

Zentrum Sprache – Variation – Mehrsprachigkeit Linguistic Lecture Series Wintersemester 2023/24

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Is seeing gesture necessary for the (timely) acquisition of language-specific patterns in co-speech gesture and their lack in silent gesture?

Abstract:

Sighted speakers of different languages vary systematically in how they package components of a motion event in speech. These differences influence the organization of semantic elements in gesture, but only when gestures are produced with speech (co-speech gesture), not without speech (silent gesture). What explains the emergence of cross-linguistic differences in co-speech gesture and cross-linguistic similarities in silent gesture? In this talk, I address this question by focusing on congenitally blind speakers of structurally different languages who have never seen others gesture. I ask whether the (timely) onset of language-specific patterns in co-speech gesture, and the lack of such patterns in silent gesture, are both affected by the ability to see others gesture.