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Semantic maps, conceptual spaces, and mental representation

The typological literature generally assumes that semantic maps and the underlying conceptual spaces have mental reality, that is, they correspond to a universal arrangement of the relevant conceptual situations in a speaker's mind, based on perceived relations of similarity between these conceptual situations (Croft 2001 and 2003, Haspelmath 2003, among others). Croft (2003) goes far as arguing that the universal distributions found for particular morphosyntactic patterns (e.g. presence vs. absence of number inflection), not just the multifunctionality patterns found for individual morphemes, are the manifestation of a universal conceptual space that has mental reality.

The paper provides a number of arguments that challenge this view, based on various types of evidence from grammaticalization processes and synchronic implicational universals. In particular:

(i) There appear to be two types of connections between the conceptual situations involved in a multifunctionality pattern. Multifunctionality patterns that originate from metaphorical transfer are indeed based on some perceived similarity between the relevant conceptual situations, so these situations are arguably associated in terms of mental representation. As has been increasingly emphasized in the literature on grammaticalization (e.g. Bybee 2003, Heine 2003), however, several multifunctionality patterns originate from metonymic extensions at a construction-based or discourse-based level. In such cases, the multifunctionality pattern originates from the cooccurrence of the relevant conceptual situations in some particular construction or discourse context, not any specific similarity between these situations. There is therefore no evidence that these situations are associated in terms of mental representation.

(ii) Some multifunctionality patterns do not appear to be based on any specific connection between the relevant conceptual situations. For example, the same relative element may be used to relativize a variety of syntactic roles depending on accessibility to relativization, or, more generally, identifiability of these roles, not any connection between the roles as such. Similarly, inflectional markedness patterns, as described in Croft 2003, reveal that use of the same morpheme to encode different values of a particular inflectional parameter (such as different number values) depend on the relative frequency of the values for a cross-cutting parameter (e.g. different animacy values), not any relationship between the values encoded by the morpheme.

All this challenges the idea that cross-linguistic patterns of multifunctionality as such, as described by semantic maps and conceptual spaces, can be regarded as evidence for a specific universal arrangement of the relevant conceptual situations in a speaker's mind. These patterns reveal a number of mechanisms of form-function correspondence that are arguably valid for all speakers. This does not imply, however, that any specific association exists between the relevant conceptual situations in terms of mental representation.