

Sound Symbolism in Pokémon Names

Summer Term 2020 • Laboratory Phonology
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Background and Research Question

Fundamental: „Words denoting or connoting SMALL or SMALLNESS (and related notions) tend to [contain] vowels and/or consonants characterized by high acoustic frequency. Words denoting or connoting LARGE use segments with low acoustic frequency.“ (Ohala 1994:335)

Newman 1933: experiment showed that participants use certain patterns in naming large versus small objects

Pokémon: fictional creatures one can collect and battle with; became famous in the late 90s; highest-grossing media franchise ever
→ Kawahara et al. 2018: number of voiced obstruents in Japanese Pokémon names correlates positively with size and weight of the corresponding Pokémon (each Pokémon has an official height and weight)

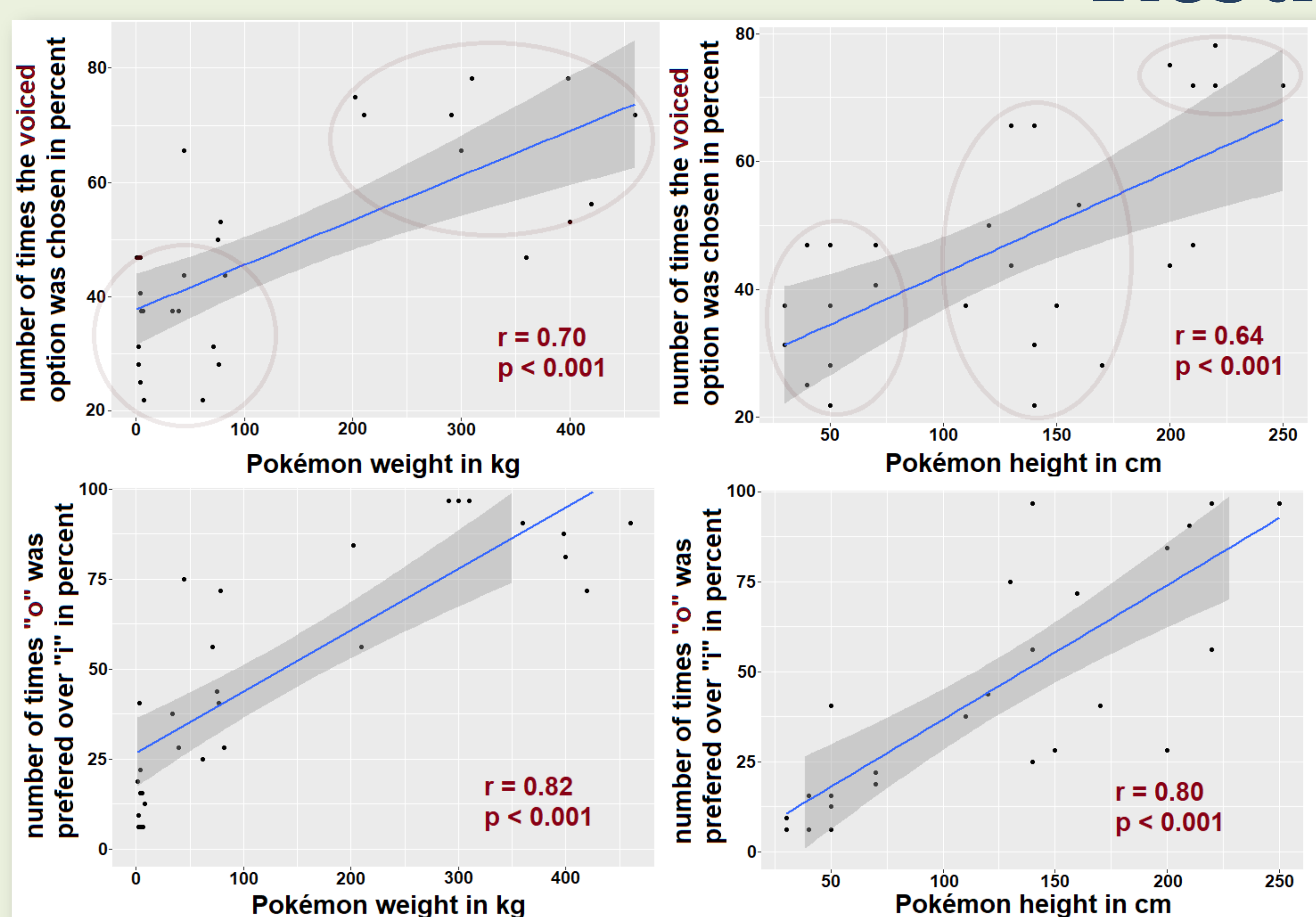
Research Question: Does this finding hold for Pokémon names chosen by German participants?

Methodology

- **Hypothesis:** voiced obstruents and the vowel /o/ get assigned to taller and heavier Pokémon while voiceless obstruents and the vowel /i/ get assigned to smaller and lighter Pokémon
- Online Experiment with SoSciSurvey:
Participants were shown a picture of a Pokémon and were told to give it a name for a fantasy language by choosing one of the two alternatives available to them.
- 2 different answer options: 3 syllables: CVCVCV vs. CVCVCV | CVCVCV vs. CVCVCV:
consonant condition: vowel remains constant (Topoto vs. Dobodo)
vowel condition: voicing of consonants remains constant (Tolowo vs. Tiliwi)
- Pretest: Background knowledge on Pokémon
- 64 participants: 38 female, 26 male; age: 18-55, median: 23
- 8 different questionnaires to get sufficient amount of answers for all consonants / vowel options on all 30 Pokémon



Results



- Hypothesis confirmed
- Moderate positive correlation: height / weight → voiced obstruent option
- Stronger positive correlation: height / weight → "o"-option
- Some evident tendencies for medium-sized Pokémon in both directions
- Background knowledge of participants had no significant influence on the results

Interpretation and Outlook

- Voiced obstruents are associated with largeness and heaviness while the voiceless are associated with the opposite
- The vowel /o/ is associated with largeness and heaviness while /i/ is associated with the opposite
- There must be other visual properties that are linked with certain phonemes
- How would the results look like if participants were to choose more freely (= produce their own names?)
- Which other visual properties trigger certain sound symbolic patterns?