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The Role of Sound Symbolism on Trans+ Individuals' Preferred Names:

Challenging Binary Gender Cis-tem

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Language cannot be undermined as just a communication tool. Its role in identity construction is particularly evident in the realm of personal names, where names hold great significance. Gender information is the most salient aspect of names (Alford,1988). As societal understanding of gender has evolved, more people explore and affirm their gender identities outside the cis-centered binary norms. For many trans+, choosing a new name represents a crucial step in their journey of self-discovery and self-actualization. These names are carefully selected to reflect their authentic selves and express their gender identities. Focusing on the preferred names of trans+ individuals, the researcher delves into the intriguing field of sound symbolism.

Phonetic elements can carry meaning or evoke specific associations beyond their literal definitions (Sapir, 1929). Some correlations between certain phonological features of names and the gender of the name bearer have been claimed (Cutler et al., 1990; Cassidy et al., 1999; Ackermann & Zimmer; 2021). While explaining such correlations, the scholars have obtained different perspectives: conventional sound symbolism and synesthetic sound symbolism. Cassidy et al. (1999) claim that the correlations between phonological features and gender are language-specific and psychologically arbitrary. Similarly, Nübling (2018) argues against the existence of gendered sounds universally, as such associations are created by convention. On the other side, Oelkers (2003) argues that there is a non-arbitrary relationship between the phonetic properties of names and gender.

Using the data, consisting of the preferred names of 46 trans women and 70 trans men from Turkey, the researcher aims to test the previously claimed correlations between gender and phonological features (the number of syllables, the number of names as segments, the sonority of the initial sound, the sonority of the final sound, the average sonority, and the number of non-palatal vowels). Secondly, the data of this study also include the names of 85 non-binary or agender individuals (NBA). NBA's preferences related to their names might provide novice insights into the discussions on gender and sound symbolism in the literature.

The main findings of the research are as follows:

-As trans men's and women's preferred names are more likely to consist of two names, the number of syllables in NBAs' preferred names is lower.

-The sonority of the initial sound is not associated with gender in Turkish.

-There are correlations between binary transgenders and the average sonority of names/sonority final sound. NBAs' preferred names reflect their gender identity by aligning with men thanks to low average sonority and aligning with women thanks to the high sonority of the final sound.

-The names of trans+ individuals lack significant differences in the number of non-palatal sounds. This implies that the association between genders and (non)palatal vowels depends on the association of size with genders. As trans+ individuals do not associate body size with gender, their preferred names lack a correlation between genders and (non)palatal vowels. Consequently, this research provides evidence in favor of conventional sound symbolism.

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