Speech-embedded non-verbal depictions:
Embeddedness and structural complexities

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Depictions, defined by Clark (2016), are physical scenes people create and display, with a single set of actions, at the same place and time, to facilitate the addressee's imagination of the depicted scenes. Iconic in nature, depictions subsume phenomena in communication where the form of the sign bears physical resemblance to the meaning. While depictions are ubiquitous in real-life language use and come in various subtypes (ibid.), of special research interest are tokens of speech-embedded non-verbal depictions; i.e. depictions that are embedded in speech, but that themselves contain no speech. Potential evidence of non-speech modalities being an integral part of language use, these tokens — cases where meaning is communicated non-verbally and without temporally co-occurring speech — are the ones that have until recently escaped the attention of most linguists, with few exceptions (e.g. Fricke, 2012; Ladewig, forthc.).

In view of this, we examined >10 hrs of video recordings of American TV talk shows, in order to unravel the systematicity of speech-embedded non-verbal depictions, tapping specifically into their relation to speech and their internal structure. Over 200 tokens of such depictions were identified, embedded on the levels of the word, phrase, sentence, and beyond. The versatility in depiction-speech integration underlines non-verbal signals' capability of communicating structurally diverse meanings, also lending support to the view that non-verbal depictions as form-function pairings are not unlike verbal constituents in the sense of Construction Grammar (Croft, 2001). In addition, the tokens also exhibit internal structural complexities of speech-embedded non-verbal depictions. In particular, numerous series of consecutive depictions, staged by a single depictor or jointly by multiple depictors, are observed building up complex composite meanings. For example, to demonstrate how he would not be able to refrain from actually eating if he were to play a role requiring eating on scene, Conan O'Brien staged three consecutive depictions, all of which share the same posture and arm configuration (annotation simplified):

(1)   [*bites into a burger*] — [*sucks fingers*] — [*sticks out R index, signaling others to wait*]

Such depiction series consist of a base-depiction — which is the common thread of the series — and, staged on top of it, several elaboration-depictions — which either each contribute to the composite meaning of the series independently, or build and elaborate upon prior elaborations in the same series (as in 1). Elaboration-depictions are also observed serving the functions of indexing and commenting on the base-depiction, highlighting the layered (Clark, 1996) nature of depictions, as events on multiple layers are simultaneously profiled.

Building on Clark's notion of depicting and the handful of available studies on non-verbal communication without co-occurring speech, the present study demonstrates not only the versatility of the depictions in question, but more importantly their internal complexities. While it would be missing the point to debate to what verbal counterparts the structural complexities of multimodal depictions correspond, the findings do counter opinions that dismiss non-verbal signals as para-linguistic or as isolated occurrences lacking systematicity, arguing instead for them being structured linguistic construct(ion)s (cf. Zima & Bergs, 2017).

References
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