

**Intuitive iconicity for events and objects:
Telicity and the count/mass distinction across modalities**

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Telic verbs refer to events bound in time (“decide”), while *atelic* verbs (“think”) refer to events that are not. Analogously, *count* nouns typically refer to objects bound in space (“coin”) while mass nouns typically refer to entities that are not (“rain”). Standard semantic theory (Jackendoff 1991, Bach 1996) draws formal parallels between the logical properties of two domains. Here, we ask whether the notion of boundedness (in space or time) is present in the fundamental cognitive representation of the entities the words denote. A first experiment showed unfamiliar Italian Sign Language signs to non-signers. Participants readily assigned telic and count meanings to signs containing “gestural stops” while they assigned atelic and mass meanings to signs lacking such stops. A second experiment asked if similar results may extend in spoken language. Here, written non-words either contained or lacked a phonological stop. “Stop” words were again more readily assigned telic and count meanings while non-stop words were more readily assigned atelic and mass meanings. Collectively, these results suggest that the telic/atelic and count/mass distinctions play similar roles in an abstract iconic system (mapping meaning to symbols), thus suggesting that these categories share deep similarities in how their typical referents are represented.

References

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