

Semantic and pragmatic effects of gesture speech alignment

Cornelia Ebert (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt)

It is a well-established result from gesture research that the temporal alignment of gesture and speech matters. This alignment often also affects or even determines the meaning of the gesture itself and the meaning of the overarching multimodal utterance, i.e. the joint meaning of gesture and speech. Depending on what a certain gesture aligns with the gesture receives different interpretations.

In my talk, I will discuss corpus-linguistic, experimental, and theoretical work around the topic of how gesture-speech alignment has an influence on the interpretation of an utterance. I will (i) discuss Ebert, Evert & Wilmes' (2011) work showing that the timing of gesture can be a means to mark information structure (next to intonation and word order) and that it serves to disambiguate possible focus domains. Furthermore (ii), I will present Ebert & Ebert's (2014) formal semantic approach to gesture interpretation, where the semantic contribution of a co-speech gesture is to a large part determined by the temporal alignment of gesture and speech. Additionally, I will report the results of a rating experiment corroborating our assumptions, in particular concerning DP- vs. NP alignment (alignment with NP, e.g. just window, vs. the whole DP, e.g. a window; Ebert, Pirillo & Walter 2022). Finally (iii), I will discuss recent work of Ebert, Hinterwimmer and Walter (2024) on the semantic effects of VP- vs. TP-alignment, where we argue that VP alignment results in an event-kind reading, i.e., a prototypical interpretation of the gesture, while TP alignment yields an event-token reading, i.e., a non-prototypical interpretation of the gesture.