Workshop proposal: Iconicity in prosaic lexicon
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Iconicity, the resemblance between form and meaning, has been left largely peripheral in mainstream linguistics, which has viewed languages – spoken languages, at least – to be a set of arbitrary signs between sound and meaning within a logical system.

Ideophones, however, have been treated as an exception to this rule of arbitrariness. Although uncommon in Indo-European languages, ideophones consist a heavy portion of lexicon in languages of East Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world (Dingemanse et al., 2016). While few doubt that ideophones are iconic by nature to some degree, there has been a common assumption that there exists a more or less clear boundary between ideophones and non-ideophonic words (referred to as prosaic words), rather than a continuum ranging from the most iconic words to less iconic ones.

Recent progress in research, however, has proven iconicity to be a pervasive character in prosaic words as well. Patterns of iconicity can be found in words denoting speech organs (Urban, 2011), spatial deixis (Johansson & Zlatev, 2013), persons (Nichols & Peterson, 1996), and – as more recently demonstrated – a sizeable set of basic meanings (Blasi et al., 2016; Johansson et al., 2020; Joo, 2020). And the iconic character of prosaic words also functions as pressure driving language change (Johansson & Carling, 2015). Thus, it is now evident that a language do not divide its vocabulary into iconic and non- iconic words: ideophones do not monopolize iconicity. Prosaic words may arguably be less iconic than ideophones, but they are certainly not void of it.

This brings us to an interesting research topic, to which papers are called for:

1. To what degree and in what manner are prosaic words (non-ideophonic words, such as mountain or butterfly) iconic?
2. How does the iconicity of prosaic words influence language change?
3. How does iconicity in prosaic words influence how we perceive and produce everyday speech?

Please send your abstract (in pdf format) to ian.joo@connect.polyu.hk for a 20-minute presentation. An abstract may not exceed two pages, including references. The provisional acceptance of abstracts will be communicated to you by 20 November 2020, after which the accepted abstracts will be submitted to the organizers of the 54th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea (SLE 2021).


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