Image-schematic scaffolding in visual and textual artifacts

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Comparing textual and visual means of expression is often difficult because of the different natural affordances of each medium. However, it seems inherently possible and productive to attempt such comparisons, as they provide more reliable information on the underlying conceptual patterns and the nature of frames evoked. In this paper, we consider one type of image schema (Johnson 1987, Lakoff and Johnson 1999) – a barrier – to uncover its viewpoint potential and the ability to yield richer visual, linguistic or multimodal meaning. We show how such an approach uncovers shared conceptual underpinnings of various forms of expression. We propose the concept of '*image-schematic scaffolding*' as a general strategy: very simple image schemas provide skeletal structure which language users fill in, through frames, metaphors and blends, to yield various creative artifacts across different modalities. Crucially, it is the inherent *viewpoint* potential of image schemas that allows complex creative edifices to be built on the basic scaffolding they provide.

A barrier can schematically be understood as a line separating two regions in space. There are then several ways in which the frame enrichment of the schema yields different viewpointed construals: one can imagine observing the divided regions from 'God's eye view' (cf. Bergen 2012), or align oneself with one side of the barrier. The latter viewpoint implies potential experiences of attempts to cross the barrier or remove it, in order to reach or at least see the other side. This 'cross or remove' construal builds on the primary scene, and thus reaches back to early childhood experiences (cf. Grady 1997, Johnson 1997).

The object that is possibly the most common representation of a barrier is a wall. We will look at various representation of walls and barriers, in texts and in visual forms. We will start with street art examples by Banksy, where images on the Israel/Palestinian territories wall create an illusion of removal of the barrier it constitutes, inviting the viewers to participate in the reconstrual of the wall as 'pliable' or 'crossable'. We will also look at political speeches (especially concerning the Berlin Wall and its removal), examples from poetry (by Robert Frost, where the need to remove barriers is the focus) and a novel (*How to be both* by Ali Smith, where the very nature of the hidden structure of the wall is used as a metaphor for layers of narrative meaning). Finally, we will look at the use of the barrier schema in cinematography of the movie *Babel*, where the concept of a boundary brings together various narrative strands of the movie.

These artifacts jointly reveal the meaning-construction potential of a simple underlying schema. The richness of available meanings – social, cultural, political, and moral – relies in a very basic way on the viewpoint potential of the barrier schema. Importantly, the viewpointed nature of a barrier is what gives the artifacts their meaning. For example, graffiti art uses walls as public surfaces. In contrast, when Banksy paints a window on a wall, he foregrounds the wall as a barrier (rather than a surface) and visually prompts the possibility of the barrier being permeated. Much of the importance of walls refers to embodied concepts such as permeability, mobility, vision, or control (all of which are diminished by barriers). When image schemas interact with these concepts, they provide the conceptual scaffolding various modalities build on to achieve similar meaning-construction goals.

References

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