

Metaphor, Gesture and Second Language Acquisition

Jeannette Littlemore

Key words: metaphor, gesture, second language learning

Recent work in the area of gesture studies has shown that metaphor is pervasive in gesture. As well as providing insights into the way people use metaphor to conceptualise abstract concepts (Cienki and Müller 2008), gesture can also shed light on the role of metaphor as a dynamic activity, heavily involved in the process of formulating thoughts. However, we are not always aware of the metaphoric nature of the language we use, nor of the metaphoric thought processes in which we engage. Müller (2008), in her book ‘Metaphors: Dead and Alive, Sleeping and Waking’, argues that speakers can have different levels of awareness of the metaphoricity of what they are saying. She outlines three clines of metaphoricity in language, all of which contribute to one’s general awareness of metaphor. The first relates to the degree of conventionality of a conceptual metaphor in a given culture ranging from fully conventional to fully novel. The second is the degree of conventionality of a metaphoric expression in a given culture, also ranging from fully conventional to fully novel. The third is the degree to which attention is drawn to a particular metaphoric expression in use, making it cognitively more or less salient. One’s awareness of metaphor can thus vary along all three clines at once, and it will not always be the same for all speakers and listeners. For example, a speaker may employ a gesture reflecting the ANALYZING IS CUTTING metaphor, without being consciously aware of the fact that they are doing so, and without that particular metaphor being present in the linguistic component of what they are saying. Their interlocutor may consciously or subconsciously pick up on these metaphoric gestures and use them to decode the message that is being conveyed.

Although the same metaphor is often expressed in speech and gesture, Cienki and Müller (2008b) point out that this may not always be the case. They cite instances where a metaphor may be expressed in gesture, but not in the corresponding speech, cases where different metaphors are expressed in speech and gesture, both of which relate to the same target domain, and even cases where gestures reveal metaphors that are not even used in the language. These observations provide powerful evidence for the basic metaphoricity of many of our thought processes, and imply that gestural data can thus provide an independent source

of evidence for the psychological reality of conceptual (or primary) metaphors (Cienki 2008). Cienki goes on to argue that gesture may provide evidence for the embodied basis of thought, i.e. the fact that many of our abstract thought processes have their basis in everyday bodily functions and movements (Gibbs 2006).

Given that gesture acts as an intermediary between abstract metaphorical thought and language, it is likely to play some sort of role in the production of language by second language learners, and by extension, contribute to language learning (McCafferty 2004). Researchers in second language acquisition have emphasised the role of ‘pushed output’ (Swain 1995). Swain argues that producing the target language helps learners to notice gaps between what they want to say and what they are able to say, to test out hypotheses about how the language might work, and to reflect on their level of knowledge of the target language. By focusing on the gestures that learners use while speaking, teachers and researchers may gain valuable information about the efforts their learners are making in order to package their thoughts into target language constructions.

As well as providing possible evidence of a learner’s attempts to package their ideas into target-language constructions, a learner’s use of gesture may provide evidence of ‘L1’ conceptualizations being transferred to the target language. This is likely to be true of metaphoric gestures in particular as these provide clues as to the ways in which abstract concepts are metaphorically construed by the speaker. Significant differences have been found between languages in terms of their conceptual metaphors and the ways in which these metaphors are manifested through gesture. For example, in English, the heart is viewed metaphorically as the seat of the emotions, in Malay it is the liver (Charteris-Black 2002). A conceptually fluent Malay learner of English will have taken this difference on board and it will be apparent in both the expressions and the gestures that he or she uses when speaking English.

Research suggests that the ontological metaphor of ‘*abstract ideas existing within physical containers*’ is different in English and Chinese (Yu 2000). The gestures employed by speakers of English sometimes embody the idea that abstract concepts exist within bounded containers which can be held in the hand (McNeill 2005: 47). However, it has been suggested that for Chinese speakers, abstract ideas tend to be conceptualised as ‘substances without

form' (ibid) and that the Chinese therefore tend not to use handholding gestures to convey abstract concepts.

Further cross-linguistic differences have been found relating to concepts of time (Sweetser 2006). It is said that Mandarin speakers tend to think about time vertically even when they are thinking for English, and this difference may be realised in their use of gestural expressions that involve time reference (Boroditsky 2001). For example, although both Mandarin and English speakers use horizontal terms to talk about time, Mandarin speakers use the vertical terms *shàng* and *xià* to represent time.

Thus, as learners develop their skills in the target language one would expect them to develop gestures that correspond to the target language metaphors. The ability to use culturally-appropriate gestures in the target language has been termed 'cultural paralinguistic fluency' by Poyatos (1997). Within this type of fluency, the use of appropriate *metaphoric gestures* constitutes a visible manifestation of the extent to which a learner is thinking in terms of L1 or L2-style conceptual and primary metaphors. It thus reflects their levels of 'conceptual fluency' (Danesi 1995) which was discussed above. Thus by focusing on the metaphoric gestures used by language learners, we may gain some insights into their levels of cultural, paralinguistic and conceptual fluency.

References

- Boroditsky, L. (2001). Does language shape thought? Mandarin and English speakers' conceptions of time. *Cognitive Psychology*, 43, 1–22.
- Charteris-Black, J. (2002). Second language figurative proficiency: A comparative study of Malay and English, *Applied Linguistics*, 23, 104-133.
- Cienki, A. (2008). Why study metaphor and gesture? In Alan Cienki and Cornelia Müller (eds.) *Metaphor and Gesture*. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 5-26.
- Cienki, A. and Muller, C. (2008). Metaphor, gesture and thought. In Raymond W. Gibbs (ed.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 483-501.

- Danesi, M. (1995). Learning and teaching languages: The role of 'conceptual fluency', *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 5 (1), 3-20.
- Gibbs, R. W. (2006). *Embodiment and Cognitive Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McCafferty, S. (2004). Space for cognition: gesture and second language learning. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 14 (1), 148-165.
- McNeill, D. (2005). *Gesture and Thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Müller, C. (2008). *Metaphors, Dead and Alive, Sleeping and Waking. A Dynamic View*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Poyatos, F. (1997). The Reality of multichannel verbal-nonverbal communication in simultaneous and consecutive interpretation. In Fernando Poyatos (ed.), *Nonverbal Communication and Translation* Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 249-282.
- Swain, M. (1995). Three functions of output in second language learning. In G. Cook & B. Seidlhofer (Eds.), *Principle and practice in applied linguistics: Studies in honour of H. G. Widdowson* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 125–144.
- Sweetser, E. (2006). Looking at space to study mental spaces: Co-speech gesture as a crucial data source in cognitive linguistics. In Monica Gonzalez- Marquez, Irene Mittelberg, Seana Coulson and Michael J. Spivey (Eds.), *Methods in Cognitive Linguistics..* Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 201-224.
- Yu, N. (2000). Figurative uses of finger and palm in Chinese and English. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 15, 159-175.