

UDC 81:159.925.8

81'221.22

Original scientific paper

Received on 17 December 2010

Accepted for publication on 7 April 2011

## The Metaphorization of Practical Action and Everyday Life Experience in the Words, Emblems, and Coverbal Gestures of Spoken Language

Bogdanka Pavelin Lešić

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zagreb

bogdanka.pavelin@ffzg.hr

This paper focuses on the impact of practical action and experience on all aspects of oral language, segmental and suprasegmental, verbal and visual (i.e. gestural). It is based on observations of emblems and coverbal gestures in synergy with the words of spoken language over a number of years annotating and studying visual and verboacoustic manifestations in videotaped oral interactions.

Facial expressions, postures, gestures, and body movement in general visually manifest the close semiotic interweaving of movement, space, and words in human thought and consequently in human oral expression. The important part of this interweaving results from the metaphorization or analogical converging of two notions that share one or more features but otherwise belong to different categories. Thinking and speaking are experienced as just another form of activity such as the practical actions of walking, running, handling objects, only transposed into the virtual world of cognitive and linguistic reality. Thus, when speaking, we are handling concepts by using gestures and words as if they were the objects experienced in the outside material reality. The etymology of words expressing abstract ideas often hide the metaphorical source domain of a concrete phenomenon in our practical life. For example, not only is the Latin word *comprehendere*, equivalent in meaning to the English words *catch*, *get*, *grasp*, or *comprehend*; the French *saisir* or *comprendre*; and the Croatian *shvatiti*, but all of these words also share the same underlying metaphor: *Understanding is catching*. The coverbal metaphorical hand gesture of grasping an imaginary object seems to visually revitalize in the gesture space the metaphor, which had become 'dead' in the linguistic system.

The correspondences in the verbal and gestural structure of metaphorical mappings in a given language are possible because words and gestures are parts of a single framework. They developed out of practical action and everyday life experience and stay deeply embedded in it.

This paper was presented at the 4th Conference of the International Society for Gesture Studies: *Gesture, Brain and Evolution*, 25-30 July 2010, University of Viadrina, Frankfurt Oder, Germany.



## 1 Introduction

This article aims to point out to the impact of practical action and life experience by means of metaphorization both on words and gestures of spoken language.

Metaphorization is rooted in the close interconnection of thought, the reality we live in, and the language we speak. Our experience of the material world shapes our cognition and our language. The presence of metaphorization in gestures and words implies that speech gestures and words are resourceful means of spoken language. They both derive from the processes shared by cognition and expression, metaphorization being one of them.

Since the spoken language is shaped by a certain objective reality and by a certain cognitive reality, it acquires in speech a real, *external phenomenal form* that is observable in the segmental and suprasegmental, analytic and synthetic aspects of spoken language.

First, I shall specify the terms of metaphorization, spoken language, speech gestures, or posturomimogestural manifestations. Then, the examples of metaphorization will be observed at the segmental and visual suprasegmental level. Since the early '90s, I have been annotating and studying visual and verboacoustic manifestations in videotaped oral interactions. What follows below are some of my observations on the metaphoricity of coverbal and emblematic gestures in synergy with the verbal part of the utterance.

## 2 The Phenomenal Form in Language

By discovering and discontinuing the surrounding *phenomenal* reality and experiencing our existence in it, we gradually discover and discontinue conceptually and symbolically our inner cognitive and affective reality. These processes result in what Petar Guberina (1952: 159, 160) calls in Croatian *pojavnii lik u jeziku* or in English the *phenomenal form in language* :

*“Thus it can be concluded that everything in objective[or: physical] reality, in the social and individual reality of human nature as well as in the reality of thought and expression, is manifested in a phenomenal form.<sup>1</sup>...*

*Experience and human thought join together all these seemingly separated elements into greater and greater wholes, into a dialectic unity.<sup>2</sup> ”*

<sup>1</sup> „Iz svega toga izlazi, da se u stvarnosti objekata i društveno-individualne čovječe prirode kao i u stvarnosti misli i izraza, sve očituje u pojavnim liku.“ (p. 159, translated from Croatian by author)

<sup>2</sup> „Iskustvo i ljudska misao povezuju sve to, što je prividno odvojeno, u sve veće i veće cjeline, u dijalektičko jedinstvo.“ (p. 160, translated from Croatian by author)



The very beginning of the first language acquisition lies in affectivity and in the natural gestures of the body, and all verbal communication retains some traces of this form of symbolization. Later on, practical action and everyday life experience become the rich source domain of metaphorization. *Metaphorization* is the procedure of relating two concepts that belong to different categories but share at least one quality. Until the 1980s, neither speech gestures nor metaphorization were of much interest to linguists. Yet metaphorization has always had a large impact on the verbal and visual components of spoken language.

*Spoken language* is more than the assemblage of sounds and their combinations. It consists of verboacoustic and *visual* manifestations. Body movement, postures, facial expressions, eye contact, and touching make up the *visual part of spoken utterances* (Kendon 2004). When using the term *gesture*, I refer to all aspects of visible bodily action that are not produced exclusively for some practical purpose, but play a part in the process of utterance. Since the term *gesture* is too often limited to hand movements only, the term *posturomimogestuality*, or *PMG*, takes more explicitly into account the importance of overall body movement. PMG manifestations, in synergy with the verbal part of the utterance, with its correspondent rhythm, intonation, tempo, and pauses, are performed in any spoken face-to-face communication. And therefore, all of these elements are integral components of a global, *multimodal* utterance.

### 3 Emblematic and Coverbal Gestures

Emblematic and coverbal PMG manifestations are the visual components of a spoken utterance.

*Emblems* are likely to be interpreted in a particular sociolinguistic community with or without an accompanying spoken utterance (Kendon 1992a). They are more or less standardized in form and can be quoted and glossed apart from the verbal content of the spoken utterance.

#### Example 1

Thumb-finger rub, French emblematic gesture for money: Thumb lightly rubs forefinger

(Pavelin 2002a: 194)

Qu'est-ce que Lucie veut *acheter*?/What does Lucie want to *buy*?





*Coverbal* gestures or PMG manifestations complete the segmental, verboacoustic part of the utterance in relation to syntax, prosody, semantic, and pragmatic content of the utterance. Their interpretation arises directly from their function in the overall speech utterance. Coverbal gestures are the suprasegmental part of the utterance which is inseparable from its segmental part. In this category of gestures, we find gestures that McNeill calls *iconics*, *metaphorics*, *deictics*, and *beats* (McNeill 1992: 76) as well as what I call *modalizers* or *modal gestures*, namely the facial expressions conveying the interactants' attitude toward their own words and toward their partner in the interaction (Pavelin 2002a: 108-109).

#### 4 The Examples of Metaphorization in Words, Coverbal, and Emblematic Gestures of Spoken Language

Our cognitive and affective experience of reality in practical action and everyday life shapes our cognition and our language, or to cite McNeill (2005: 148), "an affective tendency is, ... an ultimate 'why' of language and thought (and ... gesture)."

Despite this feature common to all languages, the ways of structuring and organizing the cognitive and affective experience of reality in everyday practical life and transposing it into the abstract domain are largely culture and language specific. The metaphorical mappings often shared by the languages of the Occident are not necessarily applicable to the languages of the Amazon or to those of the Australian Aborigines, and vice versa. Ways and conditions of life are reflected in human languages in many different ways.

Often, *the etymology of a word representing an abstract notion corresponds to the source domain of a concrete phenomenon or practical action experienced in the outside world*. Words and expressions referring to the concrete outside world serve as the source domain for transpositions into the target domain of abstract notions and relations:

##### *Example 2*

The Latin word *comprehendere* means 'to catch, get, grasp' and 'to understand'. In other European languages, we meet the same metaphor, UNDERSTANDING IS A CONCRETE OBJECT WHICH CAN BE CAUGHT AND HELD IN THE HANDS:

Croatian *shvatiti* (*hvatati* – 'to catch'); French *comprendre*, *saisir*, *concevoir*; Italian *comprendere*, *capire*, *concepire*; German *begreifen*; Russian *ponimat'*; Finnish *käsittää* (*käsi* = 'hand'); Hung. *fogalom* (*fog* = 'catches').



*Example 3*

The practical action of transferring, bearing, or carrying lies in the etymology of the Greek word for metaphor: μεταφορά derives from *meta* 'over' and *pherein* 'to bear'.

The metaphor ABSTRACT CONCEPTS ARE CONTAINERS LIKELY TO BE PASSED ON TO A RECIPIENT VIA A CONDUIT persists in the words and coverbal gestures of European languages. For example, *love*, one of many words for abstract concepts, can be deep, it can be given or taken away, sent or lost, etc. In the same way, PMG manifestations are likely to materialize and handle abstract concepts in the gesture space (cf. Examples 4 & 5).

*Example 4*

In this example, the teacher has just explained a new word in French to her Croatian students, one of them has verbalized the word in Croatian and the teacher says, „Voilà!“, looking at the student with an eyebrow flash and with the right hand, palm up, as if she is handing over an imaginary object in the gesture space to her student (Pavelin 2002a: 199):

French: “Voilà!” (in English ‘Here you are!’)

*The coverbal gesture* in this and the following example is a *conduit metaphor* (cf. McNeill 1995: 147) which could be paraphrased in this case in the following way: MY EXPLANATION/QUESTION IS A CLOSED CONTAINER WHICH I’M PASSING ON TO YOU.



*Example 5*

Gestural conduit metaphors are often realized by holding the hand/s open or half-closed palm/s up, or by holding a hand with closed or half-closed fingertips moving upwards/downwards and/or opening as if holding up a closed container, handing it over to the partner in the interaction (Pavelin 2002a: 132). The teacher is standing in front of the blackboard, holding a piece of paper in her right hand. While speaking, she is looking at the paper, slightly moving up and down her left hand, palm up. Then she continues the same movement with the fingers closed until they open, and stays „frozen” in the final part of the utterance:

1 ENS **Par exemple. Entourez la bonne réponse.**  
(Left hand, palm up, moving slightly up and down)



Marc dit à Nicole:



(Left hand closed in a purse moves slightly up and down,  
then for a moment stays opened, palm up)

Thus, when speaking, by using gestures and words, we are handling concepts as if they were physical objects experienced in the outside material world. The gesture space becomes a stage for the virtual 'objectification' and embodiment of the abstract concepts and their interrelations.

The coverbal metaphorical manual gesture grasping an imaginary object seems to visually revitalize within the gesture space a metaphor which has become 'dead' in the linguistic system. *Dead metaphors* are conventionalized to the point that, for the majority of native speakers, it has become difficult or impossible to discern their original conceptual source.

Likewise, native speakers are often unfamiliar with *the etymology of the emblematic gestures* they use, although they frequently *derive from a source domain in the practical action and personal experience of everyday life* (Examples 4, 5, 6, 7, 8).

Example 6

The Croatian idiomatic expression of satisfaction *Puna šaka brade* (literally \*'a handful of chin', meaning 'Great!, Super!') is accompanied or replaced by the emblematic gesture /*smile, eyes wide open, dominant hand, with palm up and wide open under the chin or touching it, descends under the neck and stops with the fingertips together!*. The gesture and the idiomatic expression make a correspondence with the feeling of satisfaction after a hearty meal at a feast in ancient times, when people would wipe their greasy chins and beards with their hand in the way that little children tend to do in similar situations. This idiomatic expression and its emblematic gesture are based on the metaphor SATISFACTION IS A HAND WIPING A GREASY CHIN AFTER A HEARTY MEAL.



Example 7

The French emblematic gesture /*the speaker's dominant hand with closed fist, thumb up, rubs the other arm up and down from shoulder to elbow!* corresponds to the idiomatic expression for flattering *Passer la brosse à reluire* or literally 'brushing to shine an object' (Calbris & Montredon 1986: 54). This idiomatic expression and its emblematic gesture result from the metaphor FLATTERING IS MAKING AN OBJECT LOOK SHINY.



Example 8

The French emblematic gesture /*backs of the dominant hand's fingers rubbing vertically against the cheek several times!* (Calbris & Montredon 1986: 7) accompanied or not by the idiomatic expression *La barbe!* = 'What a bore!' is grounded in the underlying metaphor BOREDOM IS TO SHAVE EVERY DAY.



### Example 9

The metaphor SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP IS THE DISTANCE BETWEEN POINTS IN SPACE underlies the following syntagms:

in English: *close friend, distant acquaintance*; in Croatian: *blizak prijatelj, dalek znanac*; in French: *rester en rapport étroits avec quelqu'un, les liens étroits du mariage, ils se sont éloignés l'un de l'autre*.

The metaphorization of gesture space is equally found in postures and proxemic organization as can be found in the linguistic system of the spoken language. Therefore, positive or negative emotions and attitudes toward somebody or something are often related to spatial closeness or distance and have an impact on the proxemic organization of the spoken face-to-face interaction according to the culture specific models of a given speech community.

TIME IS SPACE is yet another metaphor shared by the segmental and visual suprasegmental means of spoken language. In the European languages, temporal relations result from the metaphors PRESENT IS HERE, FUTURE IS AHEAD, and PAST IS BEHIND.

The present time is „here“ in the gesture space, under the speaker's feet or in an imaginary frontal point of reference related to by hand movements. It is „here“ at the segmental level too, for example: *The present existence is herebeing*, whereas the past is behind: *My schooldays are far behind me*, and the future is ahead, e.g. the phrasal verb *to look ahead* means 'to prepare for future needs'.

## 5 Conclusion

Spoken language is more than a linear progression of segments - sounds and words. The segmental part is interlaced with momentary, non-linear, synthetic visual elements. Depending on the pragmatics of the concrete situation, these visual manifestations are sometimes likely to be part of a whole and sometimes they constitute the whole by themselves.

The visual non-segmental parts of the utterance create an impression of visibility and tangibility of the speaker's feelings and thoughts. In fact, thinking and speaking are experienced as just another form of activity such as the practical action of walking, running, and handling objects, only transposed into the virtual world of cognitive and linguistic reality. The more-or-less loose conformity of visual suprasegmental manifestations to norm or convention makes them a rich source of cognitive and linguistic expression, providing the utterance with the synthetic phenomenal form, naturally always and only in synergy and solidarity with other components of spoken language.

On one hand, the metaphoricality of the emblematic gestures is basically pre-shaped by cultural and linguistic tradition, so they are more or less interpretable independently from the pragmatics of a particular utterance. The etymology of emblematic gestures and their idioms mostly derives from our practical



experience and actions in everyday life (e.g. in Croatian, *Puna šaka brade* with the accompanying gesture is based on the metaphor *Satisfaction is a hand wiping a greasy chin after a hearty meal*, and in French *La barbe* and its gesture are based on the metaphor *Boredom is shaving every day*.)

On the other hand, we have the metaphoricity of the coverbal gestures, which is at the same time shaped culturally and individually within the pragmatics of the multimodal utterance. Metaphorics, i.e. metaphorical coverbal gestures, are largely shaped in situ, hic et nunc within the pragmatics of the particular multimodal utterance. They present abstract meaning by introducing analogical correspondences to concrete objects in space and to practical actions in everyday life (cf. examples 6, 7 and 8). The speaker's gesture space becomes the ground for the "objectification" and embodiment of spatial, temporal, and abstract concepts and their interrelations.

The correspondences in the verbal and gestural structuring of metaphorical mappings in the given language are possible because words and gestures are parts of the single framework.

The examples of metaphorizations in words and gestures (UNDERSTANDING IS CATCHING, ABSTRACT IDEAS ARE CONTAINERS LIKELY TO BE PASSED ON BY A CONDUIT, etc.) show that thinking and speaking developed from practical action and everyday life experience and stay deeply embedded in it.

## REFERENCES

- Bouvet, D. 2001. *La Dimension corporelle de la parole. Les marques posturo-mimo-gestuelles de la parole, leurs aspects métonymiques et métaphoriques, et leur rôle au cours d'un récit*. Paris: Peeters.
- Calbris, G. and J. Montredon. 1986. *Des gestes et des mots pour le dire*. Paris: Clé International.
- Calbris, G. and L. Porcher. 1989. *Geste et communication*. Paris: Crédif-Hatier.
- Calbris, G. 2003. *L'expression gestuelle de la pensée d'un homme politique*. Paris: CNRS Editions, Coll. CNRS Communication.
- Calbris, G. 2008. *From Left to Right: Coverbal Gestures and Their Symbolic Use of Space*. In Cienki and Müller. 2008, 27-53.
- Cienki, A. and C. Müller. 2008. *Metaphor and Gesture*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Colletta, J-M. 2009. *Comparative analysis of children's narratives at different ages : A multimodal approach*. *Gesture* 9:1, 61-96.
- Cosnier, J. 2007. *Le corps et l'interaction*. In Chabrol, C., Orly-Louis, I. (eds), *Interactions communicatives*, Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 91-95.
- Croft, W. and D. Alan Cruse. 2004. *Cognitive Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Feyereisen, P. 1987. *Gestures and Speech. Interactions and Separations : A reply to McNeill (1985)*. *Psychological Review* vol 94 no. 4/1987, 493-498.

- Fricke, E., I. Mittelberg & S. Teßendorf (2008). *Inwieweit sind Gesten konkret? (Positionspapier zum Begriff des Konkreten in der Gestenforschung)*. Konferenzprogramm des 12. Internationalen Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Semiotik (DGS) „Das Konkrete als Zeichen“, Stuttgart.
- Goldin-Meadow, S. 2003. *Hearing Gesture: How Our Hands Help Us Think*. Cambridge, Mass.: Bellknap Press.
- Guberina, P. 1952. *Povezanost jezičnih elemenata [The Interconnectedness of the Elements of Language]*. Zagreb: Matica Hrvatska.
- Johnson, M. 1987. *The Body in the mind: The bodily basis of meaning, imagination and reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kendon, A. 1992. *Some recent work from Italy on quotable gestures ('emblems')*. Journal of Linguistic Anthropology Vol. 2 (1), pp. 77-93.
- Kendon, A. 2004. *Gesture. Visible Action as Utterance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. 1987. *Women, fire and dangerous things: what categories reveal about the mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. 2008. *The Neuroscience of Metaphoric Gestures: Why They Exist*. In Cienki and Müller. 2008, 283-289.
- Levinson, S. C. 1996. *Language and Space*. Annual Rev. Anthropol. 25: 353-382.
- Levinson, S. C. 2003. *Spatial Language and Cognition*. Cambridge: CUP.
- McNeill, D. 1995. *Hand and Mind*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Müller, C. 2008. *What gestures reveal about the nature of metaphor*. In Cienki, A., Müller, C., eds. 2008. *Metaphor and Gesture*, 219-245.
- Özyürek, A., Allen, S., Furman, R., Kita, S., Brown, A., Ishizuka, T. 2008. *Development of Cross-Linguistic Variation in Speech and Gesture: Motion Events in English and Turkish*. Developmental Psychology vol. 44, 4, 1040-1054.
- Pavelin, B. 2002a. *Le Geste à la parole*. Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail.
- Pavelin, B. 2002b. *Statut et rôle du mouvement dans la communication orale en face-a-face*. In Renard, R. ed., *La Phonétique verbo-tonale, Tome 2*. Bruxelles, Belgique : Editions des Boeck Université, 71-87.
- Parril, F. 2008. *Form, meaning and convention : A comparison of a metaphoric gesture with an emblem*. In Cienki, A., Müller, C., eds. 2008. *Metaphor and Gesture*, 195-217.
- Radden, G. 2000. *How metonymic are metaphors?* In *Metaphor and metonymy at the crossroads: a cognitive perspective*, editor Antonio Barcelona, 93-108. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Reddy, Michael J. 1979. *The Conduit Metaphor- a case of frame conflict in our language about language*. In *Metaphor and Thought*. 1993. (2nd edition) ed. Ortony, Andrew. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 164-201.
- Wilcox, S.E. 2004. *Cognitive iconicity : Conceptual spaces, meaning and gesture in signed languages*. Cognitive linguistics, 15, 119-147.

## METAFORIZACIJA PRAKTIČNIH RADNJI I SVAKODNEVNOGA ŽIVOTNOG ISKUSTVA U RIJEČIMA, AMBLEMATIČNIM I KOVERBALNIM GESTAMA GOVORNOG JEZIKA

Članak obrađuje utjecaj praktičnih radnji i iskustava na sve vidove usmenog jezika, na segmentalnoj i suprasegmentalnoj, verbalnoj i vizualnoj (tj. gestualnoj) razini. Proučavanje se temelji na dugogodišnjim promatranjima amblematičnih i koverbalnih gesta u sprezi s riječima govornog jezika u kontekstu istraživanja vizualnih i verboakustičnih manifestacija na videosnimkama usmenih interakcija.

Izrazi lica, držanje, kretnje ruku i tjelesni pokret uopće, vizualno predočuju tijesnu semiotičku isprepletenost pokreta, praktičnog iskustva i riječi kako unutar ljudske misli tako i unutar čovjekova usmenog izraza. Važan dio te isprepletenosti proizlazi iz metaforizacije ili analogijskog povezivanja dvaju pojmova koji dijele jedno ili više obilježja a inače pripadaju različitim kategorijama.

Mišljenje i govorenje su iskustva jednako kao što su to i praktična radnja hodanja, trčanja, rukovanja predmetima. No, za razliku od tih radnji koje se ostvaruju u vanjskome materijalnom svijetu, mišljenje i govorenje su transponirani u virtualnost kognitivne i lingvističke stvarnosti. Kada govorimo, upotrebljavamo pojmove služeći se riječima i pokretima kao da su predmeti iz vanjskoga materijalnog svijeta. Etimologije riječi koje se odnose na apstraktne pojmove često skrivaju metaforičko ishodište u konkretnoj stvarnoj pojavi iz našega praktičnog iskustva. Na primjer, latinski glagol *comprehendere* odgovara značenju engleskih glagola *catch*, *get*, *grasp*, *comprehend*; francuskom glagolu *saisir* i *comprendre* te hrvatskom glagolu *shvatiti*. Sve te riječi u sva četiri jezika dijele isto metaforičko ishodište: *razumijevanje je hvatanje*. Koverbalna metaforička gesta hvatanja zamišljenog predmeta u gestikulacijskom prostoru kao da vizualno oživljava „mrtvu“ ili zaboravljenu metaforu unutar jezičnog sustava. Kako su riječi i geste dio istoga jezičnog i kulturnog modela izražavanja, moguće je otkriti veze i suodnose metaforičkih prostiranja u verbalnim i gestualnim strukturama unutar određenog jezika. I riječi i geste proizlaze iz praktičnih radnji i iskustava životne svakodnevice i ostaju time duboko prožeti i na apstraktnoj razini.

*Key words:* metaphorization, utterance, segmental, suprasegmental, gestures

*Ključne riječi:* metaforizacija, iskaz, segmentalnost, suprasegmentalnost, geste