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Foreword

Language and the body – Dynamic relations between gestures and signed language

In the spring of 2007 a cognitive linguistic conference took place in Lille, a university town in the north of France announcing a remarkable topic: “Typology, Gesture and Sign”. It was the second conference of the French Association for Cognitive Linguistics (AFLiCo) and it was the second linguistics conference that invited two communities of researchers to listen to each other that hitherto had not had much chance to do so: signed language linguists and gesture researchers. It was on that historic occasion that I first met Sherman and Phyllis Wilcox. Phyllis was one of the speakers in a theme session on “Metonymy in Gesture” that I co-organized with Irene Mittelberg. Phyllis’s talk was called “Metonymic conceptualizations in ASL”, Silva Ladewig’s was “Metonymic bases of a recurrent polysemous gesture”, and I gave a talk on “Gestural modes of representation as metonymic resources of gesture creation”. In a sense, we were all seeking to understand some of the developmental processes underlying the stabilization and codification of visible bodily actions that result in conventionalized forms in spoken and in signed languages.

Gesture researchers were looking at recurrent and emblematic gestures within spoken languages as mirroring different stages in the conventionalization process of co-speech gestures (Ladewig 2014a, 2014b; Müller 2014b, 2017) and signed language linguists were interested in the development of lexical and grammatical signs (Wilcox 2005). Mandel’s paper on “Iconic Devices in ASL” (Mandel 1977) and Kendon’s work on signed languages of Papua New Guinea (Kendon 1980a, 1980b, 1980c) and “Sign Languages of Aboriginal Australia” (1988b) inspired signed language linguists as well as gesture researchers (Müller 2014a). For all of us, the iconicity of visible bodily actions played a core role as a semiotic base for gestures and for signs (Armstrong, Stokoe and Wilcox 1995; Mittelberg 2014; Müller 1998; Taub 2001; P. Wilcox 2000). Metonymy as a cognitive principle addressed the iconicity of gestures and signs as a cognitive and semiotic principle (Mittelberg 2019).

Sherman followed the panel with acute attention and the participants profited greatly from his open-minded comments on their respective research agendas. Everybody thoroughly enjoyed Sherman’s exceptional expertise on these issues. It was clear that he was framing his comments against the backdrop of decades of his thinking about such questions. The subject matter had been at the core of his reflections about signed languages for a very long time: the publication of *Gesture and the Nature of Language* in 1995, co-written with David Armstrong and William

Stokoe, marked a milestone in exploring relations between gestures and signing from a linguistic point of view.

An important element of Sherman's contributions to the discussions on the occasion of the 2007 AFLiCo panel continues to surface in my own ongoing reflections on processes of stabilization in co-speech gestures. This element is his more recent work on lexicalization and grammaticalization in signed languages. "Routes from Gesture to Language" appeared in 2005 and discussed how gestures that are "not a conventional unit in the linguistic system" develop into signs with grammatical functions (Wilcox 2005: 12; see also Janzen and Shaffer 2002). In his paper, Wilcox distinguishes two routes from gesture to grammatical items within signed language: one in which gestures evolve into lexical units that then develop into grammatical forms (lexical to grammatical is well known from grammaticalization processes in spoken languages). "The first route, by which signed words develop out of nonwords and further to grammatical morphemes, begins with a gesture that is not a conventional unit in the linguistic system. This gesture becomes incorporated into a signed language as a lexical item. Over time, these lexical signs acquire grammatical function" (Wilcox 2005: 12). The other developmental route is where grammatical expression bypasses a lexical stage and evolves from gesture to prosody to grammatical morphology:

The second route proceeds along quite a different path. In this route, the source gesture is one of several types including the manner of movement of a manual gesture or sign, and various facial, mouth, and eye gestures. I claim that this second route follows a path of development from gesture to prosody/intonation to grammatical morphology. ... Notably, the second route bypasses any lexical stage. (Wilcox 2005: 13)

The first route is noteworthy for gesture researchers, since it allows us to identify similarities and differences between gestures and signs, while we do see conventional gestural expression that one could describe as forms of lexicalization (Kendon 1988a; Müller 2018). For example, the ring gesture is an expression of perfection and excellence, or is a gesture for "okay", but we are *not* seeing gestures used along with spoken constructions within grammaticalization processes. Albeit, this appears not surprising, but it is still interesting to note.

Wilcox's second route alludes to processes of decomposition that we see in hybrid forms of recurrent gestures, where a stable formational and functional core, for example the ring-shape, can be used with variable movement patterns, orientations, and locations in the gesture space when used to express the preciseness of co-articulated arguments (Müller 2017). When, however, the ring-gesture becomes fully conventionalized—as when it is used to express perfection and excellence—all aspects of kinesic form are stable (Müller 2014b, forthcoming). What we see here, in my view, are proto-forms of lexicalization processes. It would be of interest

to carry out research on gestures that are used along with signed language to see if similar processes can be observed. However, this is only one of the manifold relations that remain to be explored for students interested in the dynamic relations that characterize language as emerging from the body and, more specifically, from the mundane practices of our bodily interactions with the world.

Sherman Wilcox saw early on how valuable a cognitive linguistic framework would be for an understanding of signed language, because it offers a pathway for a view of language as being grounded in, and going along with, embodied experiences as we sign, speak and gesture (Bressems 2021; Ladewig, 2020; Müller 2018).

The present book brings together a wealth of contributions that elucidate fascinating aspects of signed language and gesture research that, notably, only appear on stage once we allow ourselves to look—and *see*—Sherman's stance on visible bodily actions as language. It honors Sherman Wilcox's kind, lucid, pioneering thoughts in the best possible manner – it carries them forward.

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