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## Ideophones in the visual modality

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Sign languages, like spoken languages, use a variety of more or less iconic conventionalized lexical signs to describe entities, events or properties among others (Perniss et al. 2010). Besides, sign languages also systematically use gestural demonstrations (in combination with lexical signs) to depict events or actions (Davidson 2015). A third class of items used in addition to lexical signs and gestural demonstrations are so-called complex multi-channel signs (MCSs), a special part of speech that has not yet received much attention in linguistic research (Brennan 1992, Johnston & Ferrara 2012, Schütte 2014).

MCSs, which are sometimes also called ‘Spezialgebärden’ (special signs), ‘Gebärdenwendungen’ or ‘(sign language) idioms’, form a relatively small class of conventionalized expressions, which have special formal properties different from lexical signs and gestural demonstrations. On the functional side, the meaning of MCSs is highly context dependent and often translated into spoken languages with the help of different complex idiomatic expressions.

Based on examples taken from the Hamburg DGS corpus (<https://www.sign-lang.uni-hamburg.de/dgs-korpus/index.html>), we discuss modality-independent and modality-dependent properties of MCSs and argue that both their flexible ‘idiomatic’ meaning and their special formal properties show certain similarities with ideophones in spoken languages (Dingemanse 2019).

One result of this cross-modal comparison is that sign languages just like many spoken languages have a special class of marked lexical expressions that depict sensory imagery. Unlike ideophones in spoken languages, the depiction of MCSs in sign languages is not auditory but visual. And unlike other iconic lexical expressions in sign languages, MCSs are ‘idiomatic’ depictive context-dependent expressions with an expressive meaning component.

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