Degrees of iconicity in the use of reduplication

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Abstract

Linguistic constructions have two sides to them—form and meaning—and the relation between these is often iconically motivated, rather than arbitrary. Most accounts treat iconicity as a binary matter: the form-meaning relation is either iconically motivated or arbitrary. A few accounts suggest that iconicity can be a matter of degree (Bybee et al. 1994, Kouwenberg & LaCharité 2001, Perniss & Vigliocco 2014), but to date there has been no implementation of this idea. In this study, Yueyuan Li and I look at degrees of iconicity in the use of reduplication—roughly, the repetition of a word to yield a new word with a new meaning—and investigate degrees of iconicity in the form-meaning relationship, focusing on uses of total (i.e. whole-word) reduplication in predication. For 43 functions found in 113 languages, we ask what specific aspects of total reduplication are exploited iconically in the expression of these functions.

In many languages total reduplication is polysemous (i.e. has several functions). We take high cross-linguistic frequency of a particular polysemy to indicate semantic similarity between the functions involved. When we consider the iconicity of pairs of semantically similar functions, we find that the set of formal features exploited iconically by one function is always a subset of the features exploited by the other—i.e. there are no pairs where each member exploits some formal features iconically that the other doesn't also exploit. Whatever the direction of extension of use (towards greater iconicity or greater arbitrariness), it is always in one direction. Several authors have suggested that iconically motivated uses of reduplication develop first, and non-iconically motivated uses develop later (e.g. Bybee et al. 1994, Regier 1998, Fischer 2011). Making this assumption with the present data, but treating iconicity as a matter of degree, we arrive at a more detailed picture of how use is extended.

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