Sound symbolism of gender in Korean personal names

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The conventional perspective of modern linguistics is that language generally adheres to the Saussurean dictum of *the arbitrariness of the sign*, i.e., the relationship between form and meaning in language is arbitrary and there is no inherent connection between the meaning of a word and the sounds that make up that word (de Saussure 1916). For example, *dog* (English), and *aso* (Tagalog) both mean 'dog', but they use very different sounds. Such combinatorial use of abstract symbols is considered a central property of human language that makes it so successful as a communication system. There are exceptions, like onomatopoeia (e.g. *woof*), but they are generally considered minor curiosities rather than a topic worthy of serious investigation. Recently, however, a growing body of research demonstrates that a nonarbitrary connection between sound and meaning in language is more pervasive than previously assumed and may facilitate language acquisition. Some of the attested connections are ***iconic*** in nature— namely, the sound and the meaning are connected by perceptuomotor analogies and transcend the specifics of individual languages—while other sound-meaning connections are accidental statistical tendencies particular to specific languages or arise from culture-specific social meanings, with no expectations for cross-linguistic generalizability.

Studies on English personal names find that male and female names are marked by different phonological traits. Some of these sound~gender connections follow patterns attributable to sound symbolic grounding, where a perceptuo-motoric analogy (e.g., high front vowel ~ small vs. low back vowel ~ large) make certain sound~meaning associations more accessible, while other sound~gender connections are arbitrary with no apparent sound symbolic grounds (e.g., longer names ~ more female). In this talk, we report on our studies on the phonology of gender in personal names in Korean based on top 2,000 names between 2008 and 2020 in the national name registry, and compare the results against the cross-linguistic tendencies and variation. We explore how language-specific phonological patterns —in particular, the dark vs. light vowels of Korean sound symbolic patterns – interact with the cross-linguistic tendencies of vowel-based sound symbolism.