Through the lens of a language: Is there a sound-symbolic functional load?

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Abstract (max. 250 words):

The study of Pokémon names in sound symbolism is an effective way to look at the relationship between certain sounds and their corresponding characteristics. Pokémon usually have different names across languages, but their traits – e.g., height, weight, power, etc. – remain the same. In this talk, I will present the first-to-date study on German Pokémon names, which I will relate to analyses of languages such as Japanese, English, or Mandarin Chinese (Kawahara et al., 2018; Shih et al. 2018; 2019). Even though those previous analyses often signaled similarities in sound-symbolic expression across various languages, the current comparison exposes a number of differences, which I will demonstrate in detail during the presentation. To explain those differences, I re-interpret the functional load hypothesis in a novel way – for the purpose of sound-symbolic expression. In phonology, the functional load is ascribed to features in a given language that distinguish meaning. A feature with a high functional load is more essential to distinguishing meaning than a feature with a low functional load, e.g., in English, the vowel contrast has a high functional load, but the tone has a low functional load. I propose that, in sound-symbolic research, the starting point should be the features of a given language. Looking from the perspective of individual languages, it is possible to find overarching iconic correspondences. These are, however, expressed differently depending on the language but rely on similar acoustic and articulatory characteristics.