

Does *thin* sound “small” and *heavy* sound “big”? – An investigation of the size sound symbolic potential of antonym adjective pairs

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Sound symbolism, “the direct linkage between sound and meaning” (Hinton et al. 1994: 1), attested not only in onomatopoeias, interjections, and ideophones, but also the general lexicon (cf. Blasi et al. 2016, Sidhu et al. 2021, Winter & Perlman 2021), can depict myriads of meanings (cf. Jespersen 1922). One prominent dimension is size sound symbolism, in which smallness is associated with the vowel /i/ and largeness with /a/ and /o/ (cf. Sapir 1929, Johnson 1967, Ohala 1984).

This study investigates the semantic scope of size sound symbolism: Does not only *small* sound “small”, but also *thin*; or can only explicit size adjectives exhibit size sound symbolism? We analyze antonym adjective pairs (e.g., *thick/thin*, *heavy/light*, *big/small*), identifying semantic dimension (large/small) (cf. Haynie et al. 2014, Fuchs et al. 2019) and occurrence of vowels /i/ vs. /a/ and /o/ per adjective. We expect /i/ to be connected with the small vs. /a/ and /o/ with the large dimension.

Preliminary linear regression results on three antonym pairs in 20 languages (six language families) show significant effects of semantic dimension on vowel occurrence (/i/: $\beta = .267$, $F(1,118) = 6.362$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .051$; /a/ and /o/: $\beta = -.25$, $F(1,118) = 4.345$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .036$). Separate regressions on individual antonym pairs show a significant effect of semantic dimension on /i/ in *big/small* ($\beta = .65$, $F(1,38) = 10.597$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .218$), yet not for other individual pairs or /a/ and /o/.

These preliminary findings indicate that non-explicit size adjectives are semantically too complex to exhibit size sound symbolism. The results are also in accordance with Blasi et al. (2016: 10820), who identified a significant relationship between smallness and /i/, not largeness and /o/. Smallness might be sound symbolically stronger due to semantic markedness (cf. Fuchs et al. 2019).

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