It's easier to learn words that sound like what they mean

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What makes some words easier to learn than others? Researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics and Radboud University taught Japanese words to Dutch students and found that ideophones—words that sound like what they mean—are easier to learn than regular words. This suggests that some of our associations between sound and meaning may be universal.

Often, the sound of a word doesn't say much about its meaning: none of the individual sounds in dog mean anything about having four legs or enjoying being scratched behind the ears. This is why a domesticated canine can be referred to as dog in English, hond in Dutch, and inu in Japanese—and why it takes *hard* work to learn any language. But not all

[words](link) are like that. Many languages have words which use the sounds of language in a vivid way to show what the word means: ideophones like kibikibi 'energetic' or bukubuku 'fat'.

Ideophones easier than adjectives

Language scientists Gwilym Lockwood, Mark Dingemanse and Peter Hagoort asked Dutch [students](link) with no knowledge of Japanese to pick the meaning of Japanese ideophones out of two alternatives. They were able to do so far more accurately than chance. For kibikibi, they chose the meaning 'energetic' much more often than 'tired'. This suggests that we use similar sounds if we want to depict sensory information across languages and cultures.

Second, they asked another group of students to learn Japanese words. They learned half the Japanese ideophones with the real translations (e.g., bukubuku with 'fat'), and the other half with their opposite translations (e.g., kibikibi with 'tired'). These students recalled the ideophones they learned with the real translations far better than the other ones. To make sure this effect was due to the special nature of ideophones, they repeated the experiment with a third group of students using regular (non-ideophonic) adjectives like taisetsu 'important' and abunai 'dangerous'. Now there was no difference in how well the students learned the words, regardless of whether they learned them with their real or with their opposite meaning.

Beyond onomatopoeia

Lockwood, lead author of the study: "An important aspect of our study is that we use real words as opposed to made-up ones like bouba and kiki. By comparing real Japanese ideophones and adjectives, we've shown that there is something special about ideophones that makes them easier to

learn." Ideophones are a bit like onomatopoeia (words that phonetically resembles the source of the sound they describe), except that they are used far more widely than in European languages. Many people may think of onomatopoeia as just making animal sounds for children, as in What does the fox say? Lockwood explains: "Ideophones do more than that: they are used to talk about intricate things like the feeling of moping over something trivial (kuyokuyo), or the unsteady way that a toddler walks (yochiyochi)."

The experiments suggest that we use similar sounds across languages and cultures to depict sensory information, and that these associations between sound and meaning actually help with word learning. The research by Lockwood and colleagues contributes to mounting evidence that languages are less arbitrary than has long been assumed.

  More information: Gwilym Lockwood et al. Sound-Symbolism Boosts Novel Word Learning., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* (2016). DOI: 10.1037/xlm0000235

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