analysed the most popular baby names from the last decade to decode the link between the sounds in a name and the sex, in a new paper published in the journal *PLOS ONE* today.

They found that male names are far more likely to contain broad, larger sounding vowels that are emphasised when spoken, while female names are smaller sounding in comparison. This effect results in names, such as Thomas or Tom being considered more masculine and more suitable for boys, whereas names such as Emily are considered feminine and given to girls.

"The origins of names may vary but this study suggests that there is an association between the size of the sounds in first names and the sex they are associated with," explains co-author Benjamin Pitcher from Queen Mary's School of Biological and Chemical Sciences.

The data shows that larger sounding names are a popular choice for parents when it comes to naming their sons, who might associate the name size with masculine qualities. In mammals, including humans, deeper sounding vocalisations are typically associated with larger individuals and [high frequencies](#) with smaller ones.

Dr Pitcher adds: "In general, western societies tend to think of relatively taller men as more masculine and more successful with the opposite sex

whereas shorter, slimmer women are perceived as having attractive feminine qualities. It seems that over time the English language has developed a preference for names that reflect our society's attitudes of what we deem to be attractive qualities in the different sexes."

Dr Alex Mesoudi, co-author of the paper and now based at Durham University's Department of Anthropology, adds: "This is an interesting example of how [biological evolution](#) can influence [human culture](#), in this case naming conventions."

The researchers examined a 10-year dataset of the most popular names from England, Australia and the United States, which represents nearly a third of all births during that time period (15 million names from around 45 million births). They used recognised techniques from linguistics to determine whether names contained large or small vowel sounds.

Dr Alan McElligott, also from Queen Mary's School of Biological and [Chemical Sciences](#), said: "An evolutionary perspective might be that parents are choosing names that help to boost their son or daughter's success in life by increasing the chance of passing on their genes. In the future, we are interested in determining whether this gender bias in vowel sounds of first [names](#) is also seen in languages other than English.

Top ten names from 2010 in England and Wales:

Boys:

Oliver
Jack
Harry
Alfie
Charlie
Thomas

William
Joshua
George
James

Girls:

Olivia
Sophie
Emily
Lily
Amelia
Jessica
Ruby
Chloe
Grace
Evie

More information: 'Sex-biased sound symbolism is English-language first names' will be published in the journal PLOS ONE on Wednesday 5 June 2013. The article is available from this link:

[dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0064825](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0064825)

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