

EMOTIONAL SOUND SYMBOLISM

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Project	Categories across Language and Cognition.
Task	Participants will generate emotionally positive and negative words and the field researcher will then record a single person speaking these words.
Goals	To investigate the presence of emotionally sound-symbolic speech sounds in non-Indo-European languages.
Prerequisites	To conduct this task you need to translate the elicitation questions into your language of study, and you also need a recording device to capture consultants' responses.

Background

Locke (1690), and later, de Saussure (1916) argued that the connection between sound and meaning is arbitrary. This is a plausible contention. If there were natural associations between sound and meaning, then we would predict that languages would use similar sounds to denote similar meanings. In fact, the languages of the world differ dramatically in sound-meaning correspondences. Despite this, there is some evidence in support of sound symbolism. One of the first to address the issue empirically was Sapir (1929). He hypothesised, contra Locke and de Saussure, that there are universal sound-meaning correspondences — that the relationship between sound and meaning is not always arbitrary. He found that nonwords containing /a/ were taken to refer to larger objects than nonwords containing /i/. It should not be entirely surprising to find that certain communicative acts carry universal meaning. Darwin (1872) found that people from a variety of cultures agreed on the meanings of basic facial expressions of emotion. Ekman and Friesen (1971) replicated and extended Darwin's research, showing that the six basic emotions (anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise) and their expressions are not culture-specific, as had been thought previously (e.g., Mead, 1975), but rather are universal. Sauter and colleagues (Sauter, Eisner, Ekman, & Scott, 2010) have added to the picture by finding evidence that human emotional vocalisations are also recognised cross-culturally. Emotional expressions and vocalisations were likely the primary means of communication for our prelinguistic ancestors. Emotion may, thus, be a hotbed of sound symbolism. Indeed, Auracher et al. (2011) found across German, Russian, Ukrainian, and Mandarin that poems with frequent plosive sounds were rated as more happy, whereas poems with frequent nasal sounds were rated as more sad.

Research question

We have designed a series of experiments to test the hypothesis that certain classes of phonemes that share articulatory features may carry positive or negative emotional valence across languages. It is important to note that the set of speech sounds in each language differs. Thus to be clear, we are not proposing that a specific phoneme carries universal meaning, but rather distinctive features (specific manner or place features, for example) across languages may carry similar meanings. Although there may be specific sound-meaning correspondences for each basic emotion category, we are not focusing on emotion categories, but rather on emotional valence generally (i.e., positive vs. negative emotions).

Materials

The following materials come from the Affective Norms for English Words (ANEW), according to which these are the most positive and negative words in English. Words unlikely to exist in non-Western societies (e.g., christmas, millionaire) are excluded here.

Please translate the following instruction sentence, categories, and examples into your language of study.

"Tell me good and bad words in your language."

Bad

Bad things people do to each other (e.g., kill, torture)

Bad events (e.g., death, earthquake, flood)

Diseases (e.g., cancer, ulcer)

Ways of feeling bad (e.g., fear, sadness)

Bad insects (e.g., maggot, mosquito)

Bad people (e.g., murderer)

Bad qualities in a person (e.g., gloom, failure)

Disgusting substances (e.g., excrement, rotten food)

Other bad things (e.g., poison, poverty)

Good

Good places (e.g., paradise, waterfall, beach)

Ways of feeling good (e.g., happy, pleasure)

Good people (e.g., mother, baby, friend)

Good qualities in a person (e.g., friendly, lucky, beauty)

Good events (e.g., sunrise, wedding)

Good things to do (e.g., give a gift, help someone)

Good food (e.g., fruit, delicious)

Successes (e.g., triumphant, win, victory)

Other good things (e.g., rainbow, music)

Task

Ask several consultants (minimum 2, maximum 7) individually to generate good and bad (i.e., emotionally positive and emotionally negative) words. Assist the consultants using the provided categories and examples. Tell each consultant the emotional valence (e.g., bad), the category (e.g., bad things people do to each other), and list the examples of each category, where provided. Try to obtain 2-4 words per category, and then move on to the next category. For the categories "Other bad things" and "Other good things," try to collect 5-10 words each.

Start by saying (in your language of study): "Tell me good and bad words in your language. Let's start with bad things people do to each other: 'kill,' 'torture,' and any other words like that... Now let's move on to bad events: 'death,' 'earthquake,' 'flood,' and other words like that..." and so on for all the categories and examples.

Aim to collect at least 20 positive and 20 negative words from each participant. Once you have data from all consultants, select a single male consultant to record all of the words generated by all of the consultants, with a pause between each word.

Analysis

After data collection is complete, for each response, please write down the word that was spoken in the standard orthography, provide a morpheme-by-morpheme gloss, an English translation of the word, and a close transcription in IPA. Additionally, make a note of the origin of any known or suspected loanwords. Once you submit this information and your recordings, we plan to (1) determine whether certain features are more likely to occur in emotionally positive or negative words than would be predicted by chance, and (2) play the words for Dutch speakers to test whether they can correctly identify the words as emotionally negative or positive.

Outcome

Depending on the outcome of the study, a jointly authored publication is possible.

References

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