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Iconic Meanings Are Learned Earlier: Homophones Provide Insight on Iconicity's Role in the Acquisition of Words

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Abstract

Iconic words are those whose sounds share properties in common with their referents, such as “clatter” or “hiccup.” Research shows that children learn iconic words earlier than arbitrary words and that iconicity may help children form these connections. However, another factor to consider is that iconic words have forms that are easier to produce. To gain further insight into the link between iconicity and acquisition we studied homophones. This allowed us to hold the form of each word constant and examine whether iconic meanings are acquired earlier. Participants provided iconicity ratings on 1668 total meanings for 390 word forms. We ran a mixed effects linear regression and found an effect of iconicity on test-based age-of-acquisition, controlling for word form, length, frequency, phonological neighbourhood, and meaning-specific familiarity. These findings suggest that children learn iconic meanings earlier than arbitrary ones and support iconicity as an important factor in word-learning.