

'Plitschplatsch' is more credible than simply wet: Researching iconic German words

February 8 2023, by Anke Sauter

Sample item: Speech stimulus

MODE = **ADJECTIVE** w/o *round-gesture*

“In this picture, you see a round window.”

MODE = **GESTURE** w/ *round-gesture*

“In this picture, you see a window.”



Sample item: Picture stimulus

MATCH = **MATCH**



MATCH = **MISMATCH**



Credit: *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* (2022). DOI: 10.16995/glossa.5827

Words like "ratzfatz", "ruckzuck" or "pille-palle" are known as ideophones. Found primarily in spoken language, their role in the language system has scarcely been researched so far. A young linguist at Goethe University wants to change that. She is writing her doctoral thesis on the semantics and pragmatics of ideophones.

Natural languages are considered "arbitrary": linguistic signs and their meaning stand in a free relationship to each other and are not based on similarity. As such, someone who does not know the word "book" cannot infer its meaning from either the word's form or its nature.

However, there are also signs with iconic properties that can be used to infer meaning without prior knowledge. One example is gestures and [facial expressions](#): As companions to spoken [language](#), they introduce additional meaningful content. Then there are ideophones—words that describe meaning by way of "painting a sound"; usually they consist of noises or movements.

An ideophone can be a verb, an adjective, or an adverb; it describes manner, color, sound, smell, action, state, or intensity. Ideophones are particularly common in African languages, much less so in German. Although they do exist here, too: "zickzack", "holterdiepolter", "ratzfatz", "pille-palle" or "plemplem". These are the kinds of words Kathryn Barnes is interested in.

Not only are they the subject of her dissertation, which she is currently writing, but also of an article recently published in the linguistic journal "Glossa". Her thesis is supervised by linguist Prof. Cornelia Ebert, who coordinates the inter-university German Research Foundation's (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) "Visual Communication: Theoretical, Empirical and Applied Perspectives (ViCom)" research program. With regard to gestures, Ebert has found that they convey meaning on a different level than arbitrary signs. They are less likely to

be questioned by the communicative counterpart. Barnes is now exploring whether this can be applied to ideophones.

"Such supposedly special cases can tell us a lot about how language works," Barnes says. Because of the pandemic, Barnes had to carry out the survey on which her study is based as an online experiment. All told, some 40 native German speakers completed the questionnaire, designed to shed light on the usage (pragmatics) and [meaning](#) (semantics) of 20 ideophones.

One example uses a scene from "The Frog Prince", where the frog climbs—*plitschplatsch*—the stairs to the castle. In one example, he was previously described as wet, in the other, he was described as having been completely dried out by the sun by the time he arrived at the stairs. When the ideophone *plitschplatsch* was used, the subjects were still able to accept the description even though the statement actually seems illogical. The situation was different when an adverb was used—much like in the case of gestures, participants expressed less objection to the error when an ideophone was used.

"As far as I know, this is the first experimental work done with German speakers on the at-issue status of ideophones—and one of the very few ever on the information status of ideophones," says Prof. Cornelia Ebert. In German, at any rate, ideophones, which are used like sentence elements, are "not at issue"—that is, their truth content is not questioned to the same extent as that of other sentence elements. It remains to be seen whether the insights derived on the basis of German-language ideophones can also be transferred to other languages, especially to those in which the use of ideophones is much more common than in German.

But why do ideophones (like gestures) have a higher credibility? Is it because they create images in the mind, i.e. they are perceived on a different level of understanding? Kathryn Barnes wants to explore this

further, and also include other languages in her research, such as Spanish.

The work is published in the *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics*.

More information: Kathryn Rose Barnes et al, The at-issue status of ideophones in German: An experimental approach, *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* (2022). [DOI: 10.16995/glossa.5827](https://doi.org/10.16995/glossa.5827)

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