“Sounds Feminine” vs. Feminine Sounds: Perceived Iconicity in Gendered Product Names

In the field of marketing, experimental studies of phonetic symbolism have consistently found that respondents associate articulatory contrasts with semantic contrasts. On the basis of early claims about size symbolism in English, this concept has been extended to a wider range of semantic contrasts, including shape, texture, speed, and gender. If true, this has implications about the influence of word choice on perception, and for naming practices. However, can individual phones truly be isolated as the cause of such perceived semantic contrasts? The following study suggests that apparent symbolic patterning may be the result of experimental design, rather than an inherent feature of the language. Phonetic symbolism does exist to varying degrees in language, but spurious claims contribute to a misunderstanding of the distinction between conventionalized and less arbitrary manifestations.

Extant experimental studies on product names have relied on a binary elicitation process; e.g., “Which brand of ketchup seems thicker? Nidax or Nodax?” (Klink, 2000). This design also makes both the semantic and phonetic contrasts explicit, so that respondents may be unconsciously biased. Any claims resulting from such studies are not generalizable to individual phone(me)s. This approach appears to mislabel what Hinton, Nichols, and Ohala (1994) define as “conventional” symbolism (i.e., “the analogical association of certain phonemes and clusters with certain meanings”) to be more akin to the less arbitrary phenomenon of “synesthetic” symbolism (i.e., “the acoustic symbolization of non-acoustic phenomena”).

To determine whether semantic connotations independently correlated with proposed symbolic phones, a two-part survey was distributed to sixty participants. To index the concept of gender without explicitly mentioning it, participants were given the context that the task dealt with marketing hygiene products. The first survey contained nonce words in minimally contrastive triplets (e.g., /ɹɔlen/, /ɹɛlən/, /ɹʌlən/), presented non-consecutively. The second survey included a set of possible names using existing words that included allegedly symbolic phones. In both tasks, the names were presented with images of gendered (or gender-neutral) hygiene product containers, and participants selected their preferred container for the proposed name.

For the first task, there was no significant correlation between proposed symbolic phones and participant preference. For the second task, participants were significantly more successful at categorizing the names on the basis of their semantic meaning than on the basis of their phonetic structure. This supports the hypothesis that apparent symbolic patterning in existing studies may simply be the result of experimental design, and not a part of the structure of the language. The relationship between semantic and phonetic structure cannot be accounted for with a purely synchronic account.

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