What is multimodal grammar anyway? A view from quantitative corpus analysis

Kasper Kok, VU University Amsterdam

ABSTRACT

A core accomplishments of gesture research has been the dismissal of the idea that gestural expression is fully idiosyncratic. From various scholarly perspectives, researchers have proven gesture to exhibit systematicity in much of the same way as other components of language do (e.g., Kendon 2004; McNeill 1992). An important, remaining challenge, as Kendon (1996; 8) proposed, is to understand “how far (within a given cultural group) gestures are patterned and consistent in the movement patterns and the hand shape forms they use.” Some studies, advancing this agenda, have examined specific recurrent patterns in gestural expression and their functions in discourse (Calbris & Doyle 1990; Harrison 2010; Kendon 2004; Müller 2004). Others have approached the gesture-grammar question in a more comprehensive manner, calling for a multimodal reappraisal of theories of language structure (Cienki in press; Fricke 2008; Lapaire 2011; Muntigl 2004).

In this talk, I identify a number of theoretical issues underlying a multimodal reconsideration of grammar. These include (1) the immense multifunctionality of the gestural medium, (2) gesture’s dependence on the verbal channel, and (3) gesture’s potential to express meaning in a non-categorical manner. Based on an assessment of the different perspectives and assumptions underlying cognitive and functional grammatical models (González-García & Butler 2006), I propose that an adequate model of multimodal language structure should incorporate at least the following: discrete-combinatorial and gradient-kinesic structure; cognitive and interactive motivations; simultaneous and sequential compositionality; schematic and specific structures; variably contextualized categories. Also, dependent on the researcher’s aims, such a grammatical framework should hold a middle ground between being truthful to the data and being operationalizable.

Finally, I discuss the potential to address these issues on the basis of quantitative corpus analysis. I assess the potential of the Bielefeld Speech and Gesture Alignment corpus (SaGA; Lücking, et al. 2012) to provide a better understanding of the different levels on which gestural expression can be systematic, and what kind of grammatical model can account for such data.

References


