

## Locating what is arbitrary: Sound symbolism as oral gesture in Czech and Japanese

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Oral gesture has been used to explain linguistic phenomena since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Paget 1930, more recently Taunmüller 1996). The origin of language is sought in oral gesture, which is said to imitate physical movements, especially hand movements. Such an attempt ultimately supports a view that the relationship between sound and meaning/function is not arbitrary, as the former is presumably based on communicative acts.

Existing literature on different classes of sound symbolic expressions also tries to motivate non-arbitrariness of sound and meaning/function. One of the most frequent arguments concerns the correlation between vowel height and magnitude. Data from many languages indicate that high vowels are associated with small size and low vowels with large size (e.g. Hinton et al. 1994). However, there is evidence that the association between vowel-height and magnitude may be reversed (Diffloth 1994), a situation that again raises a question about arbitrariness.

The main idea of this presentation is that arbitrariness resides not in the relationship between sound and meaning, but in the *conceptualization* of oral gesture (Fidler, forthcoming). Meanings/functions, which appear at first glance to be unrelated, may be connected by family resemblance and constitute radial categories with an oral gesture at the core. When the conceptualization of the oral gesture differs among languages, different categories emerge; such conceptual differences result from language-specific ways to profile different parts of the oral gesture. The present model using radial categories solves two apparently contradictory processes: (1) the general *mechanism* of sound-meaning/function relationship based on oral gesture (i.e. non-arbitrary relationship between sound and meaning/function), which is essentially constant across languages, and (2) language-specific sound-meaning/function relationships, which result from different ways to view the same oral gesture.

Process of selection in conveying meaning is in fact widespread. According to Turner (2003) the process of blending multiple mental spaces is "at the root of what makes us human", and blending involves "*selective projection* [sic]" from the input mental spaces. In other words, only selected parts and relations from a set of meanings are used to yield a new meaning. Selection of only limited aspects of articulatory gesture is thus plausible as part of this general process in language.

The discussions will be based on qualitative analysis of examples drawn from the multiple sources (language corpora, children's literature, cartoons) in Czech and Japanese as well as secondary sources on other languages.

### References

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