

Claudia Lehmann:
Multimodal constructions in production, perception, and
language learning. The case of *Tell me about it*.

Abstract:

In this talk, I will address the debate on multimodal constructions, i.e. “emergent clusters of lossy memory traces” (Goldberg 2019: 7) other than purely verbal ones from a usage-based Construction Grammar perspective. Ziem (2017) formulates four conditions under which a construction can be regarded as multimodal, and it will be argued that the stance-related use of *Tell me about it* is such a multimodal construction.

From a purely syntactic perspective, *Tell me about it* is ambiguous between an imperative use (Example (1)) and a stance-related use (Example (2)). The following examples come from the UCLA NewsScape Library (Steen & Turner 2013):

- (1) A: Your book does take people behind the scenes. Tell me about it.
B: Well, first of all, it’s not a memoir.
- (2) A: That is such a let-down.
B: Huh. Tell me about it. It was bad.

I will show that, apart from the sequential position in which *Tell me about it* occurs, multimodal features disambiguate its usage. Corpus evidence suggests that speakers of stance-related *Tell me about it* speak more slowly, tend to avert their gaze, raise their eyebrows, smile, and tend to move their heads. Further evidence comes from a forced-choice experiment, in which language users were asked to identify the meaning of *Tell me about it* when presented with visual and/or acoustic cues only. And, finally, the results of a discussion with a focus group confirm that knowledge about the multimodal features associated with *Tell me about it* has reached some level of consciousness. Taken together, these three studies provide corroborative evidence for stance-related *Tell me about it* being a multimodal construction.

The talk will end with a brief outlook on future directions in multimodal Construction Grammar.

References

- Goldberg, Adele E. 2019. Explain me this: Creativity, competition, and the partial productivity of constructions. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Steen, Francis & Mark B. Turner. 2013. Multimodal construction grammar. In Mike Borkent, Barbara Dancygier & Jennifer Hinnell (eds.), *Language and the creative mind*, 255-274. Stanford: CSLI.
- Ziem, Alexander. 2017. Do we really need a Multimodal Construction Grammar? *Linguistics Vanguard* 3(s1). 20160095.