Why do people feel 'a rose by any other name' wouldn't fit as well?

23 September 2015, by Shelbie Sutherland

A rose by any other name might smell as sweet, but it just doesn't feel right. Credit: Mark A Neal, CC BY-NC-ND

Words are symbols that help humans communicate. The link between words and what they refer to is, with very few exceptions, arbitrary. Many of the words that we currently use ("table," "dog," "mug," etc) could easily have been otherwise – a wide variety of words would have done just as well to symbolize tables, dogs or mugs.

This arbitrary relationship between words and objects allows for the meanings of words to change with the people who speak them. For instance, in Old English, the word "sad" meant "satiated." More recently, linguists are discovering rapid changes to the meaning of words used in text communication; for example, "lol" no longer means "laugh out loud" but instead is a way of expressing empathy or mutual connection among communicators.

Despite the fact that the link between words and objects is usually arbitrary and that meanings evolve over time, people hold a persistent and widespread belief that words fit well with their referents. Psychologist Andrei Cimpian and I have investigated this phenomenon and believe it's due to people's cognitive tendency to explain what they encounter in the world quickly and easily.

Of *course* that's what we call that

While the belief that words fit with what they refer to is not always expressed explicitly, with a closer look, examples are common. Many of us have witnessed people (often unknowingly) behaving as if by merely articulating words slower or louder, a speaker of another language might understand them. People act as if the listener will somehow intuitively grasp the meaning if he just hears the foreign word more clearly.

Along the same lines, and more explicitly, in our studies participants said that "…the long 'a' in 'giraffe' appears fitting for the animal's long neck" when asked why giraffes have the name they do, and that "only a few different words could possibly describe a glove." But there's really no reason the word "glove" describes a glove better than another word that is relatively easy to pronounce and doesn't have another conflicting meaning. An object and its name often have an arbitrary relationship.

Why do we assume there's a perfect fit?

We approached this question by considering that word-use in a language is but one example of the many consistencies people encounter on a regular basis. Just like the word "zebra" always refers to a particular kind of animal in English, we're used to seeing mint-flavored toothpaste, yellow school buses, and round coins, for example. There are many things that people encounter that are regularly paired together; these are sometimes called "regularities."

Hello, my name is the one word that fits me perfectly. Credit: Tech Cocktail, CC BY-SA

As people go about their day and [try to explain these regularities](), they tend to use information that comes to mind quickly and easily. Interestingly, what comes to mind easily tends to be information that is solely [*about* the thing]() being explained, its inherent characteristics. For instance, when considering why most toothpaste is mint-flavored, people will often think the fresh taste of mint is relevant because of how easily this trait comes to mind. People are more likely to overlook information that they have in memory that doesn't pop into their minds as quickly – things like important historical events, societal trends, or the context in which the regularity began.

This may also be what people are doing when they reason about words. They might be overlooking the role of history and society on current word-use and instead reasoning that there is something *about* the word or object that makes the two go together particularly well.

Who's more apt to believe in word/object fit?

If you have a tendency to rely on quick explanations, using information that is easily available in your memory, are you also more likely to reason that words and objects fit particularly well together?

[In a series of studies]() recently published in the journal *Cognition*, we asked people to think about how particular words came to be. For example, we asked children as young as four years old to think

of a time when people didn't have a word for a particular thing. We then asked how they thought the word came about. Did people *have* to call this animal a "zebra" (consistent with the idea that "zebra" just fits) or would other words have worked just as well?

For adults, we also asked more detailed questions, such as whether people had few or countless suitable options when coming up with a name for the animal. Additionally, to measure how reasoning about words relates to how people explain a broad range of regularities, we also asked participants to explain regularities *other* than language (such as mint toothpaste and round coins).

The more people underestimated the arbitrariness of words, the more they underestimated the influence of history and society on many other regularities. So, if they were a big believer in a word and object having a perfect fit, they were unlikely to consider historical or societal explanations for other kinds of everyday pairings. Instead, these people relied on information that came to mind more easily about the words, objects and other regularities themselves.

Importantly, we also found a drop in people's belief that words fit with what they refer to when we experimentally lowered their tendency to rely on explanations that come to mind most easily. In this study, we gave half of our participants a story about why recycling bins are blue that included reasoning that would match the information that would come to mind most easily for people (including features of the color and how visible it is). The other half of our participants were given a story about the people involved in the original pilot recycling program arbitrarily choosing blue as the color for the bins.

The first story was meant to reinforce those participants' intuitive reasoning by including information that comes to mind most easily. On the other hand, the second story was meant to undermine the tendency to use information that comes to mind quickly by referencing the origins of the regularity and some of the happenstance around it. Those who read the second story were subsequently less likely than those who read the first story to believe that words fit particularly well

with what they refer to.

Overall, we suggest that the belief that [words](#) and what they refer to have a special fit might stem from the way people tend to explain a wide variety of regularities using the most readily available [information](#) – word-use being just one regularity among many. Unsurprisingly, Shakespeare had more insight into word-use than the average reasoner.

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