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A round Bouba is easier to remember than a curved Kiki: Sound-symbolism can support associative memory

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Abstract

Past research has shown that prior knowledge can support our episodic memory for recently encountered associations (Chalfonte & St-Giles, 1996; Naveh-Benjamin, 2000). Badham, Estes and Maylor (2012) for example, showed that integrative relationships between words help associative memory, even if the relationships are highly unfamiliar. A pair of words is integrative if the words make sense when considered together (e.g. monkey-foot). We extend this phenomenon to sound-symbolism associations; here, the latter refer to relationships between phonemes and object characteristics—relationships that participants readily find natural, even without prior knowledge of the items. For instance, the non-word maluma is much more readily associated with a random shape with rounded contours than with a shape that has sharp angles (Khler, 1929, 1947). In our study, 70 participants completed paired-associate memory tests after studying lists of three shape / non-word pairs. The sound-shape pairs that relied on known sound-symbolism links facilitated associative memory.