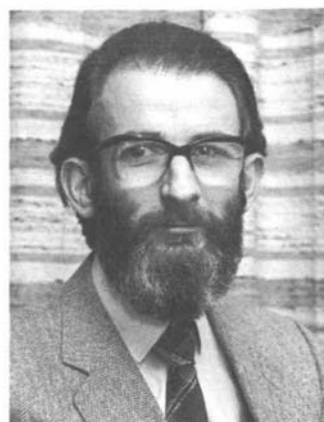


What's in a name, Bob?

DAVID CRYSTAL considers the differences in the sound structures of first names for women and men



In a famous episode of the Rowan Atkinson *Blackadder* television series, Atkinson and his colleagues are in a First World War forward dugout. A young subaltern arrives on the scene – she is an attractive woman, but pretending (for reasons which we need not worry about here) to be a man. Blackadder, responding to the lady's evident charms, calls her, ostentatiously, 'Bob'. Whenever he uses this name, he says it emphatically, with protruding lips for the vowel and a clipped articulation for the consonants. It causes a loud audience laugh. It's a good joke.

But why? What is so funny about *Bob*?

Some interesting recent research by a team from the MRC Applied Psychology Unit at Cambridge sheds some light on this kind of question.¹ What they've done is analyse the sound structure of a large number of first names, and found some interesting differences between men and women. It seems the sexes do not sound the same. The claims are of course limited by the size of their sample – 1,667 entries taken from a dictionary of English first names – but the claims they make can easily be checked against our intuitions, and they seem very plausible:

○ Female first names tend to be longer than males, in terms of the number of syllables they contain. Males are much more likely to have a monosyllabic first name (*Bob, Jim, Fred, Frank, John*), and much less likely to have a name of three or more syllables (*Christopher, Nicholas*). By contrast, there are few monosyllabic female names in the list (*Ann, Joan, May*), and many of them are trisyllabic or more (*Katherine, Elizabeth, Amanda, Victoria*).

○ 95% of male names have a first syllable which is strongly stressed, whereas only 75% of female names show this pattern. It is not difficult to think of female names which begin with an unstressed syllable (*Patricia, Eliza-*

beth, Amanda, Rebecca, Michelle), but male names are few and far between (*Jerome, Demetrius*). In fact, none of the popular British male names in top-20 lists from the past 75 years has had an unstressed initial syllable – and only three American names.

○ The stressed syllables of female names tend to make much more use of the high front vowel /i/, such as *Lisa, Tina, Celia, Maxine*, and the archetypal *Fifi* and *Mirni*. Male names in /i/ are far less common (*Steve, Keith, Peter*).

○ Female pet names tend to be longer than male. A bisyllabic pet name could be either male or female, but a monosyllabic one is much more likely to be male. *Jackie* could be either sex, but *Jack* is male. Several other pairs share this expectancy, such as *Bill/Billie* and *Bob/Bobbie*.

○ Female names are much more likely to end in a (spoken) vowel, as with *Linda*,

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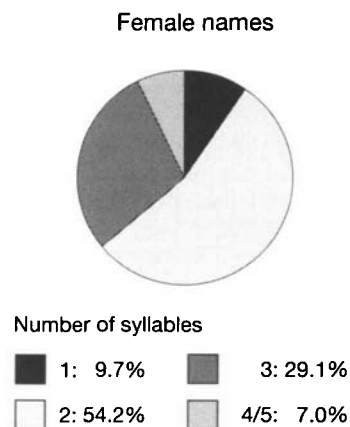
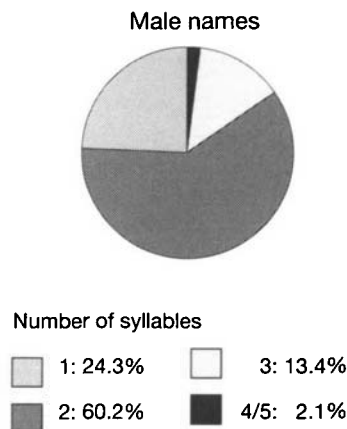
Tracey, Patricia, Deborah, Mary, Barbara. If not a vowel, the last sound will very likely be a continuant, especially a nasal (*Jean, Kathleen, Sharon, Ann*). By contrast, plosives are much more likely to be found in male endings (*Bob, David, Dick, Jock*). Interesting comparative questions arise. Is *Kate* more male-sounding than *Kath* or *Katie* or *Katherine*? Nothing is more likely to generate controversy.

It is of course difficult, perhaps impossible, to explain these trends. Could the sound-symbolic associations of /i/, such as smallness and brightness, explain the bias of that vowel? Can we relate the trend towards use of an initial stressed syllable to greater masculine aggressiveness? One thing is sure: it is much more difficult to generalize safely about female names. Popular male names are used much more predictably. There are several male names which have appeared on every list of the top 20 names in recent times (e.g. *John, David*), but no one female name appears on all lists. People are much readier to be inventive and different with female names.

Whatever the explanations, it would appear that a name such as *Sabrina* is as clear-cut a 'feminine' name as we are likely to find: it has more than two syllables, an unstressed first syllable, and a strong /i/ vowel. Another example is *Christine*, judged by men to be the most sexy female name, in one US survey. The /i/ vowel seems particularly salient. Is this why the British satirical TV programme *Spitting Image* advised its listeners to 'pretend your name is Keith' (in *The Chicken Song*, Virgin Records, 1986)?

But there is no doubt, now, why Blackadder is made to call his young friend *Bob*. It is, phonologically speaking, one of the most 'masculine' names that exist in English. Its very inappropriateness makes it potentially funny. And more than potentially, too, if the laughter of the audience is anything to go by. □

Proportions of male names and female names with one, two, three and four/five syllables.



Note

- 1 Anne Cutler, James McQueen & Ken Robinson, Elizabeth and John: sound patterns of men's and women's names, *Journal of Linguistics* 26 (2), 1990, 471–82.