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On cross modality of descriptors of everyday sounds: the case of ADJ+NOUN combinations

We know from recent work that sounds are frequently described as events and that the descriptions are instantiated in domains other than audition proper (Caballero & Paradis, 2020; Hartman & Paradis, submitted). In this study, we explore the properties and the entities – more precisely ADJ+NOUN combinations – that are part of the events by probing into participants’ descriptions of everyday sounds. Everyday sounds relate to both personal and general experience of everyday life and activate prior knowledge of sensory experiences in different ways to different people. Two questions are at the core of the study:

1. How are sounds described through the lens of ADJ+NOUN meanings in descriptions of auditory experiences?
2. To what extent do the ADJ+NOUN combinations evoke domains other than hearing?

We conducted a survey, where we used 20 everyday acousmatic sounds, i.e., sounds without corresponding visual input. The sounds ranged from ambient to more specific sounds, involving different levels of interaction between the human body and the environment, such as someone eating or digging, or the sound coming from a fireplace. For each of the 20 sounds, we asked the participants to “describe the sound in as much detail as possible, as if you are describing it to someone who cannot hear it”. We recruited 214 native speakers of English, above 18 years of age, who provided us with 3,875 written descriptions for the 20 sounds.

We identified 3,612 ADJ+NOUN combinations across all 20 sounds and found that sounds that involve less direct interaction between the human body and the external environment have fewer ADJ+NOUN combinations. References to the sources of the sounds dominate among the entities described by the ADJ+NOUN combinations, which refer mainly to objects found in the external environment (such as *juicy apple*), specific body parts and body movements (as in *annoying open-mouthed chewing*).

To capture how the uses of ADJ+NOUN combinations reflect sensory experiences, we classified the ADJ+NOUN combinations into sensory categories, such as vision, audition, proprioception and interoception. Taking into consideration the meanings of both the head nouns and the adjectival modifiers, we found most frequent references to vision and haptics. Our results show that descriptions of sounds are highly cross-modal also when properties and entities are concerned.

References

- Caballero, R., & Paradis, C. (2020). Soundscapes in English and Spanish: a corpus investigation of verb constructions. *Language and Cognition*, 12(4), 705–728.
- Hartman, J., & Paradis, C. (submitted). The language of sound: causal cognition, events, and the multitasking.