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Sub-morphemic form-meaning systematicity: the impact of onset phones on word concreteness

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Abstract

Do individual sounds carry meaning? The relationship between sound and meaning in human languages is typically assumed to be arbitrary, though recent research provides evidence for the existence of both iconicity and systematicity between word forms and their meaning. However, this research has not asked whether individual sounds in a language covary in systematic ways with aspects of meaning. In two analyses, we find evidence for more systematicity between the initial phones of words and those words concreteness ratings than one would expect in a truly arbitrary lexicon. This suggests that initial phones may act as cues to aspects of word meaning, and raises questions about whether language learners detect and exploit these cues.