Gestures, facial expressions and body posture in CxG accounts of language: Core or periphery?

Claudia Lehmann & Meike Pentrel
(Universität Osnabrück)

Keywords: Construction Grammar, Multimodal Construction Grammar, gestures, body language, constructions

This workshop aims at investigating the relationship between verbal expressions and gestures, facial expressions and body posture using Construction Grammar (e.g. Goldberg 2006, Hoffmann & Trousdale 2013), or CxG, as the theoretical background. As Langacker (2008: 250) points out: “Manual gestures […], facial expressions, actions performed more globally (e.g. a shrug), and even factors like body language […] may all be closely bound up with linguistic expressions, in which case they can hardly be excluded from ‘language’ on an a priori basis.” CxG provides a powerful framework for accounting for this very relationship. Its units of analysis, constructions, are defined as form-meaning pairings (e.g. Croft 2001: 18) and besides verbal expressions, gestures and the like can be such forms.

Recently, research on multimodal CxG has started to address these issues (e.g. Steen & Turner 2013, Zima & Bergs 2017). Quite a few publications report on notable co-occurrences of constructions and gestures (Schoonjans, Brône & Feyaerts 2015, Zima 2014a, Hsu, Brône & Feyaerts 2018). In the light of these findings, some researchers suggest that certain “constructions may not only have verbal but also gestural structure” (Zima 2014b: 27) and that gestures are thus integral parts of specific constructions. In these, gestural and verbal parts combine to arrive at a holistic meaning that is more than the sum of its parts (Schoonjans 2018). While multimodal CxG so far mainly focuses on gestures, the present workshop likes to include facial expressions and other bodily expressions, e.g. posture, in the discussion. Like gestures, body language and facial expressions also recurrently co-occur with certain expressions/constructions. An informal observation suggests, for example, that the construction Tell me about it, which is associated with an ironic meaning by convention, is often accompanied by a facial expression known as "blank face" whereas its nonconstructional counterpart (the sincere request) is not. However, the ironic construction is likewise accompanied by a flat intonation contour and so the question remains, if and to what extent “the body” can be seen as part of a construction. On the one hand, empirical studies were able to show frequency effects for morpheme sequences (e.g. Arnon & Snider 2010, Blumenthal-Drame 2012), which they interpret as a sign of their holistic entrenchment. Such a finding can easily be extended to multimodal constructions. On the other hand, it has often been argued that probably not all facets of a construction will be stored in the constructicon, i.e. the mental repository of constructs (cf. Goldberg 2013, Hoffmann 2017).

Yet, the notion of multimodal constructions is controversial. Since such constructions seem to also work in non-face-to-face situations, there are voices which analyse gestures not as integral but “as constructions in their own right that enter into crossmodal collostructions with linguistic items” (Uhrig 2018) while others argue that truly multimodal constructions (as
described by Schoonjans (2018) above), which are stored in the long-term memory, are rare phenomena (Hoffmann 2017). Given the variability of gestures and their potential infrequent co-occurrence with verbal expressions, the entire idea of multimodal constructions can easily be challenged (cf. Cienki 2018).

Although opinions remain divergent as to whether multimodal constructions truly exist (Ningelgen & Auer 2017; Schoonjans 2017), the fact that embedded depictions serve as constituents of canonical verbal utterances argues for multimodal semiotic signals being integral parts of constructions.

Following from these different approaches this workshop addresses among others the following questions and issues:

- Are constructions multimodal or is each bodily expression a construction in its own right?
- Are gestures/facial expressions part of the constructions stored in the constructicon or are they idiosyncratic occurrences that cannot be generalized?
- Are there constructions that are always accompanied by gestures, facial expressions etc., even in non-face-to-face conversations? Does the lack thereof lead to miscomprehension?
- Are facial expressions universal or cultural specific? Even if they differ, are there certain constructions that are more prone to be accompanied by facial expressions than others?
- How can we incorporate bodily actions in a CxG model?
- The entrenchment of gestures
- The acquisition of gestures and facial expressions (as part of constructions)
- Is there a special type of gesture that is especially prone to become part of a construction (e.g. metaphoric gestures, iconic, etc.)?

References


