In our paper we take a look at one of the central issues of cognitive linguistics - the embodied nature of language (cf. Gibbs 2005, Barsalou 2008). We are interested in the image-schematic representation of abstract verbs and whether abstract verbs have direction. Our work proceeds from the basic tenets of cognitive metaphor and embodiment theory, grammaticalization theory and cognitive grammar.

Our study makes two important contributions to the field of image-schematic representation of abstract verbs. First, our data comes from Estonian, a Finno-Ugric language that is typologically different from English. Previous work on the image-schematic representation of verbs is mainly focused on English (e.g. Spivey et al. 2005, Meteyard & Vigliocco 2009), but a wider variety of cross-linguistic data is necessary in order to test the (presumably) universal claims of embodiment theory. Our second contribution is the use of an innovative experimental design to study abstract verbs. We employ a free form drawing task using an iPad which allows us to record and trace the on-line processing of abstract verbs. In our experiment, 20 native speakers of Estonian were asked to create and explain their own schematic representations of 20 abstract verbs. The recordings of the explanations and the subsequent drawings were subjected to manual qualitative data analysis.

The results of our experiment confirm the general prediction that verbs with abstract meaning have an image-schematic direction, but the specifics of the direction vary according to the type of verb and the viewpoint selected. While some verbs have a clear direction (e.g. meeldima ‘like’), other verbs are depicted by a variety of lines. Still, similar strategies were noticed across the test subjects, for example elama ‘live’ was often depicted with a wavy line, a zig-zag or a spiral, mõtlema ‘think’ correlates with circular motion and määrama ‘determine’ with a dot or a square (punctual representation). In general, orientational metaphors were systematically used: verbs with a positive meaning (armuma ‘fall in love’, suutma ‘be able to’) correlate with the right and/or upward direction, verbs with a negative meaning (jätma ‘leave’) with downward and/or left direction; cf. Fuente et al. (2016) who show that the concepts of “good” and “bad” are associated with right and left space. Our study also stresses the importance of viewpoint – the schematic representation of abstract verbs depends on the viewpoint selected by the subjects. This result may explain some of the divergence in the results of previous studies.

References

