

PA1.2 – Ideophones in spoken and sign languages

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I. The form-meaning mismatch

- Ideophones like (1) and (2) are an open lexical class of marked words that depict sensory imagery [1], [3].

(1) a. *trotro* 'smooth' b. *trotrotro* 'smooth' (Ga)

(2) a. *plitch-platch* 'splashing sounds'
b. *plitch-platch plitch-platch* 'splashing sounds' (German)

- Ideophones appear to be a case of a 1:0 mismatch between form and meaning because of internal and external reduplication, a key feature of ideophones cross-linguistically, appear redundant in expressing a specific meaning.
- Co-speech gestures may also accompany ideophones to support the iconic depiction in a multimodal way [3], [5], as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Gestures elicited for the ideophone in (1a).

- Problem: Reduplication and gestures appear semantically redundant; however, if iconic components are taken into account, they can be considered semantically active iconic demonstrations of sensory imagery [1], [3].

Research questions

- What is the degree of structural integration and conventionalization of ideophones?
- Do ideophones interact differently with manual and non-manual gestures in different languages?
- What are the specific iconic meaning components conveyed by ideophones in Ga and German?
- How can the iconic meaning components be implemented in formal semantic theories?

II. Methodology and hypotheses

- Method
 - A comparative analysis of the structural and semantic properties of ideophones in an ideophonic language (IL, Ga) and a non-ideophonic language (NIL, German).
 - For both languages, gestures typically accompanying ideophones will be elicited and analyzed.
- Hypotheses
 - In ILs, ideophones are expected to be more structurally integrated and conventionalized than in NILs.
 - In both languages, more conventionalized ideophones are expected to be less expressive and accompanied by more conventionalized gestures.

III. Expected results and discussion

- In Ga, where ideophones are expected to be generally more conventionalized, the corresponding gestures should show less phonological and semantic variation across speakers for the same ideophone.
- Less conventionalized ideophones are expected to be more iconically modifiable, affecting the depictive semantic component of the ideophone.
- The iconic modulation enriches the proposition by adding a non-at-issue meaning layer that specifies the depictive aspects of the ideophone without changing the propositional truth conditions [1], [2].
- Cross-linguistic variation in the use of ideophones occurs because languages differ in their structural (phonological and morphosyntactic) integration, semantic function, and multimodal iconic enrichment.
- Similar iconic modulations have been observed in sign languages (PA12.2) and may be explained by a modality-independent theory of lexicalized demonstrations [2].

IV. Consequences and follow-up questions

- Iconic meaning components can be integrated in the linguistic system of spoken languages: ideophones are an example of auditory iconicity.
- Moreover, speakers combine auditory iconic components systematically with visual iconic components by using corresponding co-speech gestures.
- In sign languages, iconicity is attested in many different domains of the linguistic system (PA3, PA7, PA12).
- The third PhD project of PA1 will investigate a core example of the integration of iconic components into the linguistic system of sign languages: verbal agreement.
- While sign language agreement has a transparent gestural basis, integration into the grammatical system is visible in the development of agreement auxiliaries in some sign languages [6], [7].
- The third project will evaluate different analyses of sign language agreement and the empirical evidence used to argue for a gestural or grammatical (or hybrid) system to answer the question whether agreement in sign languages is really an instance of a 1:0 form-meaning mismatch.

References

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