

The Dynamic Scope of Relevant Behaviors in Talk: A Perspective From Cognitive Linguistics

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Extended Abstract

Within the field of gesture studies, the many ways in which speech and gesture interrelate in the production of utterances has been the object of research for decades (at least since Kendon 1980). Nevertheless, it has only been in recent years that more linguists have begun to think seriously about the implications of this research for their theories of language. In cognitive linguistics, the framework of Cognitive Grammar (CG) is one that provides a means of taking account of gesture; this is a consequence of usage-based (Langacker 1988) nature of the theory. To be consistent with this framework, analyses in CG should work from the ground up to see what form-meaning (phonological-semantic) associations are abstracted by language users, that is: which ones become schematized and entrenched from communicative usage events. The phonological pole of a linguistic sign could conceivably include signals that are not just the audible sounds of spoken language, but also behaviors concomitant with language-based expression, such as gesture (Langacker 2008: 457), to the degree that they should also become schematized and entrenched in sufficiently consistent association with concepts (the semantic pole of a sign). The theory thus allows for linguistic signs to be multimodal (audio-visual in the case of speech and gesture) to varying degrees, based on the extent of schematization and entrenchment.

However, this elegant theoretical characterization, that appears to quite validly capture what language users do in practice, is a difficult one for linguists to do justice to in their analyses. In traditional studies within cognitive linguistics, language is treated as if it were a discrete category, separate from gesture, and the assumptions behind this are not problematized – this despite the fact that in CG, linguistic categories on various levels (phonemes, constructions, word meanings, etc.) are considered to involve continua and prototype categories rather than categories with strict boundaries.

The present study begins by considering the different degrees to which speakers' manual gestures are conventionally communicative. Kendon (1988) and McNeill (1992) discuss a continuum of gesture types, from more to less conventionally communicative signs. On one end are "emblem" gestures (e.g., think of a "thumbs up" gesture to show a positive evaluation of something). These are the most word-like in the stability of their sign status. However, on the other end is "spontaneous gesticulation": the manual movements that may relate to the contents of the speech in idiosyncratic ways, such as depicting selected aspects of the forms of entities one is talking about. Such depiction can take place in more detailed or more schematic ways, and can vary greatly in form across speakers and across usage events. Is there any way in which such gestures can sensibly be accounted for in a theory such as CG?

I propose the notion of a dynamic scope of relevant behaviors (SRB) as a way to take into account the varying kinds of sign-status that gestures can have. Elsewhere (Cienki 2012) I consider how the SRB can also help handle the variable relation of other behaviors to talk, such as the use of non-lexical utterances (such as *uh* and *mm* in English) and the use of hummed intonation contours without speech. The proposal is that in a communicative context, there is a dynamic scope of relevant behaviours, the scope of which may differ for the producer of the behaviours and for anyone paying attention to him

or her (the “attender[s]”) at any given moment. The scope has a focus and a periphery. In face-to-face communicative usage events between hearing people, spoken language is the default focus of the scope of relevant behaviors. A producer can flexibly make use of a smaller or larger scope of expressive behaviors, and an attender’s focus can also be narrower or broader and can change in size over the course of a conversation. The SRB is thus dynamic in terms of zooming in (taking just one behaviour into account) or zooming out (including more than one behaviour at a time) and in terms of its shifting focus, determining which behaviour(s) is/are in focus.

The phenomenon of self-repetition (of the verbal or gestural part of an utterance) provides a useful context for exploring how the properties of the construct proposed above operate in practise. Self-repetitions within topic units from a set of interviews in English from an American television talk show were analysed. Verbal repetitions were counted when they consisted of more than one word repeated, and gestural repetitions consisted of repeated use of more than two form features of the set of four that have become customary in gesture analysis since McNeill (1992), namely: hand shape, palm orientation, location, and movement type. The analysis revealed a number of patterns according to which the SRB may be expanded and/or contracted in the process of talk on the time scale of seconds or minutes. The types were interpreted as follows:

- Repetition involving contraction of the SRB: An idea goes from being presented with multiple articulators (spoken words produced orally and gestures produced manually) and/or more elaborate use of one or more form features to being presented with one mode of expression. The repetition thus involves reduction of behaviours on the part of the producer.
- Expansion of the SRB: An idea first expressed with a conventional linguistic sign is reintroduced using multiple articulators and/or more elaborate use of one or more form features. One can see this as a temporary loosening of symbolization.
- Expansion and then contraction of the SRB: An idea first presented verbally is reintroduced using multiple articulators (speech and gesture), with the speaker settling on one form of expression; momentary elaboration into a multimodal sign ensemble is followed by stabilization on the use of a monomodal sign.
- Maintenance of an expanded SRB: An idea first expressed with multiple articulators is repeated and part of it is symbolized in gesture for a small stretch of discourse – using what McNeill (1992) calls a gestural “catchment”. Information that was originally temporally integrated in what Enfield (2009) calls a “composite utterance” becomes decompressed, as it were, as relevant behaviours (speech and gesture) continue to serve somewhat different expressive functions over perhaps a few minutes of talk.

The SRB that we make use of varies, and this variation occurs not only in different ways but also along different time scales. Consequently, symbolization processes can also play out along different time scales, e.g., within topic units of less than a minute (microsymbolization via gestural catchments), across topics within a usage event (in the use of ad hoc words or gestures spontaneously ascribed a symbolic function within a conversation) and across genre events (in the gradual codification of functions/meanings with certain lexico-grammatical and/or gestural forms within communities of practice)

In conclusion, this research helps us reflect theoretically about how linguistic signs function in practice. Behaviours that repeatedly occur in the SRB paired with certain functions should be more likely to become more entrenched as symbolic structures or signs. But the present study suggests that signs need not be considered static entities with rigid boundaries, but rather may have relatively stable centers and variability in their boundaries. This also allows us to explain the overlap between the semiotic systems of spoken language and gesture (and other concurrent behaviours) as communicative signs in face-to-face interaction – an overlap which varies in degree over the time course of any usage event of talk.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Suwei Wu for collection and transcription of the video data. This research has been supported by Russian Science Foundation grant #14-48-00067.

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