Specificity and schematicity in gestures and in signed languages

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Cognitive grammar considers specificity and schematicity basic semantic notions. Their relationship is a gradual one and concerns “the level of precision and detail at which a situation is characterized” (Langacker 2009: 6). It affects different forms of lexical reference and puts them in a hierarchical relation. On the other hand, a continuum from specificity to schematicity characterizes processes in which lexical meaning becomes successively grammaticized.

Resonating with the ICLC’s current topic of linguistic diversity, this theme session addresses how specificity and schematicity play out in signed languages and in the gestural dimension of spoken language. Both processes have been recognized for signed languages to play a significant role in processes of lexicalization and grammaticalization (Janzen 2012). Whether they play a significant role in co-speech gesture, has, however, not been systematically researched. On the contrary, McNeill’s semiotic continuum from gesture to sign posits (in fact) there is no real continuum, but a fundamental semiotic difference between gesticulation (e.g. co-speech, idiosyncratic gesturing) and sign: while the meaning of gesticulation is considered global and synthetic, pantomime as global and analytic, emblems as segmented and synthetic and the meaning of sign language is characterized as fundamentally different from gesticulation, namely as segmented and analytic (McNeill 2000: 5).

We will we suggest that differences in specificity and schematicity characterize the meaning of co-speech gesticulation and that these are specifically apparent when co-speech gestures undergo processes of conventionalization (Müller 2014). In bringing together researchers from signed languages with those from gesture studies we seek to foster a dialogue within Cognitive Linguistics that promises a deeper understanding of parallels and differences between the signed and gestural modalities of communication leading ultimately to a better understanding of the roles schematicity and specificity play in a cognitive semantics and a cognitive grammar of languages more generally.

References:
Woll (Eds.), Handbook on Sign Languages (Handbooks of Linguistics and Communication Sciences (HSK) series). Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter. 816-841.
Müller, Cornelia. 2014. Gestures as "deliberate expressive movement". In: M. Seyfeddinipur and M. (eds.), From Gesture in Conversation to Visible Action as Utterance, 127-152. Amsterdam:Benjamins

**List of Talks:**
Terry Janzen, University of Manitoba, Barbara Shaffer, University of New Mexico
Lorraine Leeson, Trinity College Dublin “Does grammar include gesture? Evidence from two signed languages“
Barbara Shaffer, University of New Mexico, Lorraine Leeson, Trinity College Dublin “What I know is here; what I don’t know is somewhere else: Deixis and gesture spaces in American Sign Language and Irish Sign Language“
Jana Bressem: Technical University Chemnitz “Schematicity as a factor of gestural expression of plurality”
Silva H. Ladewig, European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder) “Specificity and schematicity in recurrent co-speech gestures”
Cornelia Müller , European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder) “Specificity and schematicity in how gestures mean”
Terry Janzen, University of Manitoba “Commentator”