

A robustness approach to operationalisations of iconicity

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The complex processes behind construals of iconicity present a challenge for operationalisations of iconicity in scientific investigations. Here, we explore how the notion of ‘robustness’ from philosophy of science (e.g. Irvine et al., 2013; Levins, 1966; Weisberg & Reisman, 2008; Wimsatt, 1981) can be used to untangle the diverse mechanisms behind perceptions of iconicity, to build a comprehensive theory of iconicity as one of several factors that contribute to fitness between form and function. Through a series of case studies, we argue that construals of iconicity are not only dependent on resemblance but are shaped by experience and by the complex interactions that exist between iconicity and other kinds of motivated mappings (e.g. systematic and indexical mappings) in language. We suggest that a robustness approach to operationalizations of iconicity can be used to untangle the roles of these different factors, by considering the influences that stimuli, participants, contexts, representations, and framing have on construals of iconicity. Diversifying the viewpoints from which we examine iconicity, shifting objects of study from decontextualized signs to situated ‘composite utterances’, and triangulating insights from mixed quantitative and qualitative measures are key goals for future research. Under this approach, operationalizations of iconicity are not only a means to an end, but also an object of study in themselves; a way to explore where construals of iconicity come from and how they operate—which in turn enables us to design better measures of iconicity for the future.

References

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