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The Effectiveness of Iconic Cues in Word Learning Using the Human Stimulation Paradigm

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Abstract

Iconicity refers to a resemblance between the form of a signal and its meaning. Examples include spoken words that imitate sound based meanings (i.e., onomatopoeia; e.g., “splash”) or representational gestures (e.g., a holding the hands far apart to indicate “large”). Caregivers use iconic cues when talking to their children, however, the potential of these cues for successful word-referent mapping across communicative contexts remains unclear. This study examined the effectiveness of iconic cues when referents were physically present or absent. Using the Human Stimulation Paradigm, 320 adult participants watched naturalistic videos of a parent and child discussing objects, with all utterances of a target referent “beeped”. Participants’ task was to guess the referent. We found that iconic cues improved accuracy when the target was absent. This supports their function of bringing referents “the to the mind’s eye” in displaced contexts.