

A special kind of lexical expressions - iconic word classes in spoken and sign languages

Typological research has shown that many typologically different spoken languages have ideophones, a special class of words which can be defined as “an open lexical class of marked words that depict sensory imagery” (Dingemanse 2019). Based on data from German Sign Language (DGS), we argue that also sign languages have a special class of signs, so-called idiomatic signs, that share the defining properties of ideophones and show related semantic behavior. Building on co-speech gesture semantic approaches (Ebert et al. 2020) and applications thereof to ideophones (Barnes & Ebert 2023), we suggest an account that compositionally derives the meaning of these idiomatic signs. We show that ideophones as well as idiomatic signs consist of a conventionalized at-issue meaning part and a gestural non-at-issue part, whose meaning can vary from utterance situation to utterance situation and is dependent on how the ideophone/idiomatic sign is produced in the given situation. We hence argue that sign languages just like many spoken languages have a special open class of marked lexical expressions that depict sensory imagery. Unlike ideophones in spoken languages, however, the depiction of idiomatic signs is not auditory but visual. And unlike other iconic lexical expressions in sign languages, idiomatic signs are depictive context-dependent expressions with a particularly expressive meaning component, that is, the iconic features (especially the iconic nonmanual ones) typically contribute an expressive depictive meaning component that is dependent on the very performance of the sign in a specific situation.