

Imagistic Structure and List Buoys

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ABSTRACT

Signed language linguists distinguish between topographic and non-topographic uses of space. Topographic space is generally considered to be a three-dimensional representation of spatial relationships between entities in the world (Johnston and Schembri 2007). Non-topographic space, being abstract, does not represent spatial relationships. An example of a non-topographic use of space is the token blend (Liddell 2003), in which an abstract concept is projected onto a limited portion of space in front of the signer. Then, when the signer points towards this token, reference is made to the entity that the token represents. Whatever physical aspects that the entity may have, e.g. its specific size and shape, are not projected into the token blend.

A description of non-topographic space as being abstract could be taken as a claim that it is a phenomenon independent of human knowledge and cognitive abilities. From this perspective, topographic space and non-topographic space differ with respect to whether human knowledge and cognitive abilities structure these spaces. Thus, topographic space could be described as a projection of structure arising from one's experience of scenes within the real world into the signer's immediate space. The same cannot be said for non-topographic space, because signers cannot be said to have direct, "in-the-world" experience with the abstract (e.g. intangible, non-physical entities) available to them for projection.

This paper describes a cognitive linguistic perspective on this matter by way of analyzing several examples of list buoys (Liddell 2003). In its basic form, the list buoy has the fingertips of the non-dominant hand associated with entities of a category. Like tokens, the fingertips do not represent any physical aspects associated with the specific entities in question. Since this list buoy does not depict any possible, "in-the-world" spatial relations between entities, the structure of this instance of a buoy blend appears comparable to that of non-topographic space. (The terms topographic and non-topographic employed elsewhere characterize uses of the signing space rather than any imagistic use of the hand.)

However, there are other instances of list buoys that do exhibit or participate in spatial relations. These buoys are analyzed here as being structured by imagistic conceptions that are part of human knowledge, being schematizations of one's specific, everyday bodily interactions in the world. These conceptions are related to, if not examples of, image schemas (Johnson 1987) or conceptual archetypes (Langacker 2008). Conceptions of planar structure and linear structure are not abstract in the above sense, but embodied; they are conceptions that respectively structure the calendar plane and the sequence time line, described in Engberg-Pedersen (1993). A schematic three-dimensional imagistic structure, what we might call a scene conception, is intrinsic to what has been described as surrogate space (Liddell 1994) and depicting space (Liddell 2003). An alternative explanation to Liddell considers how—rather than assuming list

buoys and tokens are projections of something removed from human experience—we might consider them to be structured by an imagistic conception such as the conceptual archetype of a physical object (Langacker 2008).

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