



FINDING

Why Ice Cream Sounds Fat and Crackers Sound Skinny

Words carry weight. A linguist explains.

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Do the names of some foods make them sound heavier or lighter than others? This seems unlikely; after all, as Shakespeare said in *Romeo and Juliet*:

What's in a name? That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet. . . .

Juliet is expressing the theory we call conventionalism: that a name for something is just an agreed-upon convention. The alternative view, that a name might naturally fit an object, that some names might naturally sound sweeter than others, is called naturalism. Although conventionalism is the norm in modern linguistics, Plato argued for naturalism 2,500 years ago in the *Cratylus*, pointing out that sometimes sounds seem to carry meaning, a phe-

nomenon we now call sound symbolism.

Modern research has found support for Plato's position by looking at the meanings associated with front vowels and back vowels. Front vowels are the ones in which the tongue is high up in the front of the mouth, like the vowels in teeny, thin or Chex. The picture opposite shows a schematic cutaway of the head with the lips and teeth on the left, and the tongue high up toward the front of the mouth. By contrast back vowels are made with the tongue lower in the back of the mouth, like the vowels in bold, coarse or large, as shown in the illustration.

In many languages, front vowels are used in words for small, thin, light things, and back vowels in words for big, fat, heavy things. It's not always true, but it's

a tendency that you can see in the stressed vowels in words like little, teeny or itsy-bitsy (all front vowels) versus humongous or gargantuan (back vowels). Or in Spanish, chico ("small," front vowel) versus gordo ("fat," back vowel). Or French petit (front vowel) versus grand (back).

One marketing study at Loyola College created pairs of made-up product names that were identical except for having front or back vowels and asked participants to answer:

Which brand of laptop seems bigger, Detal or Dotal?

Which brand of vacuum cleaner seems heavier, Keffi or Kuffi?

Which brand of ketchup seems thicker, Nellen or Nullen?

In each case, the product named with