

Anne likes Alex but not Bob: what your name really says about you

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Imagine you're on a spaceship with engine trouble. Your captain knows she must land the ship for repairs. The navigator identifies two viable planets that could do the job. Little is known of either, other than the Lamonians inhabit one, and the Grataks the other.

Which to choose?

With no other information to hand, the captain, if she is like most earthlings, is likely to select the former: Lamonia. Apparently, and by virtue of their name alone, Lamonians seem "nicer" than Grataks.

The captain's decision is an example of the effect on our [behaviours](#) of "sound symbolism".

Sound symbolism is a phenomenon whereby the visual, tactile or proprioceptive properties of objects reliably predict the [sound patterns](#) (or phonemes) of the words by which they are described.

The so-called Kiki/Bouba effect is another example. Individuals who must choose between Kiki and Bouba as names for a spiky or rounded figure most often assign to the spiky figure "Kiki". Similar effects have been shown for words relating to glimmer and speed and for size.

Sound symbolism arose, it's been argued, because early languages developed as mechanisms for internalising physical characteristics of the external world. How things look, sound or are otherwise perceived was effectively internalised in the process of developing effective languages.

What is in a name?

Consistent with old-fashioned social roles for each sex, names given to girls tend to sound more decorative or "pretty". Those given to boys tend towards sounding more functional and powerful.

Using English monikers as examples, female names tend to be longer than male names, are more likely to have unstressed/weak initial [syllables](#), and tend to end on a [vowel sound](#). Indeed, female names also typically have more instances of the letter "i" and so contain more vowel sounds generally.

Social roles have, of course, changed. Nonetheless, there is evidence that sound symbolism persists in the names given to kids.

One reliable difference between the sexes is physical size: human female babies are typically smaller than male babies. And, perhaps surprisingly, even when they are the same size as their male counterparts, female babies are perceived as being smaller.

Smallness is captured in words by using high-pitched sounds, of which the most extreme example is the 'ë' phoneme (as in the "y" in "baby"). Real and perceived size differences in babies are reflected in contemporary name choices.

A review of the names registered for babies born in New South Wales for the years from 2001 to 2011 shows the number of different female names containing the 'ë' phoneme exceeded the number of different male names by more than two to one: 46% compared to 22%.

For the same period, the popularity of those female names as a label for new bubs was far greater than the popularity of their male name counterparts: 50% compared to 20%. That is, there were more female names than male names with sounds consistent with smallness and those names were more often given.

That pattern of naming is not new. Of all baby names given in the US for a hundred years, beginning in 1910, the proportion of female names containing the 'ë' phoneme was 40%. For males the proportion was 24%. Just as for New South Wales, those female names containing the high pitched 'ë' were more often chosen than were male names containing 'ë': 40% for females and 15.0% for males.

Your name is important

The impact of name selection extends beyond sound symbolism. Assigned names correlate strongly with a number of life choices and outcomes, a phenomenon known as nominative determinism (of which there are plenty of interesting examples).

One facet of nominative determinism is the name-letter effect: Audrey is more likely to drive an Audi than a Toyota. She is more likely to partner up with either Anna or Anthony than she is with Trudy or Tom. She is more likely to live in Acapulco or Adelaide than Tamworth or Taipei.

The mechanism by which that pattern of choice manifests seems to be associated with self-esteem. Own-name liking is associated with self-liking via unconscious or implicit egotism.

The catch is that the outcomes of implicit egotism are not always positive. For example, no one playing baseball wants to strike out. But those players whose names begin K, the letter indicating a strike-out on a scorecard, are more likely to do exactly that than are their teammates (begging the question: is Larry more likely than his teammates to get bowled LBW?).

Similarly, students whose names begin with an A or a B are more likely to have a higher grade point average than are students whose names begin with C or D! It appears the letters making up our initials can, unconsciously, be so important to us they reduce our need to avoid negative outcomes associated with those letters.

Name selection, it seems, is a high-value human behaviour. Parents beware: if you'd like your kids to be a leader in, say, business, Catherine Elizabeth Olive or Charles Edward Oakley might be a better label than Patricia Anne or Peter Alan.

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