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Does it matter that "bed" looks like a bed? Orthographic Iconicity in English

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Abstract

Iconicity is a resemblance between form and meaning. In spoken language, research has focused on the resemblance between the sounds of words and their meanings. Here I report the collection orthographic iconicity ratings: the extent to which a word's printed form resembles its meaning. This was an exploratory study to determine if participants could provide meaningful ratings on this dimension, and if it had any effects on language processing. Words high in orthographic iconicity tended to be more concrete, imageable, earlier acquired, contain less frequent letters and have more consistent spelling to sound mappings. Importantly, after controlling for a variety of lexical and semantic variables, orthographic iconicity predicted a significant amount of variance in lexical decision time and accuracy, across three different megastudy datasets. I consider whether orthographic iconicity is a meaningful construct, and what alternative explanations exist for these results.

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