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The role of iconicity in word learning: Insights from child-directed language (CDL)

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Abstract

Understanding how children acquire language remains a challenge of language research. Most research assumes that label and referent are linked by arbitrary convention alone. However, in addition to being indisputably arbitrary, language is also iconic. Recent evidence has shown that children are sensitive to iconic mappings and that these may bootstrap word acquisition. However, we know little about the presence of iconicity in the language input children are exposed to. This talk focuses on iconicity in English CDL across vocal and visual channels: phonology (meow), prosody (looooooong), gestures (stirring) and hand actions (stirring with spoon). We discuss evidence that caregivers exploit iconicity in CDL, and use iconicity differentially depending on whether referents talked about are present or not, and familiar or not to the child. An analysis of the type and amount of iconicity used in CDL is crucial for understanding the role of iconicity in supporting referential mapping.