

# The relation of name phonology and gender across languages

---

Tanja Ackermann & Christian Zimmer

*Freie Universität zu Berlin*

tanja.ackermann@fu-berlin.de, christian.zimmer@fu-berlin.de

Our study is dedicated to the relation of a first name's phonological structure and the gender of the referent. According to Alford (1988: 66–68), gender is universally the most frequently marked information on names. Gender marking languages are traditionally assigned to one of three types: (i) gender is marked via the semantics of the name, (ii) on the basis of formal means (e.g. suffixes), or (iii) because there are separate inventories. In the latter case, gender is associated with a name by convention. However, phonology also seems to play an important role. Studies on English (cf., e.g., Cassidy, Kelly & Sharoni 1999) and German (cf., e.g., Oelkers 2003, Nübling 2009) – languages which are usually assigned to type (iii) – have shown in detail that female and male names show significantly different phonological structures. Female names in those languages, for example, have more syllables and tend to show a vocalic final sound, while male names are shorter on average and more often have a non-vocalic final sound. To date there has been little agreement on how these findings relate to the concepts of iconicity and phono semantics. In our study, we compare the relation of gender and the phonological structures of names across different cultures/languages. By doing so, we hope to shed some new light on the presumed iconicity in the proprial domain: Are there language/culture-overarching similarities between names of a specific gender or are correlations of name structure and gender language/culture specific? Are there correlations at all in languages/cultures which have not yet been examined in this respect? Which phonological properties indicate (at least by tendency) gender? Are there such properties in languages which mark gender semantically or formally (apart from, e.g., the suffix)? In order to tackle the outlined questions we analysed a sample of popular first names from linguistically rather disparate countries: China, France, Germany, Hungary, Japan, Russia and Turkey. Our results indicate that there are some language-overarching similarities between names used for people of the same gender. However, these correlations are rather weak. Thus, our findings support the idea that we are not dealing with language universal iconic means but rather with conventional sound symbolism (cf. Hinton, Nichols & Ohala 1994).

**References:** • Alford, R. D. 1988. *Naming and identity: A cross-cultural study of personal naming practices*. New Haven: HRAF Press. • Cassidy, K. W., M. H. Kelly & L. J. Sharoni. 1999. Inferring gender from name phonology. *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 128. 362–381. • Hinton, L., J. Nichols & J. J. Ohala. 1994. Introduction: Sound-symbolic processes. In L. Hinton, J. Nichols & J. J. Ohala (eds.), *Sound symbolism*, 1–12. Cambridge: CUP. • Nübling, D. 2009. Von *Monika* zu *Mia*, von *Norbert* zu *Noah*: Zur Androgynisierung der Rufnamen seit 1945 auf prosodisch-phonologischer Ebene. *Beiträge zur Namenforschung* 44. 67–110. • Oelkers, S. 2003. *Naming gender. Empirische Untersuchungen zur phonologischen Struktur von Vornamen im Deutschen*. Frankfurt am Main: Lang.