

Multimodality and constructional approach to grammar: new horizons in sight? /

Multimodalidade e abordagem construcional da gramática: novos horizontes à vista?

Work under review:

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Elizabeth Zima is a contemporary linguist working within the usage-based linguistics framework, operating at the interface between semantics, pragmatics, and interactional discourse analysis. Her academic trajectory is associated with prominent European institutions, such as the University of Freiburg and the University of Zurich, and her work is part of a movement that seeks to renew Cognitive Linguistics (CL), seeking to bring this linguistic theory closer to socio-interactional studies in a more direct manner. The recurring themes in her most recent work focus on multimodality, the emergence of meaning in face-to-face interactions, and the notion of constructions as multimodal symbolic units. Specifically, Zima investigates how different semiotic resources (e.g. speech, gesture, gaze, and bodily expressions) are systematically integrated into discourse organization, proposing that grammar cannot be adequately described without considering this integration.

Published in 2025, *Multimodal Construction Grammar* by Elisabeth Zima constitutes one of the most relevant and timely contributions to the contemporary debate within Construction Grammar (CxG), especially concerning the reconciliation between the theoretical commitment to language in use and the persistent centrality of the verbal channel in grammatical description. As part of the *Elements in Construction Grammar* series, edited by Thomas Hoffmann (Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt) and Alexander Bergs (Osnabrück University), the work has a deliberately theoretical-methodological scope and assumes as its central question the following tension: if CxG defines itself as a usage-based model, guided by speakers' concrete linguistic experience, how can one justify maintaining an essentially unimodal conception of constructions when language in use is constitutively multimodal?

From the outset, Zima makes it clear that her aim is neither to propose an abrupt conceptual revolution nor to offer a finished model of Multimodal Construction Grammar (MCxG). Rather, the book is constructed as a critical, gradual, and reflective investigation that seeks to map out the state of the art, identify theoretical and methodological impasses, and cautiously discuss possible paths toward the systematic incorporation of multimodality into the constructicon. This stance gives the work a balanced analytical tone, avoiding both the verbal reductionism still dominant in many constructional descriptions and the uncritical enthusiasm for multimodality often observed in more recent approaches.

In her introduction, the author presents the book's general objectives and precisely delimits its theoretical scope. Zima starts from the observation that CxG, despite its roots in CL and its explicit commitment to usage, was historically developed from predominantly written and verbal data. This methodological heritage, she argues, has contributed to a conception of constructions as symbolic pairings essentially between verbal form and meaning, marginalizing other semiotic resources that participate in meaning-making in real interactional contexts. The initial chapter thus fulfills a fundamental programmatic function: justifying the relevance of the problem, situating the reader within the contemporary debate, and making explicit the need for a more coherent epistemological reflection on the status of multimodality in constructional theory.

In the second chapter, titled Theoretical Preliminaries, Zima deepens the theoretical foundations underlying the notion of multimodality in language. Drawing on contributions from CL, Interactional Linguistics, and Gesture Studies, the author reaffirms that human language is, essentially, an embodied, situated, and intersubjective activity. Face-to-face interaction is presented as the primary context for the emergence and development of language, in which gestures, gaze, body posture, and prosody do not function as mere expressive adornments but as systematic resources for meaning construction. One of the chapter's merits is showing that the exclusion of these resources from grammatical description stems not from theoretical incompatibility with CxG principles but from historically consolidated methodological choices. By revisiting the work of Langacker (1987; 2008), for example, Zima shows that there was already, from the foundations of CL, conceptual openness to including gestures as part of symbolic form, even if this possibility has been little explored in descriptive practice.

In the third chapter titled Ways to Model the Multimodality of Constructions, Zima focuses on the debate surrounding the so-called multimodal constructions and constitutes one of the densest theoretical cores of the work. The author systematically and didactically synthesizes the different positions existing in the literature, distinguishing between more restrictive approaches, which recognize as multimodal only those constructions in which a non-verbal component is indispensable for interpretation, and more inclusive approaches, which advocate for incorporating recurrent multimodal patterns into speakers' constructional knowledge, even when such patterns are not mandatory. Zima critically analyzes both positions, showing that the first tends to relegate

multimodality to a marginal role in the construction, while the second faces serious methodological challenges, particularly regarding the definition of criteria for identifying multimodal constructions.

In this context, Zima problematizes the direct application of classic CxG criteria (e.g., mandatoriness, predictability, and compositionality) to the multimodal domain. The contextual variability of gestures and other bodily resources makes it difficult to identify categorical associations between verbal form and multimodal form, which calls into question overly discrete models. The author convincingly argues that multimodality requires a more gradual and probabilistic conception of linguistic knowledge, consistent with the assumptions of usage-based models.

In the following chapter, *Studies in Multimodal Construction Grammar*, Zima examines intermediate proposals that seek to circumvent the impasses identified earlier. Models are discussed that shift part of the multimodal information to networks of associations between constructions, avoiding the so-called "fat node problem" (Hilpert, 2021), i.e., the risk of excessively inflating constructional nodes with heterogeneous multimodal information. The author analyzes contributions from different researchers and shows how these proposals vary in terms of the degree of integration between modalities, the schematicity of constructions, and the role attributed to frequency. This chapter stands out for showing that the debate on multimodal constructions is not binary but involves a constellation of theoretical solutions that attempt to balance empirical adequacy and descriptive economy.

The fifth chapter, *Interactional Research on Multimodal Packages*, is dedicated to a critical review of empirical studies in MCxG. Zima examines corpus-based multimodal research, qualitative analyses of natural interactions, and quantitative studies of co-occurrence between verbal constructions and gestures. A recurring point emphasized by the author is the rarity of categorical associations between constructions and specific multimodal resources. Even when recurrent patterns are observed, contextual variability remains high, reinforcing the need for gradual models. At the same time, Zima adopts a critical stance toward approaches that rely exclusively on frequency metrics, arguing that the functional and pragmatic relevance of multimodal resources cannot be fully captured by isolated quantitative analyses.

In the sixth chapter, *Beyond Gestures: Gaze and Prosody*, the author broadens the scope of the discussion by addressing modalities often neglected in constructional studies, such as gaze

and prosody. Zima demonstrates that these resources play central roles in interaction organization, turn management, and the expression of epistemic and evaluative attitudes. One of the most stimulating arguments of the chapter is the suggestion that different modalities occupy distinct positions in the hierarchy of linguistic knowledge, with prosody, in some cases, being more systematically associated with certain constructions than manual gestures. This observation contributes to a more refined conception of multimodality that avoids treating all semiotic channels as functionally equivalent.

In the final chapter, *The Future: Where Do We Go from Here?*, Zima revisits the main issues discussed throughout the book and outlines a research agenda for MCxG. The author emphasizes the need for greater data diversity, including natural interactions, different languages, and varied communicative contexts, as well as the importance of integrated methodological approaches that articulate qualitative and quantitative analyses. Rather than offering a closed model, the book concludes with a defense of theoretical caution, interdisciplinary openness, and an awareness of the current limits of the field.

As a general assessment, Multimodal Construction Grammar stands out for its conceptual rigor, expository clarity, and intellectual honesty. The work contributes less by presenting definitive solutions and more by precisely formulating the problems that CxG must face in the 21st century as a theory that seeks to explain the nature of speakers' linguistic knowledge. Although it may frustrate readers seeking a fully operationalized formal model, the book superbly fulfills its purpose of (re)positioning constructional theory in the face of the challenge of multimodality. In this sense, it is essential reading for researchers in CL, Usage-Based CxG, and interaction studies, as well as providing indispensable theoretical resources for dialogues with areas such as gesture studies, prosody, and sign language linguistics.

In response to the central question that guides the entire work, that is to say, how to justify maintaining an essentially unimodal conception of constructions in a model that defines itself as usage-based, when language in use is constitutively multimodal, Zima's book offers an answer that is both firm and open. The author consistently demonstrates that such maintenance is not theoretically sustainable without significant explanatory costs: a CxG that systematically ignores bodily resources risks describing an abstract language that is never fully realized in speakers' experience.

However, Zima also rejects the simplistic solution of declaring every construction as intrinsically multimodal. Her answer involves advocating for a gradual reconceptualization of the construction, capable of accommodating different degrees of modal integration, sensitive to the frequency, functional recurrence, and interactional relevance of non-verbal resources. Thus, the work does not eliminate the tension between usage and unimodality but transforms it into a theoretical engine: by recognizing that not every multimodal regularity crystallizes as a construction, Zima preserves the economy of the constructional model while reaffirming, in a manner coherent with its foundational assumptions, that speakers' concrete linguistic experience, inevitably multimodal, must remain at the center of grammatical explanation.