

Thinking, Speaking and Gesturing

Grammatical Aspect in Spoken Chinese and English from the Perspective of Multimodal Communication

With the advent of gesture studies, the relationship between grammar, gesture and cognition is being studied in a variety of languages and cultures. This thesis focuses on native speakers of English and on Chinese speakers of English as a second language to get a better understanding of the relationship between grammar, gesture and (event) cognition. For Chinese speakers, grammatical ‘aspect’ appears to be one of the most important linguistic devices used by speakers to represent how they conceptualize events. Grammatical aspect has the potential to be expressed multimodally (in speech and gesture) and therefore: embodied.

The thesis develops qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse multimodal representations of aspect in grammatical constructions as well as in gesture in natural conversation. Comparisons are made with speaking and gesturing about events in Chinese, revealing multiple meanings of certain aspectual forms in Chinese, in contrast with the more uniform meaning of the English progressive aspect. Results show that Chinese speakers of English tend to maintain their native thinking-for-speaking patterns while mixing Chinese with English gestural patterns. Consequently, these findings may have implications for teaching English to Chinese learners.