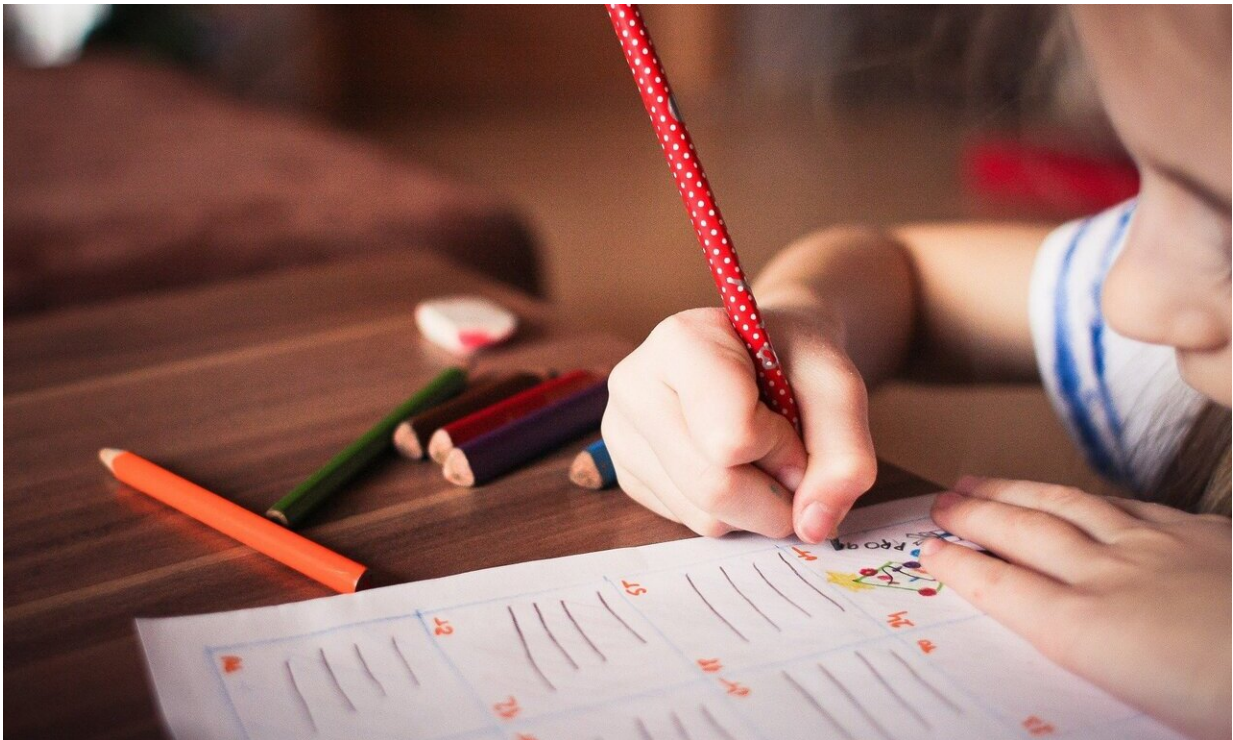


# New study finds that iconicity in parents' speech helps children learn new words

May 17 2021

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Some words sound like what they mean. For example, "slurp" sounds like the noise we make when we drink from a cup, and "teeny" sounds like something that is very small. This resemblance between how a word sounds and what it means is known as iconicity.

In her lab at the University of Miami, Lynn Perry, an associate professor in the College of Arts and Sciences Department of Psychology, previously found that [children](#) tend to learn words higher in iconicity earlier in development than they do words lower in iconicity. She also found that adults tend to use more iconic words when they speak to children than when they speak to other adults.

"That got us curious about why," said Stephanie Custode, a doctoral student in psychology, who worked with Perry to answer questions posed by her prior work. "Does iconicity play a causal role in children's language development, helping them learn new words, eventually even those words that have non-iconic, or arbitrary, sound-meaning associations?"

For their new study, published in the journal *Cognitive Science*, the researchers explored whether [parents](#)' who used iconic words as they played with novel objects with children between 1 and 2 helped them learn those objects' names. The objects were novel toys and foods that the researchers made and gave names to, like the word "blicket" to describe a clay toy with a made-up shape. They found that when parents named a novel object, their children were more likely to remember those novel names later if the parent also used highly iconic words in the same sentence. This was true both for parents speaking English and Spanish.

"Consider when a parent teaches their child about 'cats' by talking about how they 'meow,' or about a sweater by talking about how 'fuzzy' it is, or about 'honey' by talking about how sticky it is," Perry said. "The resemblance between the sound of a word like 'sticky' and the texture of the honey helps the child pay attention to that property. If the parent also says 'honey' while describing its stickiness, the child can form a stronger memory of that new word and its meaning, because they're paying attention to its important properties—its sticky texture in this case."

The researchers found it was beneficial for parents to use iconic language specifically when they introduced a novel name. "If a parent talks about stickiness without saying the name 'honey', there's no new name to associate with that sticky texture, and if a parent names the honey but talks about it being yellow, a word that doesn't particularly sound like its meaning, the child might pay less attention to the honey and forget about it. In both cases, the child wouldn't learn the new word 'honey'," said Perry.

From these findings, the researchers concluded that iconicity could be an important cue that parents and other caregivers can use to facilitate word learning.

Next the researchers plan to investigate whether using more iconic words can help children with language delays learn new [words](#). They also are interested in studying how parents talk to children changes over time and whether they decrease their use of iconic language as they recognize that their child is becoming a stronger word learner.

**More information:** Lynn K. Perry et al, What Is the Buzz About Iconicity? How Iconicity in Caregiver Speech Supports Children's Word Learning, *Cognitive Science* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/cogs.12976](https://doi.org/10.1111/cogs.12976)

Provided by University of Miami

Citation: New study finds that iconicity in parents' speech helps children learn new words (2021, May 17) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-05-iconicity-parents-speech-children-words.html>

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