

Lexical iconicity in American Sign Language
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Iconicity (a resemblance between form and meaning) in sign languages appears to be much more pervasive and structured compared to spoken languages because of the affordances of the body and the visual modality. Currently, however, we know very little about how visual-manual iconicity is perceived by signers vs. non-signers or whether iconic signs are processed differently in the brain. My colleagues and I have been exploring the nature of the distribution of iconic forms in the American Sign Language (ASL) lexicon, how the perception of iconicity is impacted by linguistic knowledge, and how the perception of iconicity changes when the sign meaning is given versus when it must be guessed (“perceived transparency”). We have also been investigating whether there are general principles of alignment between visual-manual articulations and conceptual elements (e.g., handshapes map to objects). Finally, we have been using Event-Related Potentials (ERPs) to investigate the possible role of iconicity in modulating the temporal neural dynamics of single sign processing. Thus far, this work indicates a) an important distinction between iconicity and transparency, b) linguistic knowledge reduces and changes sensitivity to certain types of iconicity, and c) there appears to be no “neural signature” that tracks iconicity during sign recognition, but sign iconicity impacts lexical access in picture-naming and picture-sign matching paradigms.