

[The Bouba-Kiki Effect](#) Video Transcript

LUKE GROSKIN: Which of these shapes is Bouba and which is Kiki?

SPEAKER 2: What?

SPEAKER 3: Bouba or Kiki?

SPEAKER 4: What's a Bouba? And what's a Kiki?

LUKE GROSKIN: They're just made up words. So which shape looks like Bouba, and which shape looks like a Kiki?

SPEAKER 5: This one is Bouba. And this one is Kiki?

SPEAKER 6: This is Bouba. And this is Kiki.

SPEAKER 7: Bouba. And Kiki.

SPEAKER 8: Bouba, to me, maybe a splash, you know? Kiki, I don't know. Maybe something shiny like a key ring, you know?

SPEAKER 9: This one is Kiki. And this one is Bouba.

LUKE GROSKIN: You're not alone if you thought this one was Bouba and this one was Kiki. In fact--

KELLY MCCORMICK: Upwards of 90% of the groups tested will reliably match Kiki the jagged shape and Bouba to the rounded shape.

LUKE GROSKIN: But no matter where it's tested or what language it's tested in, researchers see the Bouba-Kiki effect.

KELLY MCCORMICK: The effect was originally documented by Wolfgang Köhler in the 1920s with Spanish-speaking population. And since then, it's been taken all over the world.

LUKE GROSKIN: Including preschool.

KELLY MCCORMICK: It's been conducted on toddlers, and a similar effect was observed.

LUKE GROSKIN: So what's going on?

SPEAKER 10: I don't know. It just looks like it.

SPEAKER 3: Come on, look at the curves and the-- just looks like a Bouba, man. It's like a Bouba.

LUKE GROSKIN: But there's got to be a better explanation than that. Kelly McCormick of Emory University riffs on some of the popular theories.

KELLY MCCORMICK: Some people do think that we're all a little bit synesthetic. That we're associating audio and visual information because we have kind of a wiring between auditory and visual parts of the brain.

Maybe it's the shape our mouths are making as we're pronouncing these words that causes us to associate. So when you say the word "Bouba," your lips are rounded, your oral cavity is very open. Bouba. Nothing tense or linear or tight about it, as there is when you say "Kiki." Kiki.

It could also be something that arises over the course of experience. Maybe we're kind of simulating what it would be like to interact with something of these different forms.

Take a bowling ball and a pinecone, and you roll them across the ground. The bowling ball is going to have this kind of "whoa, whoa, whoa." And the pinecone's going to be more like "t-t-t-t."

LUKE GROSKIN: But the Bouba-Kiki effect is really just a roundabout way of answering a more pointed question.

KELLY MCCORMICK: At the heart of it, we're really asking why certain sounds are especially good for representing certain meanings. So one thing that we've done is make hundreds and hundreds of nonsense words and done kind of a playoffs. Hey, which of these do you prefer? Is this a good word for pointed? Is this a good word for roundedness?

LUKE GROSKIN: And word after word, you can narrow in on the exact sounds that convey a meaning.

KELLY MCCORMICK: Words like "Tekae, Ketae, Teetae" were most likely to be rated as sounding extremely pointed. And those are words with very abrupt transitions in the sounds.

LUKE GROSKIN: And on the opposite side of the spectrum?

KELLY MCCORMICK: "Nolu, Mumo, Lomo." These are all characterized by sonorant consonants. Their voiced consonants, and they all have rounded vowels. By figuring out what it is about specific words that's driving the effect, we can come up with a better account of what kind of cross-sensory mappings might be driving it.

LUKE GROSKIN: So whether it's just the way we make a sound or we learn to associate that sound with a concept or we're just wired weird, you can be certain this is not all nonsense.

SPEAKER 3: I just know this is a Bouba. This is Bouba, man.

LUKE GROSKIN: For Science Friday, I'm Luke Groskin.