

Comprehension of Non-Linguistic Vocalizations across Cultures

It is widely observed that visual communication with gestures enables successful communication between speakers of different languages. But can people also innovate iconic vocalizations to communicate meanings? The current project investigates this question, first tackled by Perlman and Lupyan (2018). Using Percy (Draxler, 2011), we conducted comprehension surveys with listeners from 28 diverse languages. Participants listened to a total of 90 vocalizations and for each, guessed its meaning from among six alternatives. Apart from that, we designed an offline fieldwork version to test more remote populations. Both in the online and in the offline version, all language groups were able to accurately guess the intended meaning of the vocalizations well above chance level. Our results provide the first strong evidence that people can comprehend improvised iconic vocalizations for successful, cross-linguistic communication about a variety of meanings. They speak to the universal potential for vocal iconicity to scaffold communication between speakers without a common language and thus ground the formation of spoken symbols.