

## **Re-examining Iconicity as a Modality Effect**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In search for linguistic universals from both sign and spoken language, a very useful strategy is to make a distinction between modality effects and non-effects (Meier et al.2002, Sandler and Lillo-Martin 2006). Iconicity is identified as a key modality effect which motivates different structural principles from the two channels of human communication.

On one hand, there has been an increasing recognition of the important role of iconicity in sign language since Klima and Bellugi (1979). It can be discerned in the work by Sandler and Lillo-Martin (2006). While they adopt generative grammar to construct important structures of sign languages at all linguistic levels, they are compelled to recognize modality effects as sign language universals. These modality effects include the use of space for pronouns and verb agreement, simultaneity of production and perception, iconic motivations. Yet all these three modality effects can be subsumed as iconicity effect.

On the other hand, iconic motivations in spoken language have been shown to be pervasive ((Haiman 1980, 1985). Similarly, sound symbolism (Hinton, 1994) and mimetics in Japanese (Hamano 1986, Kita 1997) are abundant.

This paper proposes that spoken languages are more iconic than ever perceived, if we further take into consideration the abundance of iconic motivations in co-speech gestures (McNeill 1992, McNeill (ed., 2000, Kendon 2004), intonation (Bolinger 1989), and facial expressions of emotions (Ekman 1997). Thus, iconicity as a modality effect can be mitigated. In essence, iconic motivations are exhibited and distributed differently in the auditory-vocal modality of spoken languages and the visual-gestural modality of sign languages.

Finally, it will be noted that the pervasiveness of iconicity in natural languages called for a rethinking of some linguistic dogmas such as arbitrariness of signs and autonomy of syntax. It also has non-trivial implications for our understanding of the brain/mind.

**Keywords:** Iconicity, Sign language, Modality effect, Gesture, Facial expression