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Testing Cratylus' Hypothesis: Aspectual Iconicity

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Abstract: Cratylus famously claimed that there is a kind of inherent correctness in names, the same for all men. This entails that some codings are better for a given content than others and that coding preferences could be part of UG (under a modern view: 'analytic biases that prefer certain language types over others'). Since verbs tend to code events and pronouncing a verb is also an event we call aspectual iconicity the identity of continuity values in both: English 'to stop' involves stop consonants and therefore codes termination iconically, German 'aufhören' does not. We used an artificial language together with purported German translations in order to test the hypothesis that aspectual iconicity is part of UG and observed a significant effect: Presented with a German sentence describing a (dis-)continuous event participants preferred a purported translation (to be read aloud) when articulation event and described event matched in continuity.