

Are all ideophones equally iconic?

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“Are all ideophones iconic to the same degree” (Dingemanse 2019: 14)? In Japanese, different lexical properties of ideophones (phonological, morphological, and semantic) have been argued to contribute to their iconicity differently. For example, monomoraic-based (e.g., *poN* ‘popping’), reduplicated/suffixed (e.g., *pokipoki* ‘snapping’), obstruent-initial, vowel-assonant (e.g., *bataQ* ‘thudding’, *pataQ* ‘flopping’), and unimodal ideophones have been discussed as more iconic. In contrast, CVCCVri (e.g., *pokkiri* ‘exactly’) and intervocalic /r/ are more common in less iconic, crossmodal ideophones (e.g., *buruQ* ‘shivering’) (Akita 2009, Dingemanse 2012, and Hamano 1998).

The current study reexamines these previous theoretical proposals using iconicity ratings. 125 native Japanese speakers rated 391 frequent ideophones presented in isolation from 1 (not iconic at all) to 7 (very iconic) and from 1 (not familiar at all) to 7 (very familiar). Data points with familiarity ratings below 4.0 were excluded. We systematically coded each ideophone according to the previously reported features, as well as its etymology (i.e., whether the ideophone has a non-ideophonic origin; e.g., *iraira* ‘irritated’ < *ira* ‘a thorn’) (Yamaguchi 2003, etc.) Cumulative link mixed models were constructed using the ordinal package (Christensen 2019) to predict rated iconicity from each lexical property as a single fixed effect and participant and item as random effects. We compared each model with the null model which contains only random effects. All plots were generated from averaged data using the ggplot2 package version 3.4.2. (<https://osf.io/xhwfa/>).

The results show that the morphological (root in Fig. 1, template in Fig. 2), phonological (initial obstruency in Fig. 3, intervocalic /r/ in Fig. 4, vowel assonance in Fig. 5), and etymological properties (Fig. 6) did not contribute to iconicity ratings. Only the effect of sensory modality was significant; however, it was found that, contrary to the previous studies’ assumption, haptic (crossmodal) ideophones (e.g., *funyafunya* ‘limp’, *sarasara* ‘smooth’, *torotoro* ‘mushy’) were rated as more iconic than ideophones which belong to other sensory modalities, including audition (*surusuru* ‘slurping sound’, *korokoro* ‘chirping sound’) (Fig. 7).

In summary, the current study generally supports the claim that “native speakers are adamant that all ideophones are iconic” (Dingemanse 2019: 19). Investigating the emergence of intuitions and the disparities between iconicity ratings and researchers’ proposals may deepen our understanding of iconicity.

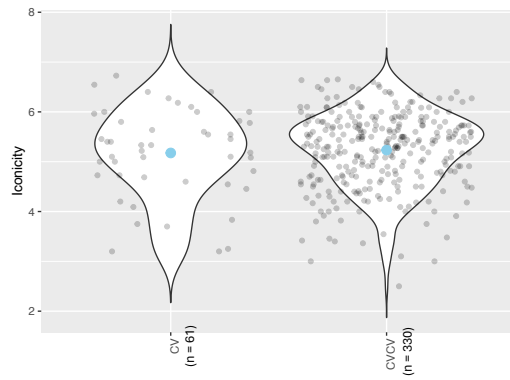


Fig. 1: Root

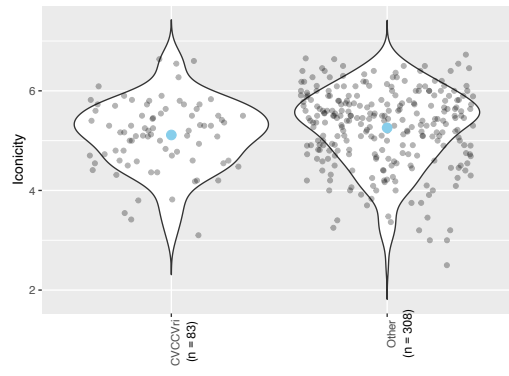


Fig. 2: Template

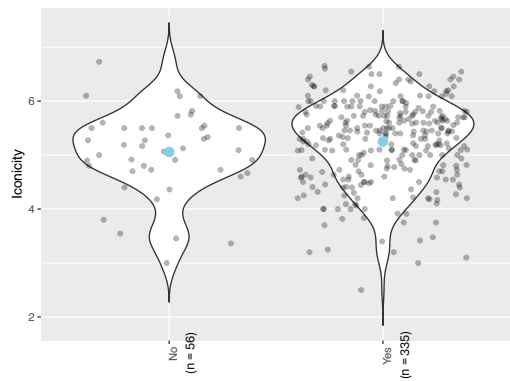


Fig.3: Initial obstruency

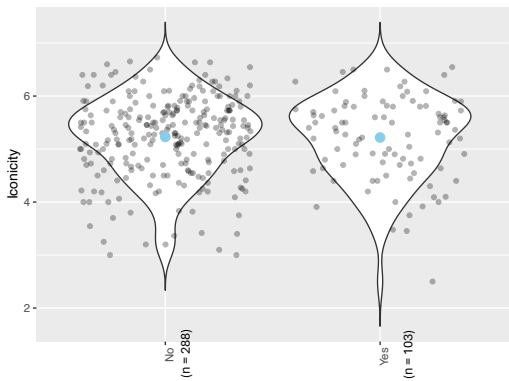


Fig. 4: Intervocalic /r/

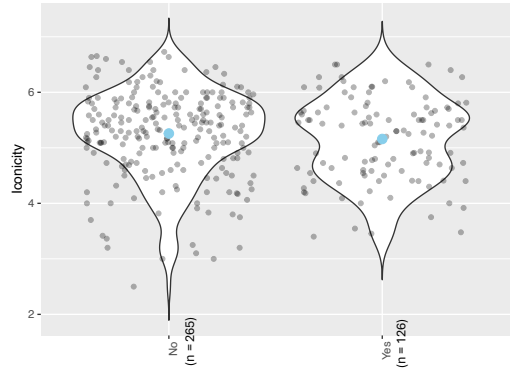


Fig. 5: Vowel assonance

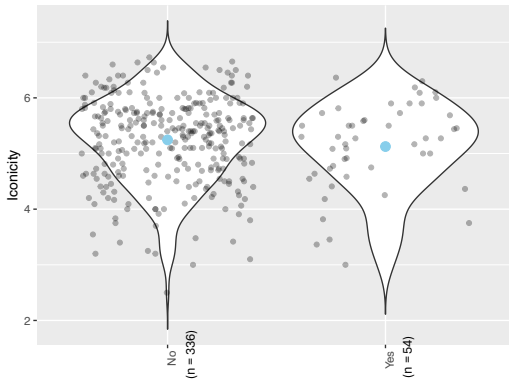


Fig. 6: Ideophonization

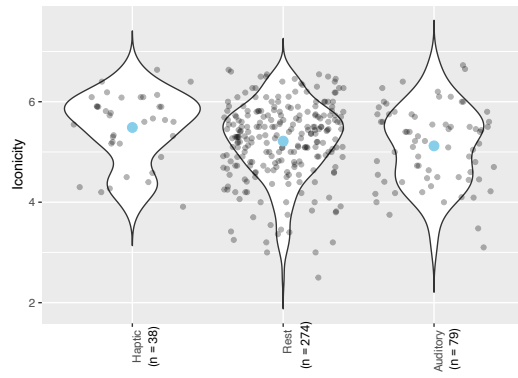


Fig. 7: Sensory modality

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