The length of words reflects their conceptual complexity

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Are the forms of words systematically related to their meaning? The arbitrariness of the sign has long been a foundational part of our understanding of human language.[1,2] Theories of communication predict a relationship between form and meaning, however: longer descriptions should convey more complex meanings.[3,4] Here we show that the lexicons of human languages reflect this relationship between linguistic and cognitive complexity. We asked participants to rate the conceptual complexity of word meanings and found that their judgements correlated highly with word length across 66 languages, even controlling for frequency and concreteness. This relationship is productively encoded in the minds of speakers, as well: Adults and children both mapped longer words to more complex meanings, and more complex meanings to longer words, in comprehension and production tasks and across a wide range of stimuli. In addition, explicit judgments of complexity were highly correlated with an implicit measure of study time in a memory task, suggesting that complexity is directly related to basic cognitive processes. These results

point to a general regularity in the design of lexicons and suggests the importance of cognitive constraints on language evolution.[5,6]

Human languages universally contain sequences of sounds — words — that are associated with particular meanings. A foundational part of our understanding of human language is that these associations are arbitrary. This assumption is supported by a superficial survey of word forms across languages: different languages use different words to refer to similar meanings. However, theories of communication predict a systematicity in these mappings. They predict that longer words should be associated with more complex meanings. Here we address whether this type of systematicity is present in language. We first examine lexicons of XX languages. We then explore whether this systematicity is productively encoded in the minds of speakers.

Tables

Figure Legends

Methods

References

Acknowledgements

Author Contributions

Author Information