

Phonetic bases of sound symbolism: A Review—for LingBuzz

Shigeto Kawahara

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Abstract

While the relationships between sounds and meanings are generally arbitrary in human languages, we do observe cases in which systematic correspondences hold between sounds and meanings, at least as stochastic tendencies. When such systematic sound-meaning relationships appear to be modulated by iconicity, we refer to these relationships as “sound symbolism,” although defining precisely what it means for a sound to be iconic of its meaning can be difficult. Nevertheless, in many cases, systematic associations between particular meanings and particular sounds seem to make phonetic sense, i.e., sound symbolic meanings appear to have their roots in the articulatory and/or acoustic properties of sounds under question. This paper reviews these sound symbolic patterns together with their phonetic underpinnings, both in terms of their articulatory and acoustic characteristics. While the aim of this review is not to establish a new theory of sound symbolism, two conclusions nevertheless emerge from the survey: (1) phonetic and phonological considerations do seem to offer insights into the patterning of systematic sound-meaning correspondences that are recurrently found in natural languages and (2) we need to take both articulatory and acoustics factors into account when we consider the phonetic bases of sound symbolism. It is hoped that this review can serve as a useful guide for all researchers who work on sound symbolism.

1 About this paper

The main intended audience that I had in mind as I wrote up this review article was psychologists and cognitive scientists who are interested in sound symbolic patterns in natural languages, but not necessarily in phonetic and phonological research in a broad sense. Donna Erickson, however, suggested that it may be a good idea to make this document available among phoneticians and phonologists as well, because one aim of this article is to facilitate more communication between psychologists/cognitive scientists and linguists. For those who may be interested, here is a link to the full paper <https://psyarxiv.com/fzvsu>.