



香港中文大學
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語言學及現代語言系
**Department of Linguistics and
Modern Languages**

Linguistic and Neural Consequences of Iconicity in American Sign Language

Prof. Karen EMMOREY
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Date: March 31, 2026 (Tuesday)

Time: 4:30 p.m. - 6:15 p.m. (Hong Kong Time, UTC +8)

Venue: Lai Chan Pui Ngong Lecture Theatre, Y.C. Liang Hall,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong



Abstract

Iconicity (a resemblance between form and meaning) in sign languages appears to be much more pervasive and structured compared to spoken languages. Currently, however, we know very little about how visual-manual iconicity is perceived by signers vs. non-signers or whether iconic signs are processed differently in the brain. My colleagues and I have been exploring the nature of the distribution of iconic forms in the American Sign Language (ASL) lexicon, how the perception of iconicity is impacted by linguistic knowledge, and whether iconic signs are perceived and processed differently than non-iconic signs. In particular, we have used Event-Related Potentials (ERPs) to examine whether iconic signs exhibit a distinct neural signature for deaf fluent signers or for hearing new learners and whether effects of iconicity are task-dependent. Thus far, this work indicates a) an important distinction between iconicity and transparency, b) linguistic knowledge reduces and changes sensitivity to certain types of iconicity, c) salient/unique semantic features are likely to be iconically depicted, d) there appears to be no “neural signature” that tracks with the strength of iconicity during sign recognition, and e) the effects of sign iconicity are task-dependent, facilitating picture-naming but not word-to-sign translation. Overall, the results reveal behavioral and neural consequences for grounding language in the body that may only occur under certain circumstances (e.g., when visual features of a picture map to iconic features of a sign).

Speaker

Karen Emmorey is a Distinguished Professor in the School of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences at San Diego State University and the Director of the Laboratory for Language and Cognitive Neuroscience. She received her doctorate in Linguistics from the University of California, Los Angeles, and she was a Senior Staff Scientist at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, until 2005. Dr. Emmorey’s research focuses on what sign languages can reveal about the nature of human language, cognition, and the brain. She studies the processes involved in how deaf and hearing people produce and comprehend sign language and how these processes are represented in the brain. Her research interests also include bimodal bilingualism (i.e., sign-speech bilingualism) and the neurocognitive underpinnings of reading skill in profoundly deaf adults.

All Are Welcome

Enquiries

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