

Embodiment and abstraction – The experiential basis of gesture formation

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The idea that abstract meanings are motivated historically and synchronically by more concrete „real world“ meanings has been forcefully argued by Sweetser (1990). In her work on perception verbs, on modality, on conjunction, on coordination, and on subordination and conditionals she has proposed that in all cases the abstract meanings are rooted in more concrete ones, meanings with a ‚real world‘ relation. For instance, historically the meaning of the perception verb „to see“ has developed from seeing as a concrete physical act of perception to the abstract meaning of understanding. It is a fairly widely accepted fact within historical linguistics that over time concrete meanings tend to lose their concrete dimensions (semantic bleaching) and what remains is the abstract ‚arbitrary‘ meaning. However, Sweetser goes much further by specifying the motivating link between the two meanings as a metaphorical mapping (Sweetser 1990: 38-39). Sweetser proposes that also in a synchronic perspective (in polysemous words) the more concrete meanings motivate the more abstract once via similar metaphoric mappings (Sweetser 1990: 49).

Now, what we want to argue in this talk is that similar processes can be observed in co-verbal gestures. In particular, we will show that complex physical experiences such as full body movements serve as experiential source for more abstract hand gestures – the motivating link being metonymy in the first place.

Hand gestures may abstract from full body movements by re-enacting what the hands actually did in the first place, but perform the movement in the default gesture space: instead of pulling an imaginary silk-thread from the head, extending it between the two hands in the default gesture space in front of the body. Or the hands may abstract from a full body movement by representing a body slightly swaying in search for balance: a flat erected hand represents body back and forth movements. Based on data from different types of dance trainings (Ballet, Modern Dance, Argentine Tango, Waltz) we will present analyses of different forms and instances of full body pantomimes and hand gestures. Sometimes the two evolve in a linear process where the full-body experience happens first in time in a session and the more abstract one evolves at a later moment – for instance, when remembering and talking about the lesson. Sometimes they co-exist and a speaker switches between the modes all along the lesson. This is what we term „embodied abstractions“. (Müller and Ladewig forthcoming) Such processes of abstraction that show how in fact bodily experiences serve as experiential source domains for more abstract meanings of body movements can also be observed in other conversational situations.

We suggest, that what we observe here in co-verbal gesturing might be similar to what sign linguists consider grammaticalization (e.g., Wilcox 2005).

References

- Sweetser, Eve (1990) From etymology to pragmatics. *Metaphorical and cultural aspects of semantic structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
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