

Levels of metaphor in gesture

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In a recent contribution to Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Kövecses postulates that metaphors should be seen ‘as simultaneously involving conceptual structures or units, on a variety of different levels of schematicity’ (2017: 2). Following the long-standing assumption that conceptual metaphors can be expressed multimodally (e.g., Forceville 1994, McNeill 2005, Cienki 2004), this paper aims to show how the multilevel approach to metaphor, as proposed by Kövecses (2017, 2020), can be applied to gesture as a speech co-expressive semiotic modality. Gestures from coming out narratives (narratives on how people revealed their sexual orientation and/or gender identity to others) were selected to show how low-schematicity structures, such as image schemas and domains, feed into high-level structures, conceptual frames and metaphorical scenarios. The results of the analysis demonstrate multimodal applicability of the multilevel approach to metaphor: the OBJECT and SOURCE-PATH-GOAL image schemas are directly linked to the domain of TRANSFER, which, when adequately contextualized, turns into the COMING OUT frame. This frame, in turn, becomes a highly context-dependent and variable gestural metaphorical scenario of COMING OUT IS SHOWING AN OBJECT. This theoretical extension of the multilevel approach to metaphor reveals some modality-specific features of metaphoricity in gesture. While verbal context is not strictly necessary for the level of image schemas due to their relative cognitive basicness, it becomes obligatory at the level of frames to disambiguate the meaning of a given gesture and infer its metaphorical character. The multimodal bent of this contribution also raises questions as to whether some different levels can be inserted into the hierarchy. An additional level of constructions (Goldberg 1995, 2019) may be added to the hierarchy, together with the level of mimetic schemas, proposed by Zlatev (2014), possibly offering an enriched view on the human conceptual system.

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