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The persistence of space: formalizing the polysemy of spatial relations in functional elements

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The persistence of space



The persistence of space

Formalizing the polysemy of spatial relations in functional elements

Languages frequently make use of spatial vocabulary to describe abstract notions. For instance, the spatial preposition *by* (*by the house*) can be used to describe relations in the temporal domain (*by five o'clock*) as well as in the causal domain (*hit by John*). This dissertation shows that when a spatial term is extended into an abstract non-spatial domain, some of its spatial meaning persists. Speakers seem to rely on a spatial representation of the abstract domain, and use it to reinterpret the spatial term to obtain an abstract meaning.

On the basis of Western European languages, the proposal is formalized for the use of spatial prepositions in the causal domain (e.g., French *de* and *par* in passives) as well as the use of demonstratives to refer to information content (e.g., the use of English *that* to introduce complement clauses). The proposals are further tested in corpus studies using Biblical Hebrew. Data from the Hebrew Bible additionally show that the analysis can be extended to the use of prepositions for describing social relations.

The research presented here shows that spatial meaning often persists when grammaticalization takes place. The use of spatial vocabulary in abstract domains is not metaphorical but deeply embedded in cognition, shaping the conceptualization of abstract relations. In this way, the study of language contributes to our understanding of the human mind.

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