

Integrating iconicity: recent work and future directions

theme session convened by
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The study of iconicity—the resemblance- or simulation-based mapping of form and meaning—is seeing a renaissance across the language sciences (Perniss et al. 2010; Svantesson 2017). Studies of signed and spoken languages show the importance of iconicity alongside other organizing principles in lexical and grammatical structure, learning experiments shows how iconicity may help word learning and rely on widespread cross-modal associations, the study of natural discourse organization demonstrates how theatrical staging of action plays a fundamental role, and work in experimental semiotics reveals the affordances and limitations of iconicity in the origin and evolution of communication systems (Fay et al. 2014; Perniss & Vigliocco 2014; Winter et al. 2017; Ferrara & Hodge 2018).

With growing interest in iconicity there is also a growing need to clarify its place in the larger network of the language sciences (Dingemans et al. 2015). While it may be rhetorically attractive to cast iconicity as slayer of the dogma of arbitrariness or solution to the enigma of language evolution, ultimately its explanatory power must be positioned relative to (and in interaction with) other known principles of linguistic organisation such as frequency, economy, conventionality, or systematicity; and its roles in learning and communication must be understood in relation to factors like multimodality, embodiment, and intersubjectivity.

This session is devoted to the theme of integrating iconicity. It brings together current work on the varied roles of iconicity in linguistic organisation and communication, with a special focus on linking recent findings from iconicity research to insights from comparative and cognitive linguistics. The session features empirical and theoretical contributions from across the language sciences. Themes covered include typology, semiotics, language evolution, reduplication, sensitivity to sound-symbolism, and embodiment.

References

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