

The emergence and stabilization of gestures

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Researchers have rightly pointed out that our reconstructions of the evolution and development of language is “overwhelmingly restricted to speech [...] hence, we have little to say about the evolution of gestures and signing” (Heine & Kuteva, 2007, p. 349). Sign linguists have started to fill this gap by systematically studying the processes of grammaticalization in different sign languages (Janzen & Shaffer, 2002; Pfau & Steinbach, 2006; van Loon et al., 2014). They demonstrated that gestures play a fundamental role in these processes as they can be a source for the evolution of signs (ibid.). However, the fact that gestures may also change and stabilize has been largely neglected.

This paper addresses the question of how we can study the emergence and stabilization of gestures. The point of departure is a particular gesture type namely “recurrent gestures” (Bressemer & Müller, 2014; Ladewig, 2010, 2014b) which are characterized by a stable form-meaning relationship across different contexts and speakers. Interestingly, the variants of recurrent gestures show meaning variants of different degrees of stabilization. Some variants of a recurrent gesture are closer to spontaneous gestures showing a low degree of schematization and form stabilization whereas others are closer to emblematic gestures showing a higher degree of schematization and form stabilization. This makes recurrent gestures an object of research for the investigation of stabilization processes in gestures *par excellence*.

Using the example of the recurrent Cyclic gesture (Ladewig, 2014a) the study argues that the variants of this recurrent gesture a) show different degrees of stabilization and b) have emerged from different paths of stabilization that are indicative of processes of lexicalization, schematization, and pragmaticalization in spoken and signed language. In doing so, the study reveals that stabilization processes in gestures can be grasped by general principles of language change and that such processes are not unique to spoken and signed languages but can be reconstructed for gestures, to some extent. As such it offers insights into the stabilization processes of human expressive modes.

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