

## Twinkle twinkle

Kai von Fintel (2022-09-15)

Language is arbitrary. There's no rhyme or reason why (wo)man's best friend should be called "dog" or "hund" or "chien" or "marongkai". In addition, individual speech sounds, the building blocks of meaningful words, do not have themselves have meaning. Our other best friend is called "cat" but the three sounds that make up the word can also make the word "act", which has nothing to do with felines. This is what allows languages to make vast inventories of words from basic ingredients.

And yet, there are parts of language that are less abstractly arbitrary. My first word for canines was "wauwau", which is obviously onomatopoeic, mimicking one of the sound dogs make. Onomatopoeia is a common enough phenomenon. We can describe kids frolicking in the pool as "splish-splashing". The state bird of Massachusetts is called the "chickadee" after its characteristic song.

But depicting the world through sound does not stop with mimicking the sounds of the world. Stars don't make sounds we can hear but saying that they "twinkle" at night is a way of painting a picture with sound, perhaps grounded in synesthetic connections. The German psychologist and linguist Wilhelm Wundt in 1900 coined the term "Lautbilder" (sound pictures) for such words and phrases. More science-sounding terms are now more commonly used: "ideophones" or "mimetics".

There are languages with hundreds and thousands of ideophones. The African language Ewe has two dialects with different words for ducks, one using the onomatopoeic "kpakpa" mimicking the duck's quacking, the other one using the word "ɖaboɖabo". About the latter, a speaker was asked by a linguistic fieldworker why that word was used and he used his upper body to imitate the waddle of a duck.

English displays another intriguing aspect of associating vivid meanings with particular sounds that is deeply embedded in the lexicon. Consider the large set of words that begin with "sn": "sniff, snort, snore, sneeze, snicker, snout, snuffle, snoop", and so on. It is not hard to begin to suspect that these all have to do with the nose. But "sn" doesn't mean "nose" and the meaning of "sniff" isn't the combination of "sn" (nose) and "iff" (whatever that could

be). Nevertheless, the presence of “sn” reliably evokes the association with the nose. There are several more such sets. Here’s one which you can ponder yourself: “glint, glimmer, glisten, glow, ...”, what might these words have in common?

An intriguing idea is that sound pictures constitute a remnant of what was even more pervasive at the dawn of language, hundreds of thousands of years ago. Perhaps, language started as a collection of vivid sound pictures and became more arbitrary and combinatorial over time. A supporting piece of evidence may come from the study of a nascent sign language that is emerging among a community of both hearing and deaf individuals in the Negev. This language, called Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL), has a strong iconic component, vastly more so than established sign languages such as American Sign Language (ASL) or the more local Israeli Sign Language (ISL). Perhaps, history is repeating itself?

## References

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