



# What better for Breakfast than trochaic PC



**Paul Warren**

**WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE**

**I**N HER television review column for the *Listener*, Diana Wichtel wondered whether the new *Breakfast* show lineup of Petra Bagust and Corin Dann would become known as Petra and Corin or Corin and Petra.

A few years ago some colleagues and I ran a study of people's preferences in ordering pairs of names. We were particularly interested in any preferences that related to some of the speech sounds in the names as well as their rhythmic patterns.

Our study was based on previous research in the United States, but we included respondents from New Zealand, Britain, and Singapore. We gave people printed sheets with pairs of names (these could be both male, both female, or a female name followed by a male name, or a male name followed by a female name). They had to put the names into sentence frames such as "\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ went to the park", using whatever order they preferred for each pair.

A leading factor in how we order the names of pairs of people we know is which member of a pair we knew first. I refer to my brother and his wife as Mark and Ali, not Ali and Mark. How a couple is introduced to us might also be important, and might reflect the introducer's own links to the couple. I might expect my friends also to refer to Mark and Ali, though Ali's sisters' friends probably know them as Ali and Mark.

Although our participants probably gave some responses that were based on previous encounters with people with the names we chose, we hoped that such

effects would be random and not as important as the factors we were interested in.

Our study showed that names that end with more open sounds were more likely to come second. So if one name ended in a consonant and the other in a vowel, then the one ending in a vowel came second, as in "Pam and Kay".

Similarly, if both names ended in consonants then the one with the more open consonant came second as in "Jack and Bruce" and "Pat and Sam" rather than "Bruce and Jack" and "Sam and Pat". This preference for the second word in a pair to finish with a more open sound is also found in many collocations like "black and blue" or "up and down". There are exceptions, like "down and out."

Rhythm provided one of strongest effects. If a pair had a single-syllable name (Mike) and a two-syllable name with stress on the first syllable (Robert), then the preferred order was "Mike and Robert" rather than "Robert and Mike".

The first order results in an alternating DAH-dit-DAH-dit trochaic rhythm, whereas the second has DAH-dit-dit-DAH. Other research has shown that the preferred rhythmic pattern in the major varieties of English is for an alternation of strong and weak syllables, as in "Mike and Robert".

Interestingly, our Singapore English speakers showed a smaller influence of this preferred rhythmic pattern than the other speakers.

This ties in with other research that has shown that in Singapore English the



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contrast between weak and strong syllables is less marked and trochaic rhythm less strongly preferred than in other varieties.

When the names in our study clearly indicated different sexes, then there was an overall preference for a male name to be followed by a female name rather than the other way round.

This preference was very marked for the Singapore English speakers, but less so for both the British and New Zealand English speakers, suggesting that the latter may be influenced a little more by political correctness.

On the basis of the overall findings for the New Zealand English speakers in our study, our prediction would be that the

*Breakfast* hosts will become known as Corin and Petra (the male name first, and a more open final sound in the second word).

However, I'd put a bob each way, as I suspect the final vowel in Petra might get elided, giving "Petr'and Corin", with a trochaic rhythmic pattern and a politically correct female-first order.

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