

## Why Chloe sounds so pretty, and Jack so butch

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If you heard that a friend had had a baby, and that they had named the baby ‘Manella’, we reckon that you and the vast majority of people in our British English-speaking culture would assume that the baby was a girl. If your friend told you that they had acquired a puppy with the name of ‘Drock’, we reckon that you would assume that the puppy was male.

There is something about the sound of a name that suggests femininity or masculinity. But it is a cultural thing, and people from a different culture may well interpret the sound of names quite differently. And within our culture it is also a fashion thing, with a general tendency for girls’ names to be ‘in’ for a generation, but ‘out’ in the next.

If we compare the present top 50 names for boys and girls, we can see what they have in common, and also what is distinctive, and of course it is the distinctives that will give us a clue about what makes a name sound more feminine than masculine.

The first thing to note is that most names have two syllables: 65% in fact – 35 of the girls’ names, and 30 of the boys’. But what is then noticeable is that of the other 15 girls’ names, only 4 have a single syllable – and two of these are recognizable words, *Grace* and *Jade*. But there are 10 boys’ names with just a single syllable, so a single syllable seems to favour a sense of masculinity.

48 of the 50 boys’ names have a strong first syllable, like *THOMas*: the only exceptions are two traditional names *AlexANDer* and *MoHAMmed*. 7 girls’ names begin with a weak

syllable, like *ReBECCA* and *NaTASHA*, so there is just a hint there too of a sense of femininity.

But much more noticeable is the ratio of consonants and vowels. There is a rough average of 3 consonants per boy's name, but only 2 per girl's name. And there are more vowels in the girls' names than in the boys' names.

Of course, we have to be careful here that we are talking about spoken consonants and vowels, not spelling. There are three spoken consonants, for instance, in *Thomas* (t, m, s) and only two in *Chloe* (c, l); the h's in both cases don't 'count' in speech. And there is only one vowel pronounced in *James* and only two in *Sophie*; the e's in both cases are silent.

It is also noticeable where the consonants and vowels occur. Only 7 of the 50 boys' names begin with a vowel and they include several traditional names like *Oliver*, *Alex(ander)*, *Adam* and *Aaron*; and only 12 boys' names end in a vowel sound, like *Joshua*, *Jamie*, *Charlie* and *Bradley*, and linguists point out that the r at the end of names like *Oliver*, *Alexander* and *Connor* is not actually pronounced by most people in UK – otherwise there would only be 7.

But girls have vowels everywhere. 16 of their names begin with a vowel, and – this is perhaps the most distinctive factor – 35 (ie 70%!) end with a vowel.

And does it matter what vowels they are? Oh yes! 38% of girls' names have the sounds 'ee', i and e in their strongest syllable (*Mia*, *Olivia*, *Emily*) whereas only 18% of the boys' names. They both like a and 'ay' (*Hannah*, *Amy*, and *Jack* and *Jamie*), and all the other vowels are much less common.

As for consonants, all these – l, m, n, r, ‘c’ – feature in both boys’ and girls’ names, but boys have many more d’s (Daniel, David, Adam, Dylan, Bradley and Brandon) and j’s (Joshua, James, Joseph, George, Jake, Jordan, Jamie, Jacob, Joe, Benjamin) than the girls do. And only boys’ names in the top 50 have w (William, Lewis, Owen, Edward).

So boys’ names tend to be shorter, with a strong syllable at the beginning and have plenty of consonants at the beginning and end, especially d, j and w.

And girls’ names

- tend to be longer
- often have a weak syllable at the beginning
- have a high ratio of vowels
- especially ‘ee’, i and e

and tend to

- end in a vowel
- end in a weak syllable

Now why?

There has been a strong tendency in our linguistic culture – lasting well over 1,000 years – to associate small dainty and bright things with the vowels ‘ee’ and i. Think of *chicks* and *snippets*, *slim* and *nimble*, *glint* and *bleep*; and even new words like *chic* and *niche*. This is by no means an invariable rule as words like *big* and *thick* show, but there has nevertheless been a strong, long-lasting association between these vowels and smallness. (Compare *tick* with *tock*, and *flip* with *flop*, and *jingle* with *jangle*.)

There has also been a long-standing tradition – again in our linguistic culture – of adding a weak syllable with y (or ie) to make something sound smaller, cuter, more friendly, more homely. Think of *piggy*, *pussy* and *horsey*; presents become ‘*prezzies*’; a nice helpful person is a ‘*sweetie*’. Bob is a man, Bobby is more likely to be a boy, and Bobbie might even be a girl.

Vowels themselves are gentler sounds to produce than most consonants. Consonants tend to interrupt or interfere with breath passing through the mouth; make a p, or a s, or a j to feel this. And then compare them with the smooth, longer, production of any vowel; try ‘oo’, a, and ‘aye’. Some consonants share some of these long, smooth vowel-like qualities, like l, m, n, r and that is probably why these four consonants appear most often in names – they sound rather gentle and comforting.

When you add up these cultural and phonetic observations, they support the general impression of girls’ names being prettier, daintier and cuter than the short ‘butch’ boys’ names.

It just so happens that those feminine features tie in with British people’s notions of what words sound the most beautiful. Professor David Crystal examined a few popular lists of what people thought were the most beautiful words in the language, words like *melody*, *velvet*, *tranquil*, *lullaby*, *mellow*, *murmur*, *mellifluous* and *gossamer*. In a recent BBC Radio 4 Today survey, *serendipity* was voted the nation’s favourite word. There can be no doubt that semantics plays a major role in these impressionistic evaluations – all these words have some kind of positive, even soothing, quality in their meaning – but also the sounds of the word were felt to make a positive contribution to this sense of loveliness too.

The sound elements of these words, known as the study of phonaesthetics, are very similar to girls' names: if you want to produce a beautiful word, it must

- have at least two syllables – best to have three or more
- have a strong first syllable, but not absolutely necessary, it could have a weak syllable first
- have a relatively high vowel to consonant ratio
- have vowels like 'ee', i, e, a and 'ay'
- have consonants like l, m, n, r, k

So girls' names actually sound more beautiful to us. And boys' names? Who wants a boy with a beautiful name? Much better to have a strong name – one syllable, two at the most, strong at the beginning and plenty of consonants that are tough on the passage of breath in the mouth.

A writer to The Guardian (Letters 17.5.2002) lamented the loss of 'simple, manly names' like Stan, Roy and Eric in our footballers' names and seemed to wince at the arrival of Peggy at Liverpool, and Lilian at Man United. He could have included Arsenal's Lauren and Ipswich's Venus. The writer, of course, was wrong in at least three ways; you shouldn't compare first names with family names; you shouldn't compare British names with foreign names – as we said at the beginning, this is a cultural thing; and thirdly, Roy, Stan and Eric have disappeared from the list of popular names anyway – Roy and Eric dropped out of the top 100 boys' names in the 1960s, Stan in the 1950s!

But it was a bit of fun to apply the girls' name features to present Premiership names and find pretty names like Vieira, Pires, Kanu, Edu, and Thierry (Henry) alongside Lauren for

Arsenal, and Anelka, Hyypia, Riise and Litmanen alongside Peguy for Liverpool – the two top teams in the country! Man Utd are going to need more than Lilian and May to keep up with them! (Another Guardian reader (Letters, 25.5.2002) suggested new recruits to the cleaning ladies XI: Eadie, Flo, May, Peguy, Lilian, Marian (Pahars) .....).

But there is a more serious angle to this. Thousands of pounds are spent on researching new names of products that will appeal to the public – and these names have got to sound good. The Brand Institute based in Miami has a couple of basic rules: go for two, or at most, three syllables, and no more than ten letters. They gave us Relenza and Lipitor, which conform to the ‘phonaesthetic’ table above (see What’s got 10 letters, three syllables and costs up to £100,000, The Guardian, 11.1.2000). If you had flu, you are sure to prefer something called Relenza to take for it, than something like Grunk – even if you felt pretty ‘grunky’ yourself.

We wanted to test this general hypothesis of feminine sounding names further. We gathered together nearly two hundred names that had been made up for characters in video and computer games, science fiction, films and comics and we could see immediately that the vast majority of female characters had names that corresponded to the feminine pattern of sounds; and likewise, the male characters tended to have short, ‘strong’ names with plenty of consonants. Their creators knew what to do, but there were a few odd cases. (I expected Kimhari to be female, but he is a male in Final Fantasy!) One consistently different feature was the use of a common noun for a character; that tended to spoil the general pattern, just like Grace and Jade do in the list of girls’ names.

But we wanted to test this further, to investigate how young people interpreted these names for gender – they are the target audience for all these entertainment games, after all. Debbie

selected 25 male and 25 female names for characters, mixed them up and asked 148 students to indicate whether they thought each of the 50 names was for a male or a female character. And they had very definite ideas; there were only 35 don't knows in the 7,400 response items.

Table 2 shows these responses arranged by proportions of femininity. There seem to be three discernible groups: 1-17 have more than a 2 to 1 majority in favour of femininity; a small group 18-25 where opinions are fairly evenly divided; and a large group 26-50 with a 2 to 1 majority in favour of masculinity.

In the top 17, there are 14 constructed names and three common nouns (*Jubilee*, *Glory* and *Cloud*). 12 of the 14 constructed names have three syllables or more; not one of them is a monosyllable. No less than 6 of them (43%) have the vowels 'ee', i and e; 13 of them end with a vowel, in a weak syllable. And there are very few of the more typical boyish consonants (d, j and w). *Jubilee* and *Glory* fit the general pattern too. *Cloud* is the odd one out. It was intended to represent a male character in Final Fantasy, but nearly 70% of the students interpreted it semantically. We suspect that for most people, the word *cloud* conjures up white, light, fluffy entities scudding happily across a pleasant blue sky – a pretty image.

In the bottom 25, only 3 names had more than 3 syllables (*Raziel*, *Garentex* and *Adelbert*) – a staggering 88% had only one or two syllables. 92% began with a strong syllable, the 2 exceptions being *Zidane* and *Garentex*. There are very few cases of the vowels 'ee', i and e in constructed male names. 4 common nouns had the i vowel (*Link*, *Trick*, *Switch* and *Din*), leaving just 2 cases in constructed names (*Brin* and *Krit*). Consonants outnumber vowels by

nearly 2 to 1. 22 of the 25 names began with a consonant, 17 end with one – excluding the r which Americans would tend, of course, to pronounce – otherwise the figure would rise to 22 again.

And the middle section contains eight names which had features from both sides. *Aeris* and *Elian* obviously sounded pretty feminine as they were supposed to do; *Syl* is too short for a girl, but has got the i vowel. *Cyan* doesn't have a feminine-sounding vowel, but does have an equal proportion of vowels and consonants. *Taki* has a k which was a good deal more common with the top 50 boys' names than with the girls' names. *Storm* is the most ambiguous; intended for a female character in X-Men, but interpreted semantically by almost half as a male. (What boy wants a girl called *Storm*?). *Amarant* and *Venetri* are male characters, but the choice and number of vowels misled nearly half in their interpretations; maybe *Amarant* sounded too like *amorous* and *amaryllis* to be masculine enough.

The evidence is there in the actual choice, last year, of names for our children; in the rise and fall of name popularity; in the creation of names in our entertainment genres; in young people's interpretations of those names, and older people's impressions of foreign footballers' surnames, that we British English-speaking people have a strong collective consciousness of what sounds masculine and what sounds feminine.

It perhaps explains why *Christopher* and *Timothy* are losing their appeal, but *Tyler* and *Louis* are gaining – shorter and without those feminine-sounding vowels. And why pretty names like *Mia*, *Erin* and *Millie* are gaining popularity, but *Susan* and *Ruth* are not. But fashions change; after all, *Susan* was the most popular throughout the 50s and 60s, followed closely by *Julie*. But that was when the 'oo's were in! And even though the 'ee's and i's and e's are in



now, *Rita, Vera, Belinda, Gillian* and *Beryl* are out. Yes, fashion can be hard for a couple of generations, but kind again later for great grandma's nostalgically classy names like *Charlotte, Lucy* and *Amy*.

Today's fashion also favours new American imports like *Lauren, Georgia, Courtney* and *Paige* for girls, and even for boys too: *Jake, Ethan, Jordan*. Celtic names are in favour too: *Caitlin, Erin* and *Niamh* (Neve for the Americans!) for girls, and *Callum, Ryan, Liam, Cameron, Connor*, and more, for the boys. Greek and Latin names for girls are in: *Chloe* and *Zoe; Jessica, Olivia* and *Amelia*, but they're on their way out for boys: *Alexander* is dropping (though *Alex* is holding its own); *Dominic, Jason, Anthony, Marcus, Gregory* are all gradually losing their appeal.

And it is girls' names that change with fashion rather than boys' names. Only one girl's name has remained consistently popular – in the top 50 – in 50 years, *Elizabeth*; but no less than 16 boys' names have remained in *their* top 50.

It seems when we come to choose names – quite apart from any specific family considerations – we tend to conform to prevailing fashions: classy names from Edwardian and Victorian days, modern American, traditional Celtic and exotic, classical Mediterranean names for girls; and traditional, stable, Biblical names, but also modern American and Celtic names for boys. But above all, they've got to *sound* right – and there appears to be a national British consciousness of what sounds pretty and what sounds butch.

**Table 1**  
**Top 50 boys' and girls' names in England and Wales in 2001**

	<b>Boys</b>		<b>Girls</b>
1	Jack	1	Chloe
2	Thomas	2	Emily
3	Joshua	3	Megan
4	James	4	Jessica
5	Daniel	5	Sophie
6	Harry	6	Lauren
7	Samuel	7	Charlotte
8	Joseph	8	Hannah
9	Matthew	9	Olivia
10	Lewis	10	Lucy
11	Luke	11	Ellie
12	Oliver	12	Amy
13	William	13	Katie
14	Benjamin	14	Georgia
15	Callum	15	Rebecca
16	George	16	Molly
17	Adam	17	Bethany
18	Ryan	18	Emma
19	Jake	19	Holly
20	Alexander	20	Ella
21	Ethan	21	Caitlin
22	Liam	22	Abigail
23	Cameron	23	Grace
24	Connor	24	Jade
25	Jordan	25	Mia
26	Mohammed	26	Shannon
27	Jamie	27	Eleanor
28	Dylan	28	Alice
29	Nathan	29	Jasmine
30	Jacob	30	Courtney
31	Ben	31	Leah
32	Charlie	32	Amelia
33	Michael	33	Elizabeth
34	Kieran	34	Anna
35	Max	35	Amber
36	Bradley	36	Lily
37	Brandon	37	Laura
38	Owen	38	Sarah
39	Louis	39	Rachel
40	Aaron	40	Phoebe
41	Tyler	41	Erin
42	Kyle	42	Millie
43	Reece	43	Zoe
44	Edward	44	Abbie

45	Alex	45	Nicole
46	David	46	Paige
47	Robert	47	Niamh
48	Harrison	48	Daisy
49	Christopher	49	Natasha
50	Joe	50	Alexandra

**Table 2**

No	Name	Interpreted as		Undecided	Intended Gender	Source
		Female	Male			
1	Saphia	148	0	0	F	Andromeda
2	Sophitia	148	0	0	F	Soul Blade
3	Alixia	144	4	0	F	Star Trek Voyager
4	Anaesthesia	144	4	0	F	Nowhere
5	Tiama	143	5	0	F	Andromeda
6	Tifa	141	6	1	F	Final Fantasy
7	Lillias	140	8	0	F	Star Trek Voyager
8	Edea	139	9	0	F	Final Fantasy
9	Denara	138	9	1	F	Star Trek Voyager
10	Jubilee	138	10	0	F	X-Men
11	Anyanka	134	14	0	F	Buffy
12	Olma	128	20	0	F	Andromeda
13	Glory	124	22	2	F	Buffy
14	Kimhari	115	33	0	M	Final Fantasy
15	Rinoa	111	37	0	F	Final Fantasy
16	Ursari	106	41	1	M	Andromeda
17	Cloud	105	42	1	M	Final Fantasy
18	Aeris	95	50	3	F	Final Fantasy
19	Elian	92	55	1	F	Star Trek Voyager
20	Syl	87	60	1	F	Dark Angel
21	Cyan	80	66	2	M	Final Fantasy
22	Taki	77	69	2	F	Soul Blade
23	Storm	76	71	1	F	X-men
24	Amarant	69	76	3	M	Final Fantasy
25	Venetri	65	82	1	M	Andromeda
26	Setzer	48	99	1	M	Final Fantasy
27	Seifer	46	101	1	M	Final Fantasy
28	Shadow	45	100	3	M	American Gods
29	Raziel	45	103	0	M	Devil May Cry
30	Tyr	45	103	0	M	Andromeda
31	Trance	37	109	2	F	Andromeda
32	Squall	31	117	0	M	Final Fantasy
33	Link	30	118	0	M	Zelda
34	Trick	29	118	1	M	Buffy
35	Switch	24	123	1	F	The Matrix
36	Brin	24	124	0	F	Dark Angel
37	Gau	17	130	1	M	Final Fantasy
38	Krit	17	131	0	M	Dark Angel
39	Zidane	15	132	11	M	Final Fantasy
40	Havok	10	137	0	M	X-Men
41	Auron	10	138	0	M	Final Fantasy
42	Halfrek	10	138	0	F	Buffy
43	Din	9	138	1	F	Zelda
44	Adelbert	9	139	0	M	Soul Blade

45	Voldo	9	139	0	M	Final Fantasy
46	Dozer	8	140	0	M	The Matrix
47	Apoc	6	142	0	M	The Matrix
48	Garentex	5	143	0	M	Andromeda
49	Brexos	1	145	2	M	Andromeda
50	Rafer	1	147	0	M	Dark Angel