Communicating space as time in distance representations

Over 30 years ago Lakoff and Johnson (1980) pointed out that we systematically talk and think about time in spatial terms by metaphorical extension, but not vice-versa, which makes time asymmetrically dependent on space. However, an extensive body of cognitive research (see Tversky 2009 for a review) has demonstrated that language reflects topological cognition of space, which abstracts away the metric properties of space expressed as absolutely fixed quantities, and focuses instead on general relations (Talmy, 2000).

This paper demonstrates a tendency to communicate distance in space in temporal terms, which has been found in the British National Corpus in the semantic context of motion events (Waliński, 2014). Since the linguistic representation of space is largely relativistic and approximate, rather than Euclidean and quantitative, it comes naturally to language users to express spatial distance in terms of the time required to execute a motion event. In more general terms, the results indicate that in motion-framed scenarios neither time or space should be regarded as metaphorical extension of the other. Because the interaction between language and space relies on schematization mechanisms, the linguistic structuring of space should not be interpreted as simple object recognition, but rather as spatial understanding (cf. Jackendoff, 2012; Langacker, 2012).

References


