Multimodal constructions revisited. Testing for the association between syntactic constructions and non-syntactic features.

Claudia Lehmann, Universität Potsdam, claudia.lehmann@uni-potsdam.de

In the narrow sense, a multimodal construction is a pairing of a function and a form that combines at least two semiotic modes. Quite a few studies show a statistically significant co-occurrence of (oftentimes) stance-related constructions and prosodic or visual features (e.g. Põldvere & Paradis 2020; Ward, 2019; Schoonjans, 2018; Zima, 2017). While these studies show that there are recurring multimodal constructs, they don't provide direct evidence for multimodal constructions in the narrow sense, given the possibility that these might also be recurring configurations of unimodal (syntactic and non-syntactic) constructions triggered by a third, contextual feature.

The present paper will report on an experiment showing that language users draw on acoustic and visual information to disambiguate constructs when presented without further co-text. In a pilot run of the experiment, six participants were presented with a speaker uttering *Tell me about it*, which is potentially ambiguous between a requesting and a stance-related construction, and were asked to identify its meaning. The stimuli for the experiment (N=20) were extracted from the *NewsScape Library of International Television News* (Steen & Turner, 2013) and selected based on the findings reported in Lehmann (2023). They were presented in two conditions: with acoustic information only (audio files) and visual information only (video files without sound). The results show that, overall, the participants assigned the constructs to a particular construction above chance level (χ^2=17.88, p<0.01). The results also show that the participants were more confident in the visuals-only condition (χ^2=13.13, p<0.01) than the acoustics-only condition (χ^2=5.55, p<0.05).

It will be argued that these results provide evidence for both requesting and stance-related *Tell me about it* being multimodal constructions from a usage-based perspective, since the use of acoustic and visual information for disambiguating between constructions can only be accounted for if a cognitive basis for their association is assumed. Furthermore, it will be argued that some of the visuals constitute constructions themselves, associated with either the requesting or stance-related construction via slot-filler relations, which accounts for their primacy in the experiment.

References

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