Poets say woof woof, scientists say dog:
Iconicity is more common when expressivity is demanded

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Researchers have theorized that word-referent iconicity serves many different functions, such as aiding word memorization or facilitating first language learning. However, these proposals scarcely explain why iconicity would be present in the lexicon in the first place. The purported benefits of iconicity might be secondary effects, downstream from a primary mechanism that steers language evolution in the direction of non-arbitrariness. Flaksman (2017) offered a direct account of iconicity's presence in language. She argued that words tend to decrease in iconicity over time, but to balance this out new terms are coined specifically because imitative words afford more expressivity than arbitrary representation. Though this link between iconicity and expressiveness could explain the former's prevalence in the vocabulary, there is not much empirical evidence in support of it. Our study assessed the basic hypothesis that communicative contexts where expressivity is demanded would also tend to contain iconic words. We used corpus analysis to compare the overall use of iconic words across different texts associated with either expressive language (literature and poetry) or informative language (Wikipedia and legal documents). To quantify iconicity numerically, we used the Likert-type iconicity ratings for 14 thousand words collected by Winter and colleagues (2023). We found higher mean iconicity ratings for expressive communicative contexts compared to informative contexts. This was the case even when accounting for part of speech. Predictably, the corpora were not matched for word class, but even within grammatical categories words tended to be more iconic in expressive contexts (e.g., poems had more iconic verbs than Wikipedia articles). Highly iconic words constituted a small subset of the tokens in all corpora. However, they were less rare in expressive contexts than informative contexts. These results demonstrate that the link between iconicity and expressivity can be observed even in real-world texts. Nevertheless, further research in experimental settings could help establish a more direct causal relationship between those concepts.

References

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