

Grammaticalized manual actions of giving and holding: From ditransitive to existential constructions in speech and gesture

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Recognizing the semiotic idiosyncrasies of spontaneous co-speech gestures and their tight semantic and syntactic integration with speech, this paper assumes that although gestures tend to be less codified than linguistic signs, they may exhibit characteristics comparable to those that commonly drive gradual processes of codification and grammaticalization in spoken and signed languages. These changes may concern reduction in phonetic form, subjectivation (Langacker 2002; Mortelmans 2006), semantic transparency (Hopper & Traugott 2003), pragmatic/metonymic inferencing (ibid.), ritualization (Haiman 1994), as well as differing degrees of iconicity and schematicity through abstraction (Givón 1985). As recent sign language research exploring the “gesture-language interface” (Wilcox 2004:43) shows, gestures, when entering the linguistic system, may become lexicalized and grammaticalized in various ways (e.g., Janzen & Shaffer 2002; Kendon 2008).

Starting from basic object-oriented manual actions of giving and holding, this paper aims to trace crossmodal processes of embodied grammaticalization in English and German. Since such routinized physical interactions with the material and social world may be understood as blueprints for prototypical ditransitive and transitive constructions (Goldberg 1995; Bergen & Chang 2005), we propose that they may also be at the root of less transitive existential constructions occurring in both speech and gesture. The entry point to the rationale developed here is the observation that existential constructions in English and German recruit different kinds of verbs. Whereas English *there is* combines unstressed *there* (assuming a presentative, not a locative function) with a form of *be*, German *es gibt* consists of the non-referential pronoun *es* (‘it’) and the lexical Verb *geben* (‘to give’) conjugated accordingly. As a well-documented path of grammaticalization evidences, this impersonal usage of *geben* goes back to the source meaning of manually giving something to someone and related ditransitive constructions involving an agentive subject transferring a physical object to an animate receiver (Lenz 2007; Newman 1998). One could thus hypothesize that English existential uses of *there is* tend to be accompanied by muted indexical gestures and German *es gibt* by reduced variants of iconic gestures metonymically alluding to actions of giving. However, the point we wish to make is that gestures abstracted from physical actions of giving and holding may, even in the absence of the corresponding verbs in the linguistic track of the utterance, fulfill pragmatic functions of physically articulated existentials.

Drawing on two multimodal corpora, we will demonstrate that although speech-gesture pairings identified in the data confirm the above hypothesis, both existential constructions may be underpinned by variants of the frequently occurring palm-up open hand gesture (Müller 2004), e.g. more or less clearly defined articulations of hands with the palm turned upwards seemingly handling discourse contents. Such gestural signs with an indexical ground were also found to simply point to the existence of ideas mentioned in speech by providing a tangible surface (Mittelberg in press). These insights shall lay the ground for larger-scale empirical investigations at the juncture of grammaticalization and gesture pragmatics.

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