

How do people gesture metaphorically when swearing? Going beyond the middle finger

It may appear trivial to say that when people speak, they also gesture (e.g., Martiniec 2004, McNeill 2005). Gesture is so engrained in our daily communication that we hardly ever notice the movements of our hands and arms. Swearing is an equally persuasive communicative phenomenon, with its functions varying from expressing anger (Jay 1992) to building solidarity (Drummond 2020). The intersection of the two has been extensively analyzed in terms of emblematic gestures (e.g., the middle finger in the European culture used to convey offence, e.g., Ljung 2011), with cognitive (semantic) mechanisms of gesture and swearing left largely unexplored. The present study aims to bring the cognitive analysis of gestures and swearing closer together, offering a principled way of uncovering image schematic properties of metaphorical gestures in swearing. In the study, 469 YouTube videos were screened, out of which 29 fragments were extracted for further analysis, all of which showed a gesture-swearword (“fuck off”) pairing. Each of the gestures was analyzed in terms of its (1) handshape, (2) orientation, (3) movement, and (4) position in gesture space, following Ladewig and Bressems’ analytical criteria (Ladewig and Bressems 2013). The analysis of the gestures has shown that the “fuck off”-accompanied gestures can be arranged into a semantically and kinesthetically coherent metaphorical scenario (see Dyrmo 2022), based on the OBJECT image schema, which is later used to convey the idea of BLOCKAGE. The results of the analysis remain consistent with previous studies on the gestural expressions of rejection and negation, often expressed as a vertically oriented Palm-Up Open-Hand gesture (e.g., Bressems and Müller 2017, Kamunen 2018, Harrison 2014).

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