HISTORICAL RETROSPECT or why space became a central concern in today’s linguistics

chain 1
Long-standing empiricist and pragmatist tradition

Centrality of perception and of spatial representations in cognition.
Cognitive theory of metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson 1980).

Localist* strand in linguistics (case theory, Wüllner 1827, Hjelmslev 1935, Anderson 1971)

Gruber’s localist theory of thematic roles (1965).
Talmy’s localist model of the linguistic representation of events (1972).
Jackendoff’s (1983) Thematic Relations Hypothesis** (inspired by Gruber).

chain 2
Universalist conceptions are dominant (conceptual primitives, linguistic categories mirror universal cognitive categories).
Berlin & Kay (1969) on the universality of focal colors. Rosch and the prototype theory.

The “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”. Spatial relations as a testing ground, besides color categories, mass / count (Lucy 1992b), counterfactuals (Lucy 1992a).

The return of linguistic relativism: Levison et al. (MPI, in the 90s).
Functional-semantic typology.
Anti-Universal Grammar movement (Functional and Cognitive Linguistics, Typology).

chain 3
Rise of semantics within Generative Grammar. The Generative Semantics movement (Lakoff, McCawley, Ross…).
Langacker and Talmy close to GS.


Schism between GS and Generative Grammar.

** “In any semantic field of [EVENTS] and [STATES], the principal event-, state-, path- and place-functions are a subset of those used for the analysis of spatial location and motion” (1983 : 188).
Ex. field : Possession
BE<sub>POSS</sub> AT<sub>POSS</sub> = ‘belong to’
GO<sub>POSS</sub> TO<sub>POSS</sub> = ‘receive’
CAUSE STAY<sub>POSS</sub> AT<sub>POSS</sub> = ‘keep’ etc.

* Lyons (1977, vol. 2 : 718): Localism is “the hypothesis that spatial expressions are more basic, grammatically and semantically, than various kinds of non spatial expressions (cf. Anderson, 1971, 1973). Spatial expressions are linguistically more basic, according to the localists, in that they serve as structural templates, as it were, for other expressions; and the reason why this should be so, it is plausibly suggested by psychologists, is that spatial organization is of central importance in human cognition (cf. Miller & Johnson-Laird, 1976 : 375ff).”