Iconicity as a bridge between language and the world

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Most research in psycholinguistics, linguistics and neurobiology of language investigate language as unimodal (speech and/or text) and assumes that linguistic forms are arbitrary symbols. I will present an alternative approach to the study of language that takes language as a multimodal phenomenon where messages are conveyed by the linguistic content but also by gestural and prosodic cues, for spoken languages, just like they are conveyed by multiple articulators (hands and face) in signed languages. By broadening the lens to multimodal language, iconicity in communicative forms becomes visible and common (e.g., in the gestures and/or in the prosody). I will present studies in spoken (English) and signed (British Sign Language, BSL) languages that investigate the role of iconicity in language development; and studies using iterative learning to assess whether iconicity emerges and is maintained during simulations of cultural evolution.