GESTURE, LEXIS, AND GRAMMAR

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The degree to which speakers' gestures can function as conventional signs has long been recognized to range along a continuum (Kendon 1980; McNeill 1992, 2005). On the high end are gestures that have a conventional status within a given culture that function like words (such as a thumbs-up sign to indicate positive evaluation). On the low end are gestures produced one time in a specific context (such as illustrating the form of an unusually-shaped object). The fact that gestures with a highly conventional status can be word-like has been known at least since Efron (1941) referred to them as "emblems". But to what degree do speakers' gestures play a role that is more grammatical in nature?

Research in gesture studies is increasingly showing that they do. I will discuss work being conducted, by PhD candidates in the Amsterdam Gesture Center (AGC) and by an international team based at Moscow State Linguistic University, on how some grammatical categories central to verbs appear as "manu-festations" in gesture. In addition, I will consider the implications of these studies for the relation of gesture to grammar when we understand 'grammar' as a system for characterizing how languages work (e.g., the theory of Cognitive Grammar, e.g., Langacker 1987).

Looking at gesture provides insights into the imagistic nature of grammatical concepts (Cienki 2013). It also raises questions about the overlap of spoken language with other semiotic systems, in terms of forms of expression and in terms of their functions.

References

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