

# Iconicity in prosaic lexicon

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Are prosaic (non-ideophonic) words in spoken languages also iconic? Recent progress in research has shown iconicity to be a pervasive character in prosaic words as well. Patterns of iconicity can be found in words denoting speech organs (Urban 2011), spatial deixis (Johansson and Zlatev 2013), persons (Nichols and Peterson 1996), and other basic meanings (Blasi et al. 2016; Joo 2020; Johansson, Anikin, et al. 2020). It is now evident that a language do not divide its vocabulary into iconic and non-iconic words: Prosaic words may be less iconic than ideophones, but they are certainly not void of iconicity.

**To what degree and in what manner are prosaic words iconic?** The English noun *breast* is iconic in the sense that it bears the [+labial] phoneme *b*, thus sharing the universal tendency of morphemes meaning ‘breast’ bearing [+labial] phonemes (Joo 2020) and reflecting the perceptual association between bilabial sounds and softness (Sakamoto and Watanabe 2018). The noun *breast*, however, is not fully iconic, since we are not aware of any iconic motivation behind the remaining phonological features represented by this word (such as its consonant *t*) and must thus judge them to be arbitrarily assigned to the lexical meaning of ‘breast’, at least at the synchronic level. Thus, iconicity is a continuous character and a lexeme may be iconic to different degrees, often only subtly so. It is this continuum of iconicity in the prosaic lexical stratum that merits further investigation.

**How does the iconicity of prosaic words influence language change?** Lexical iconicity can motivate language change. This is not surprising, since biased synchronic phonosemantic association implies biased diachronic change. That is, if the words meaning ‘breast’ tend to have [+labial] phonemes, then there must have been diachronic mechanisms where such a phonosemantic pairing was favored. Several hypotheses (not mutually exclusive) have aimed to explain such mechanisms, such as the iconic treadmill (constant coinage of new iconic words following the de-iconization of existing iconic words) (Flaksman 2017), phonosemantic inertia (resistance to regular sound change in order to preserve iconicity) (Flaksman 2013), the rebuilding of iconicity (morphosemantic rearrangement of lexemes to build iconic schemata) (Johansson and Carling 2015), and remotivation (iconicity-motivated semantic reanalysis of existing lexemes) (Benczes 2020). Even though the iconicity of the prosaic lexicon has been so far clearly observed at the synchronic surface, what diachronic processes lead to its emergence remains relatively unclear.

**How does iconicity in prosaic words influence speech perception and production?** If many of the words we use are iconic, then what purpose does their iconicity serve? Some works have argued that ideophones help early language acquisition (Imai, Kita, et al. 2008; Imai and Kita 2014). As mentioned, iconicity is not a feature categorically reserved for ideophones but rather gradually (albeit unevenly) distributed throughout the ideophonic and prosaic strata. Thus, iconicity in prosaic lexicon may help L1 acquisition as well. Further research is needed to investigate whether prosaic

lexical iconicity brings cognitive advantages other than acquisitional benefits.

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