The role of iconicity in word learning: Insights from multimodal language

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Understanding how children acquire language remains one of the great challenges of research in the language sciences. Much of the work that explores how children learn to map words to objects and events in the world has been underpinned by two fundamental assumptions: that label and referent are linked by arbitrary convention alone and that learning occurs in situated contexts, where label and referent co-occur. However, in addition to being indisputably arbitrary, language also exploits iconicity, resemblance relationships between form and meaning, e.g. *meow*. Recent research has shown that iconicity is prevalent in children's early vocabulary (Laing 2014; Thompson et al. 2012) and that iconicity may bootstrap word acquisition (Imai & Kita 2014). Furthermore, displacement, the ability to talk about things that are spatially and temporally removed, is an important hallmark of language, and previous research has shown that children are able to learn novel referents in both situated and displaced contexts (Tomasello & Barton 1994).

In this talk, I take a multimodal approach to word learning from the perspective of the amount and type of iconicity that children receive in the input. The focus is on the use of iconicity in child-directed language across modalities, signed and spoken, and across vocal and visual channels, including phonology, gesture and hand actions. I discuss evidence that caregivers exploit iconicity to highlight salient properties of referents and that their use of iconic forms is modulated depending on whether referents being talked about are present in the environment or not and whether they are familiar or not to the child. I furthermore discuss evidence that children find iconic labels easier to learn, especially in displaced contexts, where iconicity can help link label and referent by evoking physical properties of the referent (Perniss & Vigliocco 2014). The talk explores the role of iconicity as a strategy supporting referential mapping, drawing on insights from multimodal language and from complementary studies using naturalistic and experimental data.

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