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Effects of Sound Symbolism in Names on Personality Perception

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The Effects of Sound Symbolism in Names on Personality Perception

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Background

Our research study is a conceptual replication of work done by Sidhu, Deschamps, Bourdage, and Pexman (2019).

Sound symbolism is the idea that phonemes in languages are connected with certain qualities (Sidhu & Pexman, 2019). This idea stems from the Maluma-Takete effect that was discovered by Kohler in 1929. In that study, people paired words with no meaning to different types of shapes.

The round sound of “maluma” was paired with round shapes while the sharp sound of “takete” was paired with sharp shapes (Sidhu, Deschamps, Bourdage, & Pexman, 2019). Similar to the round and sharp shapes, we thought that round and sharp sounds in words can also be associated with something that is arbitrary like names.

We believe that certain personality traits of the big five can be associated with names with these round or sharp sounds.

- Sonorants are round sounds like: /n/, /m/, and /l/ (McCormick, Kim, List, & Nygard, 2015).
- Voiceless stops are sharp sounds like: /d/, /g/, /b/, /t/, and /k/ (McCormick, Kim, List, & Nygard, 2015).

Previous studies have shown that people can make fairly accurate judgments of other’s personality traits. Traits can be predicted quite well after only meeting for less than half a minute (Borkenau, Mauer, Riemann, Spinath, & Angleitner, 2004).

With this knowledge we expected people to associate higher levels of extraversion, openness, neuroticism, and masculinity with names with sharp sounds. While names with round sounds would be associated with higher levels of conscientiousness, agreeableness, and femininity. We expected to find a difference between invented and non-invented names. We did not expect to find an interaction.

Method

Participants were 106 undergraduate students (17% male, 83% female)

Participants were randomly assigned to four conditions - invented round, non-invented round, invented sharp, non-invented sharp

Participants were given 5 names that varied by condition and asked to fill out a BFI-10 and BSRI-12 for each name, imagining that person to the best of their ability

- Invented Round names: Maureem, Nula, Romis, Morah, Warrim
- Non-invented Round names: Luna, Laurel, Mona, Noelle, Warren
- Invented Sharp names: Triski, Tekra, Reppi, Seka, Garek
- Non-invented Sharp names: Christie, Petra, Trista, Pippa, Garrett

Given 10 descriptions, high and low for each of the Big 5, and asked to choose the name, round or sharp, that best fit the description

Results

As predicted, we found a significant main effect of sharp sounds vs. round sounds on perception of traits of extraversion, $F(1,102) = 10.55$, $p < .05$.

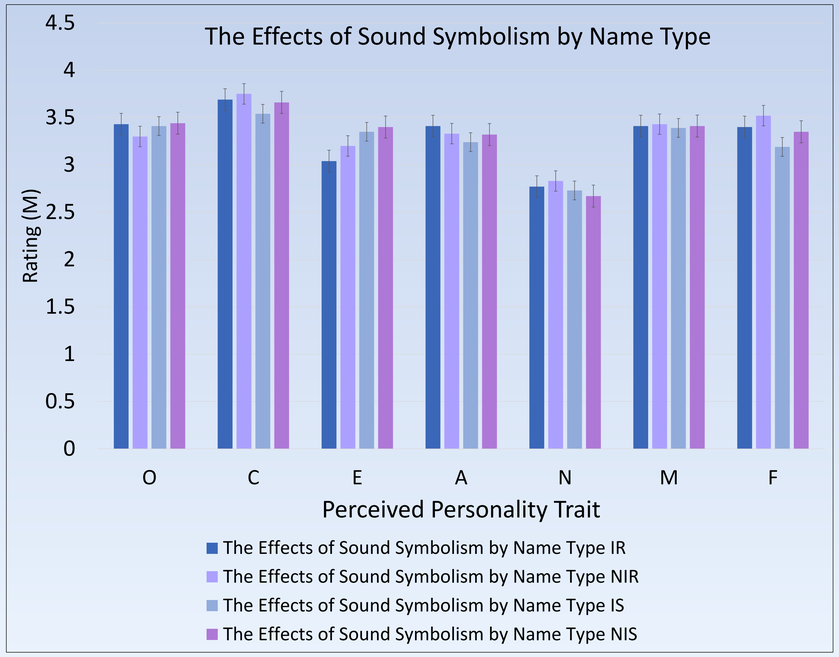
Extraversion scores were significantly higher for sharp sounds ($M = 3.37$, $SD = .39$) than round sounds ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .40$).

As predicted, there was a significant main effect of round sounds ($M = 3.44$, $SD = .35$) on perceptions of traits associated with femininity, $F(1,102) = 6.43$, $p < .05$.

We found a significant main effect of invented names ($M = 3.31$, $SD = .36$) vs. non-invented names ($M = 3.44$, $SD = .36$) on perceived traits of femininity, $F(1,102) = 4.59$, $p < .05$.

Contrary to our hypothesis, we did not find a significant main effect of sharp sounds vs. round sounds on perception of traits of agreeableness, $F(1, 102) = 1.16$, $p > .05$, or on perception of traits of conscientiousness, $F(1, 102) = 1.83$, $p > .05$.

The figure below shows the averages of each of the dependent variables (E, A, C, O, N, M, F) for each condition.



Conclusions

We found that the sharp names scored significantly higher than the round names in Extraversion while round names scored significantly higher than sharp names in Femininity. The non-invented names scored significantly higher than the invented names on Femininity.

The extraversion results confirm the results of previous research done by Sidhu et al. (2019).

The result of Femininity being significantly higher in round names confirms the research done by Sidhu and Pexman (2015) in that round sounds are more associated with feminine characteristics while sharp sounds are more frequently associated with masculine characteristics.

The main effect of name type for Femininity could be explained by the names that were used in the non-invented conditions. Many of the names included in these condition could be considered more feminine names.

One possibility, when looking at this line of research, is that the way the participants pronounced the name in their head affected the way they completed the questionnaire. This idea would be interesting to consider.

This study could also be repeated in the future, using a different variety of names and/or presenting the names in an audio format to ensure uniform pronunciation.

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