
Patterns of multimodal imitation in spoken languages

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Human capacity for imitation in spoken languages is considered to be very much limited in comparison to that one in the signed languages. Signed languages are multidimensional and, therefore, more adapted for creating multimodal iconic signs (Perniss 2007). “Iconic” is the term used for (intended as well as perceived) similarity between form and meaning. Spoken languages, on the other hand, seem to employ only one (audial) channel for imitation. Imitative words in spoken languages are thus, for the most part, onomatopoeic (e.g., *bow-wow*, *plop*, see Körtvélyessy & Štekauer 2024). In this talk, I argue that spoken languages, nevertheless, do have another means of imitation apart from the audial one, which also makes imitation in spoken languages multimodal. I argue, that for certain categories of words not only the acoustic shape but also *movements of speech apparatus* can be iconic. Just as signed languages simultaneously employ manual articulation and movements of body or facial mimics for the purposes of imitation, spoken languages simultaneously employ sound *and* articulation (i.e., movements of tongue, jaws, etc.). While compiling *An Etymological Dictionary of English Imitative Words* (Flaksman 2024) – which has 1317 entries – I came across (ca400) words imitating (in)voluntary speech apparatus movements (licking, coughing, gulping) not used for speech production purposes (“SAMs”). I have discovered that by such words (which I termed “mimetic”), the *place of articulation* of speech sounds becomes significant; that is, they differ from onomatopoeic words not only lexically but also by *means of imitation* (articulatory as opposed to acoustic). Thus, words imitating SAMs performed by lips exhibit a typical pattern – they contain labial consonants and rounded vowels – cf. *mumble*, *pout* (< [pu:t]), *babble*; mimetic words imitating SAMs localized in or near the throat contain velar or glottal consonants – cf. *cough* (< [kox-]), *heck*, *gargle*, or *gulp*. Articulatory means is also limitedly applied to imitation of phenomena perceived visually – lip rounding synaesthetically conveys round shape – cf. *bubble*, *boob*, *blob*. By imitating round shape by lip rounding, one performs *articulatory gestures*, similar to manual articulation in signed languages. A bulk of words coined in such a way might have given rise to the *bouba-kiki* effect (Köhler 1929) – *any* words, regardless of their origin, which have round vowels and labial consonant become generally *perceived* as round, bulky, or curvy. I believe such articulatory imitation patterns as well as multimodal nature of iconicity to be language-overarching.

References: • Flaksman, M. (2024). *An Etymological Dictionary of English Imitative Words*. Berlin: Peter Lang. • Köhler, W. (1929). *Gestalt Psychology*. Liveright. • Körtvélyessy, L., & P. Štekauer (2024). *Onomatopoeia in the World's Languages*. De Gruyter. • Perniss, P. (2007). *Space and Iconicity in German Sign Language (DGS)*. PhD Thesis. Nijmegen.