

Spaces and Scenes within Comparative Maps

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ABSTRACT

When two concepts are being compared in ASL, the signer may employ the left and right sides of the space in front of her to represent these concepts. In this way this conventional use of space, described by Winston (1996) as a “comparative map,” and gives concepts a spatial presence. Examples of ASL comparative maps in signed language linguistics publications (e.g. Janzen 2012; Liddell 2003) have signers pointing signs towards locations within the map. Janzen describes these locations as abstract, in that they do not correspond to locations within an actual or imagined physical world. Liddell describes them as tokens, which “bear no physical resemblance” to the concepts. From this perspective, the comparative map could be considered to be an example of an use of space that is far less motivated than the spatial representation of a single, three-dimensional scene which is necessarily located within a world, which are labeled either as a “surrogate space” or a “depicting space” in Liddell’s (2003).

However, there are examples observed in non-elicited ASL data in which the left and right sides of space are used to represent three-dimensional scenes. Such examples provide us with an opportunity to better understand not only the convention of comparative maps but also the structure of abstract spaces and scene representations. In this paper I consider theoretical notions in the investigation of comparative maps, including the “conceptual archetype” within the framework of Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 2008). Conceptual archetypes are “experientially grounded concepts [that are] frequent and fundamental in our everyday life,” which include conceptions of a physical object, the human body, and holding something (Langacker 2008:33-34). Wilcox (2002) describes tokens as “virtual things” that are motivated by a conceptual archetype labeled as the “billiard-ball model.” This is “our conception of objects moving through space and impacting one another through forceful physical contact” (Langacker 2008:355). This conception is embodied, arising via bodily interaction with the world. Abstract objects within certain instances of comparative maps are argued to be abstracted away from scenes. This view allows us to consider all uses of space as motivated and depictive. It also aligns with Clark’s (2016) “staging theory,” in which all depictions are “physical scenes that people stage for others to use in imagining the scenes they are depicting.”

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