

Multimodal constructions in spoken English.

A corpus-based approach

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Face-to-face communication is inherently multimodal. When we talk to one another, we use morpho-syntactic structures, prosody, facial expressions, and manual gestures (to name but a few) to convey meaning. Given these observations, does that imply that linguists should concern themselves with these meaning-making practices? In this talk, I will argue for an enthusiastic ‘Of course, they should!’.

The line of argumentation is couched in a Construction Grammar framework (see e.g. Hoffmann & Trousdale 2013). A construction is a “learned pairing of form with semantic or discourse function, including morphemes or words, idioms, partially lexically filled and fully general phrasal patterns” (Goldberg 2006, p. 5). I will argue that apart from the morpho-syntactic constructions Goldberg mentions in her definition, there are also constructions that are not exclusively morpho-syntactic, i.e. also include prosodic and/or visual components on their formal side.

For that matter, I will report on three corpus-based studies investigating the prosodic and visual features of stance-related constructions in spoken English: Tell me about it, syntactically independent as if clauses and the morpheme *ish*. The results of these studies show the following: Stance-related Tell me about it is rather long in duration and is associated with avoidance of eye contact, raised eyebrows, smiles and head movements. Independent as if clauses are produced with a lowered mean pitch, are followed by a pause, and are associated with head tilts. Finally, free uses of *ish* are prosodically distinct from previous language material, tend to be longer and show more pitch variation, while bound *ish* with the meaning of ‘approximately X’ shows the same prosodic tendencies, but is further associated with a “wiggle” of either head or hand(s) and slit eyes.

The discussion of these results will show that while some of the prosodic and visual features independently contribute to the meaning of the utterance, some only have meaning in tandem with the morpho-syntactic construction and must, therefore, be considered integral parts of a multimodal grammatical construction.

References: • Goldberg, A. E. (2006). *Constructions at work. The nature of generalization in language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. • Hoffmann, T., and G. Trousdale (eds.) (2013). *The Oxford Handbook of Construction Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.