

## Abstract

10th International Pragmatics Conference (Göteborg, 8-13 July 2007)

**Jana Bressem**

European University Viadrina

[bressem@euv-frankfurt-o.de](mailto:bressem@euv-frankfurt-o.de)

“Systematic distribution of form features in gestures – applying corpus linguistics in gesture research”

The leading assumption in gesture research assumes that the formal execution of gestures must be considered a random implementation of individual speakers. The varying hand shapes and orientations of the hand, movement patterns and positions in space speakers use when gesturing are thought of as creations based on individual preferences. By using a corpus linguistic approach to the study of co speech gestures, I will challenge this belief in chance and show that speakers of German dispose of basic standardized gestural form parameters on which they fall back in gesturing.

To this day, a large part of analyses on co speech gestures conceives of gestures as on line and idiosyncratic creations of speakers (McNeill 1992, 2005). Contrary to language, gestural forms do not follow standards of form but are rather created based on individual preferences. “[Neither] gesture in fact obeys constraints within a system of forms [...]. The hand shape and position are creations of the moment and reflect the speakers imagery” (McNeill 2005:8). However, as research has shown, constant form-meaning pairs also occur in co speech gestures (Becker 2004, Kendon 2004, Ladewig 2006, and Teßendorf 2005). Accordingly, Müller was able to show that the flat hand in combination with the palm facing upwards and differing motion patterns “is used to present an abstract, discursive object as a concrete manipulable, and visible entity” (2004).

Taken from a sampling frame of 10 conversations of German speakers, the research was carried out based on two 25-minute videotapes of naturally occurring conversations in dyadic situations. A close description of the formal features of 623 gestures produced by four speakers set up the basis for a detailed analysis of the use, combination and clustering of hand shapes, orientations, positions and movements used. The results show that speakers of German not only fall back on basic standardized gestural form parameters, but also that the combination of specific hand shapes with other form parameters is not random. Further, I will show that speakers use form clusters, which depend on particular hand shapes and their combination with other specific parameters. The use of a lax flat hand in combination with the palm facing upwards or a clockwise wrist movement is just one example for the systematic linking of formal features which I will address. I will thus demonstrate that German speakers use particular formal features recurrently, combine them systematically, form clusters and therefore possess a stock of gestural form parameters of which they make use when gesturing.

The talk will therefore support the idea of using larger amounts of data to discover new insights and it furthermore shows that a corpus linguistic analysis is just as well able to detect structures and regularities in co speech gestures as it is in speech. Furthermore, the analysis suggests a necessary combination of both quantitative and qualitative analyses in the field of gesture research to discover the intrinsic characteristics of co speech gestures. Additionally, the analysis prepares the ground for further research on possible form-meaning pairs of gestural parameters and is thus a necessary complement for analyses on the interaction of gesture and speech in constituting meaning.

## References:

- Becker, Karin (2004) *Zur Morphologie redegleitender Gesten*. Unveröffentlichte Magisterarbeit: Freie Universität Berlin.
- Kendon, Adam (2004) “Contrasts in gesticulation: A Neapolitan and a British speaker

- compared". In: Cornelia Müller/ Roland Posner (Hgg.) *The semantics and pragmatics of everyday gestures. Proceedings of the Berlin conference April 1998*, 173- 193.
- Ladewig, Silva (2006) *Die Kurbelgeste- konventionalisierte Markierung einer kommunikativen Aktivität*. Unveröffentlichte Magisterarbeit. Freie Universität Berlin.
- McNeill, David (1992) *Hand and Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McNeill, David (2005) *Gesture and Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Müller, Cornelia (2004a) „Forms and uses of the Palm Up Open Hand: A case of gesture family?". In: Cornelia Müller/ Roland Posner (Hgg.) *The semantics and pragmatics of everyday gestures*. Berlin: Weidler Verlag, 233-356.
- Teßendorf, Sedinha (2005) *Pragmatische Funktionen spanischer Gesten am Beispiel des "Gestos de Barrer"*. unveröffentlichte Magisterarbeit. Freie Universität Berlin.