Gesture in (Finnish) Sign Language

Tommi Jantunen, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

In this talk I will present the various ways gesture is manifested in sign languages in general and in Finnish Sign Language (FinSL) in particular. I will first discuss, from a diachronic and a synchronic perspective, the (consequences of the) obvious fact that signs are more or less conventionalized articulatory gestures (see Jantunen 2015). I will then go on and replace the underlying and traditional "articulatory view" on the gesture with a more "semiotically-based view" (Okrent 2002), which leads on to the discussion of the sign as a possible combination of morphological and gestural elements (see Liddell 2003). Finally, I will take the semiotically-based view on the gesture and contemplate the role the gesture has also on other levels of linguistic structure. In particular, I will present some recent work I have done partly with my colleagues on the role the gesture has both in (Finnish) sign language prosody and in syntax. The relevant questions here concern the linguistic vs. gestural status of head movements and positions in sign languages, and the role the gesture might have in explaining the frequent ellipsis of syntactic material in FinSL (see Jantunen 2013, Puupponen et al. 2015).

References


Okrent, A. (2002). A modality-free notion of gesture and how it can help us with the morpheme vs. gesture question in sign language linguistics (or at least give us some criteria to work with). In R. P. Meier, K. Cormier & D. Quinto-Pozos (Eds.), Modality and structure in signed and spoken languages, 175-198. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Considering gesture, grammar, and grammaticalization

Jürgen Streeck, The University of Texas at Austin, the USA

Speech-accompanying gesture does not really lend itself to grammatical analysis: there are no gesture-equivalents of multi-word constructions nor can we speak of well-formed gesture expressions; it is also generally not possible to identify syntactic relations among gestures. And yet, grammatical considerations often come into play when we investigate gestures. For example, the presence of gestures may shape the grammatical structure of an utterance, and there may be language units (words) dedicated to anchoring gestures in sentences or utterances. Furthermore, some gestures seem to serve grammatical functions, i.e., functions that otherwise ‘function words’ or grammatical morphemes serve (e.g., negation). And, thirdly, some conversational gestures appear to have acquired their meanings in ways not unlike grammatical elements in spoken language, through ‘grammaticalization’. While the term is not entirely appropriate to describe the emergence of ‘functional’ units in gesture, the parallels to spoken language are quite visible. The paper will examine two instances of ‘grammaticalized’ hand gestures, hand closings and slicings, and explore how their experiential qualities might be related to their meanings and communicative functions.
Gestures and their relation to grammar

Silva Ladewig, European University Viadrina, Germany

Within the past ten years researchers became increasingly interested in the study of gesture and grammar, claiming that gesture relates to grammar itself by fulfilling grammatical functions such as aspect (Bressem 2012; Duncan 2002) and negation (Calbris 2003; Harrison 2010), by forming stable units together with speech (“multimodal constructions”, e.g. Andrén 2010; Bressem 2012) and by exhibiting proto-syntactical structures themselves (Fricke 2012). Research on multimodal language use integrates these phenomena into different grammatical frameworks such as Functional Grammar, Cognitive Grammar, or Construction Grammar. Moreover, the various approaches differ in the way they address verbo-gestural phenomena: Researchers either start from the point of view of speech and identify particularly interesting verbal grammatical phenomena or they take recurrent gestural phenomena as their starting point and investigate their relation with the grammar of speech. Yet, regardless of the approach, two basic lines of thought can be traced in the current discussion of gesture and grammar, which will be discussed and exemplified in this talk.

First of all, the talk will attend to gesture itself and focus on processes of semantic bleaching and grammaticalization, gestures may undergo when becoming linguistic units. Using the example of “recurrent gestures” (Ladewig 2014a) which may build gestural repertoires within a speech community (Bressem & Müller 2014), it will be shown that one gestural form, such as the cyclic rotation of a hand, shows different degrees of lexicalization according to the different contexts in which this gesture may be used. A lexicalized gesture may then grammaticalize and enter the linguistic system of sign language as a marker of aspect, for instance (Wilcox 2004).

The second part of the talk will address the relation of gesture and the grammar of spoken language. Using the example of interrupted utterances completed by gestures, processes of gesture-speech integration will be elucidated (Ladewig 2014b). By presenting the results of perception experiments, it will be shown that gestures, in these cases, preferably substitute the linguistic units of nouns and verbs and that they are perceived and conceived differently, dependent on the grammatical slot these gestures are integrated into: In noun positions, gestures are conceived as depicting objects, in verb positions they are considered as profiling actions. It will be argued that the replacing of nouns and verbs and the creating and understanding of these multimodal utterances is possible because our hands embody the “conceptual archetypes” (Langacker 1991) of nouns and verbs, which are objects and actions. Both phenomena (semantization and grammaticalization of gestures and integration of gestures) are discussed from a linguistic-semiotic perspective (Müller 2013) which aims at revealing the potential of gesture to fulfill linguistic functions, yet is sensitive to the medial properties of hand gestures. As such the talk offers insights into one line of research within the field of multimodal communication addressing the relation of grammar and gesture.

References


