

Gesturing the source domain: Exploring the metaphorical models of transgenderism

Gesture is aptly described as a “backdoor” to cognition (Sweetser 2007: 203). Co-speech gesture has been shown to encode metaphorical source domains (Cienke 1998), aid in the representation of abstract concepts (Perril and Sweetser 2004), and specific handshapes, movements, and directionality systematically structure metaphorical vocabulary in American Sign Language (Taub 2001). Although gesture is a rich source of data for the examination of conceptual metaphor, it is noticeably absent from the critical and political discourse analysis paradigms. In this presentation, I use gesture to investigate which source domains are structuring American understandings of transgenderism, the concept ascribed to those who have begun or completed a change in their sex characteristics from male to female or female to male. Through the examination of twenty transition narratives documented on video, I will show how both co-speech gesture and an emerging lexicon of ASL signs align with spoken and written narrative to support a spatially based representation of gender identity and transition. Recently, there has been a large amount of work analyzing the construction of transgender identity (e.g. Armitage 2008; Valentine 2007), some of which includes linguistic analyses of transgender, transsexual, and drag queen communicative patterns (Barrett 1998, 1999). However, there exists no comprehensive analysis of the cognitive models used to understand transgender identity or the transition process. I offer a roadmap for those interested in incorporating evidence from gesture into the identification of unconscious assumptions, which organize speakers’ comprehension of complex political topics.

The assignment of gender is talked about and thought about as being located in a bounded region; English speakers qualify and quantify gender and transition through their understanding of movement through space: *cross-dressing, transitioning, changing, male-to-female, coming out, intersex*. This language is indicative of a binary category model of gender assignment, in which each category is understood as a bounded region in space and transition is a journey with intermediate and final destinations along a path as in (1):

- (1) *I have often likened my transition to slowly **wading** out into a cold lake. I take **a step or two**, shiver a bit at the coldness, and **hang out** for a bit as my body acclimates. Then I decide if I want to go deeper. **All along the transition** I have been open to the concept that I can **stay** where I am, **go back**, or **push deeper**. And though several times I have **pulled back** –too deep, too fast, too cold- I have always found myself **moving toward transition**.*

Co-speech gesturing from my corpus, such as two upward facing palms in alternate motion, canonical of decision-making (MAKING DECISION IS WEIGHING), suggests the coming out process is understood as a choice with two alternatives. In one specific example of this gesture, the two palms are subsequently coopted into deictic reference points on the left to right timeline. The temporal reference set up in the gesture signals a spatial threshold, which once passed, cannot be re-traveled.

Often paired with a Journey Model, is a metaphorical understanding of the self as divided into two entities (Lakoff 1996; Talmy 2000). The ‘real’ inner-self is hidden, exemplified by phrases like *in the closet*. However the exterior self, the one presented to others, must match the desired identity, giving rise to terms like *stealth* and *passing*, and examples such as that in (2):

- (2) *If you change the sex of your body to become your **real self**, you are often rejected*

New ASL vocabulary including the signs COMING OUT and TRANSGENDER offer further evidence of the divided-self mapping. In TRANSGENDER, a body internal rotation is implied. The sign for COMING OUT indicates not only the activation of KNOWING IS SEEING, but also a forward trajectory of the previously hidden self. The transgendered divided self, in which the true self is hiding, or purposefully being hidden, runs counter to American societal expectations of honesty and the morality therein. Freely moving from one location/identity to another also flouts common conceptions of gender as a fixed, assigned category.

These examples, and others from my corpus, serve as untapped but fruitful supporting evidence in the identification of how members of the LGBTQ community understand transition and, in the process, move us one step closer to conceptual alignment between the LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ speech communities.

References

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