

Gesture and eventuality – multimodal constructions in English

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The paper presents results of an ongoing pilot study of the relation between lexical-semantic features of verbs and deverbative nouns and formal features of co-speech gestures in spontaneous English conversations. The apparent link between expression of eventuality (here as an umbrella term for aktionsart as well as aspectuality) and adjacent co-speech gestures has been in focus of a number of studies (initially by McNeill & Levy, 1982, followed by Duncan, 2002, Becker, 2011, Parrill et al. 2013, Lis & Navaretta, 2013). The research so far have indicated that

- (a) the form of gestures accompanying eventuality constructions exhibits iconic association with the nature of an event expressed verbally
- (b) co-speech gesture reflects crosslinguistic differences in event structure (Talmy, 1985) and thus reflects different ways of “thinking for speaking/gesturing” (Slobin, 1987).

The present study is based on the data from a multimodal corpus of English (AMI Corpus, Carletta, 2006). An excerpt from the corpus containing spontaneous conversation between 3 native English speakers have been annotated at several levels: gesture (gesture phases after Kendon (2004), gesture form after Bressemer (2013), verbal categories including aktionsart features (durativity, telicity, dynamicity and boundedness, cf. Vendler (1967) or Depraetere (2007)) and also prosody (intonation phrases, pitch accents), syntactic roles and discourse status (information structure) in order to take all possibly correlating features into account. Features with a significant tendency to co-occur in the same contexts should be considered a part of multimodal constructions. This pilot study thus follows the emerging approach of multimodal construction grammar (see e.g. Zima, 2013).

We hypothesize that, for instance, manual gestures with stressed end of a movement will tend to co-occur with punctual expressions, whereas “unbounded” gestures are expected to tend to accompany processes and complex, repeated or longer gestures to accompany durative events (based particularly on findings of Becker et al., 2011).

The main contribution of this pilot study, apart from being a basis for subsequent crosslinguistic research, is the complexity of annotation and thus inclusion of an unprecedented number of potential factors that may play a role in the construction of multimodal meaning. Moreover, this study is one of the first attempts to explore gesture and eventuality in spontaneous dialogic communication – while most of the previous research was based on elicited narratives.

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