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Grammar as gestural action

Building on Arnheim's claim that « there are perceptual equivalents of all theoretical notions» (1969), McNeill's theory of « abstract pointing » (1992, 2005), Talmy's concept of « ception » (2000), I would like to show that the conceptual organization and hidden cognitive mechanisms of grammar can be made visible and meaningful by using special iconic, deictic and metaphoric gestures called KineGrams (Lapaire 2006). This special kind of “gestural action” (Kendon 2004) and its associated symbolism require the creation, observation and manipulation of *imaginary objects of conception*, as well as a highly plastic and symbolic use of space in order to represent *conceptual regions* and *domains of experience*. In this visuo-kinetic rendering of grammatical processes and meanings, *speakers* and *cognizers* are cast in the role of *viewers* and *movers* who adopt a number of *epistemic* and *socio-pragmatic stances*. Postural and gestural analogs of grammatical notions and processes are thus created that are visually explicit.



Figure 1 – Comparatives
Visuo-kinetic activation of the BALANCE-schema (Johnson 1987)



Figure 2 : Variations on superlatives
Going to upper / lower extremes



Figure 3 : Preterition as retrospection



Figure 4 – Grasping essentials with the zero article in English
e.g. *Life ... Beauty... Silence...*

The visuo-kinetic display is to a large extent *image schematic* (Johnson 1987, Lakoff & Johnson 1999), and consistent with the «schematicity» of grammatical meaning (Langacker 2000). KineGrams make full use of the «abstract properties of gesture» (McNeill 1992). More importantly, they enact some of the moves characteristically made by the IBC – or *Idealized Body of Cognition* (Lapaire 2008). This is the abstract body image and metaphoric bodily activity that is unconsciously invoked by ordinary speakers to construe and report socio-physical experience, like «weighing options», «grasping essentials» (HANDS), «going ahead», «following», «moving forward», «standing in the way» (LEGS / FEET), «observing», «looking back / ahead» (EYES), etc.

KineGrams may serve as a basis for visuo-kinetic explorations of language structure and language use in workshop settings. In this presentation, filmed scenes from «Grammar and movement» sessions held with linguistics students (aged 20-30) and bilingual schoolchildren (aged 8-10) will be shown.



Figure 5 – Exploring socio-physical scripts for negation
“Standing in someone’s way” along a given “action path” / “Forcing one’s way”, “Getting around”

The presentation will end with remarks on how KineGrams may also be used to develop an awareness of the contribution of spontaneous gestural activity to grammatical meanings and processes in oral discourse. Examples will be given of the verbo-gestural construction of aspect, comparison, concession, epistemic modality, changes of state and processes, time reference, etc. in spontaneous speech (Calbris 1990, Fricke 2010). As will be shown, abstract

grammatical meanings may be performed and even drawn by children, after careful observation and workshop practice.

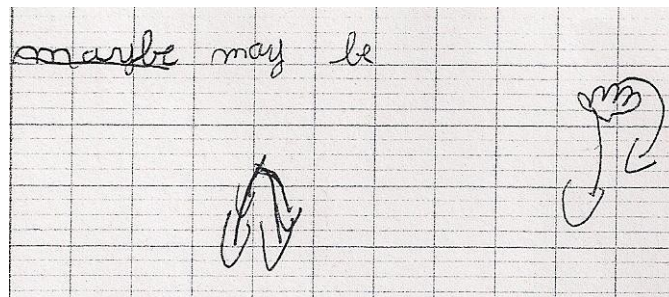


Figure 6 – Yasser’s schema for “maybe”

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