

The Specificity of Non-Arbitrary Sound-to-Meaning Correspondences in Spoken Language

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Abstract: Sound symbolism, or non-arbitrary correspondences between the sound of a word and its meaning, is an inherent property of natural language. Although previous research suggests that listeners are sensitive to sound-to-meaning correspondences, little is known about the specificity of these mappings. The present study investigated whether sound symbolic properties correspond to specific meanings, or whether these properties aid mappings to other semantic dimensions as well. English-speaking adults heard sound symbolic foreign translations of four adjective pairs (big-small, pointy-round, fast-slow, still-moving), and for each foreign word, chose which of two English antonyms (matched or mismatched with word dimension) was its correct translation. Participants reliably matched foreign words to their correct meanings, as well as to related semantic dimensions, suggesting not only that listeners utilize sound-to-meaning correspondences to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words, but also that sound-symbolic properties facilitate word-to-meaning mappings within a range of associated and co-varying semantic dimensions.