

The Effect of Sound Symbolism on Gender Cues For New Brand Names

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1. Introduction and Background

Sound symbolism refers to a direct link between sound and meaning.

A classic example by Edward Sapir (1929):

- English speakers tend to pair certain vowels with certain sizes according to some phonetic dimensions.
- mal* = large table *mil* = small table

Vowels are identified by three articulatory features:

(A) Height

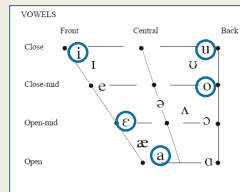
High: [i] as in *beat*
 Low: [a] as in *ball*

(B) Backness

Front: [ɛ] as *bet*
 Back: [o] as in *boat*

(C) Roundedness:

[u] as in *boot*



Sound symbolism and marketing (Klink 2000; Yorkston and Menon 2004):

- Brand name selection has become important
- There is a front-back vowel distinction, and front vowels considered more feminine
- Little research has been done on how consonants affect the images of brand productions

In addition to retesting vowels, this study focuses on the following features of consonants:

(A) Manner of Articulation

Stops: [t], [d]

Fricatives: [s], [z]

Sonorants: [r], [n]

(B) Voicing: [t, s] vs. [d, z]

[Place of articulation is controlled—we used alveolars]

Why Gender?

- Very salient product feature
- Strong contrast can be contained in a single product, e.g. hygiene products

2. Experimental Design

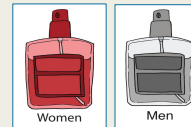
The stimuli consisted of 60 disyllabic nonce words:

- Syllable construction = CVCV
- Consonant kept same in both positions [t, d, s, z, n, r]
- First vowel position has 2 conditions [ɛ, i]
- Second vowel position has 5 conditions [a, ɛ, i, o, u]
- Recorded by 2 native English speakers (male, female)
- Pitch and amplitude made uniform via resynthesis

Examples: [tɛtɛ], [zizo], [mimu]

Trial: new brand name judgment

- Presented with one audio token
- Forced-choice option between masculine vs. feminine product
- Four generic images of hygiene products used (fragrance, body wash, razors, deodorant)



Listeners: 27 native speakers of English

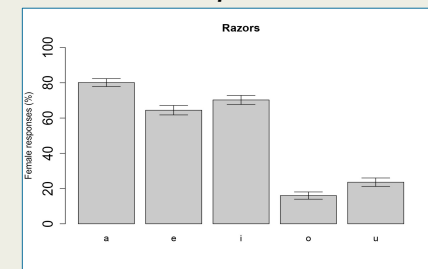
3. Hypothesis

The hypotheses were as follows:

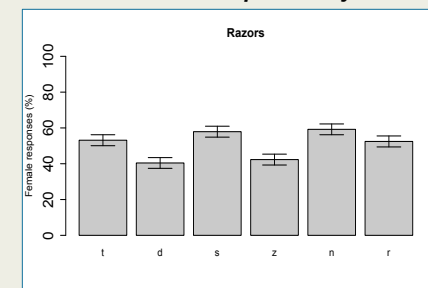
- Front vowels are considered more feminine...
- Consonants may follow Sonority Hierarchy, where stops < fricatives < sonorants < vowels
- Voiced obstruents = males (Wright et al. 2005)

4. Results

Percent feminine responses for consonants



Percent feminine responses by vowels



Sound symbolism can be applied to the creation of new brand names, which is valuable in an already crowded marketplace.

Questions to ponder about...

- Can this result be expanded to other product features?
- Are there combinatory or interactive effects within words?
- Are there optimal candidates for certain product features?
- How does sound symbolism affect brand memorability?

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