

The contribution of sound symbolism to phonological theory

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The abstraction of signifiers (i.e., linguistic sound) from signified (i.e., meanings or concepts) is a foundational construct of modern linguistic study: it allows us to examine the structure of linguistic form in isolation. In understanding and modeling the breadth of linguistic sound patterns, however, it is increasingly evident in recent formal phonological study that we must also take seriously the interaction between sound patterns and extra-phonological—if not also extralinguistic—considerations: for example, in the interactions with articulation, morphosyntax, learning and acquisition, society and culture.

This talk takes up sound symbolism, which is often considered to be conditioned by “automatic” factors such as perceptuomotor analogy and hence relegated to a place external to the formal linguistic system. I present two exploratory case studies on sound symbolism in (1) a cross-linguistic dataset of Pokémon names and (2) an English dataset of American baseball player names. The results demonstrate an intimacy between sound symbolism and the linguistic system proper: real-world attributes shape the way that phonological patterns and the categories that are relevant to phonological patterns are formed, and correspondingly, linguistic grammar influences the structure of sound symbolic patterns.

The entwinement between phonological form and real-world attributes holds import for understanding the adequacy and power of our phonological theories. Sound symbolic patterns, for example, speak to issues of categoricity versus gradience that are especially relevant to current phonological models: they show that recent expansions of phonological theory with scales and gradient activations are necessary for capturing natural language phonological patterns in context. Here, I propose that a natural extension of gradient symbolic activations to categories (cf., gradient symbolic representations over phonological elements) allows us to model differences in phonological patterns over both discrete and gradient category membership. Crucially, we find such patterns not only in sound symbolism—where they are often most obvious—but also in what is considered “core” language (e.g., lexical or morphological classes).

This talk includes joint work with (in alphabetical order) Jordan Ackerman; Noah Hermalin; Sharon Inkelas; Hayeun Jang; Jessica Johnson; Darya Kavitskaya; Shigeto Kawahara; Miran Oh; Deniz Rudin; Rebecca Starr; and Alan Yu.