

Multimodal acts of depiction: gestural productions of hand and mouth in folk definitions of ideophones

Mark Dingemans

Studies of multimodal language often assume that speech and gesture play complementary roles, with speech providing propositional content and iconic gestures supplying more imagistic, gradient information (McNeill 1992; Goldin-Meadow 2016). However, this division of labour is not set in stone: there are word-like gestures and gesture-like words (Okrent 2002). Here I start from the latter in the form of ideophones, vivid sensory words found in many of the world's languages. As words that are highly gradient, evocative and often iconic, they "belong not only to language but to an expanded conception of gesture" (Nuckolls 2000; cf. Kunene 2001). Ideophones often occur in composite gesture-ideophone utterances (Kita 1997; Dingemans 2013; Mihás 2013), in which gesture and speech work together to depict sensory imagery. This coupling offers a unique opportunity for a contrastive study of depictive signs across modalities.

Are all ideophones equally likely to come with gestures? What are the iconic affordances of speech and manual gesture? How do signs in gesture-ideophone composite utterances compare in terms of gradience, conventionalisation and linguistic integration? I study these questions in a video corpus of folk definitions of ideophones in Siwu, a Kwa language spoken in Ghana (Dingemans 2015). Data is coded for semantic domain, aspect (action/state), and formal properties like gradience and cross-speaker consistency. Ideophones for visible percepts (wùrùfùù 'fluffy') are more likely to come with iconic gestures than those for audible percepts (gbiim 'boom'). Also, ideophones for actions (yaa 'gushing') are more likely to come with gestures than those for states (kpoo 'still').

Ideophones show much more gradience and variance in form than other lexical items like nouns and verbs, pointing to their gesture-like status (Kunene 1965). On the other hand, speakers do converge on basic phonological properties like vowel quality, phonotactic properties and syllabic structure, pointing to their lexicalised nature. The iconic gestures accompanying ideophones show an even larger amount of gradience and also vary quite a bit across speakers, suggesting they are for the most part non-conventionalised depictive movements. There is a subset of composite utterances in which the gestural part is fairly consistent across speakers in terms of handshape, gesture space or method of depiction. Over time, some gesture-ideophone combinations may move towards conventionalisation, a development that opens up the way for the formation of emblematic gestures and ultimately perhaps a loss of motivational transparency. Composite gesture-ideophone utterances show the utility of a modality-free notion of gesture (Okrent 2002) and reminds us that meaningful signs may occupy intermediate positions on what is often cast as a binary distinction between convention and creativity. When it comes to multimodal acts of depiction, speech and gesture are not loosely aligned and complementary, but tightly coupled and alike in mode of representation.

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