Spatial meanings for function words? 
The link between conjunctions and spatial representations

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Abstract
While formal theories of language consider function words to have little semantic content, more recent theoretical work has argued that even function words have meaning. Yet, there is little experimental work on the representations underlying the meaning of function words such as conjunctions. In two offline experiments, we examined whether conjunctions (and, or, but, either...or) are associated in systematic but distinctive ways with spatial information. In Experiment 1, participants drew schematic representations to depict how two abstract conjuncts might be connected by each of the four conjunctions. These drawings were evaluated on three spatial dimensions (distance, containment and size). In Experiment 2, participants evaluated how well schematic sketches (that differed in distance, containment, and size) represented different conjunctions. In both experiments, spatial information was systematically and distinctively associated with conjunctions. Either... or and or conjuncts were reliably associated with the use of large distance and separation via containment of the conjuncts. And, by contrast, was associated with shorter distance between, and no containment of, the conjuncts. Finally, but was associated with differences in size. We discuss implications of these results for the spatial foundation of linguistic meaning, and the link between lexical semantics and logic.

Keywords: Conjunctions, spatial representation, drawing, rating, simulation, embodiment.

Introduction
Natural language conjunctions such as and and or are used in ways that differ markedly from their logical or “truth-tabular” senses. For instance, and often expresses the temporal order of two conjoined events (Bloom et al, 1980). Thus, (1) and (2) mean quite different things:

(1) He ran through the door and slipped on a banana peel.
(2) He slipped on a banana peel and ran through the door.

While (1) and (2) differ only in the order of the conjuncts, this results in a different temporal ordering of the events. Conjunctions can also express causality, counterfactuals, or subordination (see Culicover & Jackendoff, 1997). This departure from formal logic has long been recognized by linguists of all stripes (e.g., Hoeksema, 1987; Klinedinst & Rothschild, 2012). But what about those cases where and or are used in a sparse discursive context and actually appear to express a simple logical relation? What are the lexical semantics of and or in their most austere uses?

On a classic formal account, the semantics of these function words is impoverished, contributing to the meaning of an utterance only in virtue of the meaning of the conjoined content words (e.g., Keenan & Faltz, 1985; cf. Boole, 1854). More recent work, however, has prompted a reconsideration of the semantics of function words, and of the semantic content of grammar more generally. Langacker (2008) has argued that grammar is inseparable from meaning, since it shapes conceptualization in subtle but reliable ways. According to Langacker (1987), conjunctions like and or prompt the “juxtaposition” of two or more objects or events in a dynamic conceptualization. Moreover, he and others (e.g. Landau & Jackendoff, 2003; Talmy, 2000) have argued that schematic spatial information may lie at the core of linguistic meaning. Could the “juxtaposition” prompted by conjunctions rely on implicit spatial representations?

This possibility aligns with recent evidence that language comprehension involves the dynamic construction of an embodied mental simulation. In contrast with approaches that posit abstract, symbolic representations (e.g. Landauer & Dumais, 1997; Markman & Dietrich, 2000), embodied approaches argue that linguistic meaning is fundamentally tied to perceptual, motor and affective representations (Barsalou, 1999). Understanding “He threw the apple into the air,” might involve activating cortical circuits implicated in perceiving the color red (Connell, 2007), perceiving motion (Saygin et al, 2012), or performing the action of throwing (Masson, Bub, & Warren 2008). To account for how less concrete language is grounded in perception and action, proponents of some embodied approaches to language comprehension have appealed to “metaphorical” representations that map concrete experience to abstract linguistic content (Gibbs, 2006; Galles & Lakoff, 2005).

For instance, respect can be conceptualized in terms of vertical height—“I look up to my superiors”—while similarity can be conceptualized in terms of closeness—“Our ideas are quite close” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). And, in fact, comprehending language about respect, similarity,
and other abstract concepts appears to involve schematic spatial representations (Guerra & Knoeferle, 2012; Richardson et al., 2003; but see Bergen et al., 2007). Thus, the meaning of content words—both concrete and abstract—may include schematic spatial information.

But what about function words, such as conjunctions? Could their meaning also involve schematic spatial information, co-opting space to juxtapose conjuncts? There is evidence that grammatical tense, for instance, activates spatial representations. Santiago and colleagues (2007) found that participants were faster to categorize words as referring in the past tense when words were presented on the left (vs. right) side of the screen, but faster for words in the future tense when presented on the right (vs. left)—as if grammatical tense activated a left-to-right mental timeline (see also Torralbo, Santiago & Lupiáñez, 2006). The “juxtaposition” prompted by conjunctions may also rely on schematic spatial representations, such as containment (see Glenberg, 2010). Comprehension of and, for instance, could involve a spatial grouping of the conjuncts, while or could mark alternatives by separating them spatially via containment. However, there is no clear experimental evidence showing that function words such as conjunctions are indeed related to spatial representations.

In the present two studies, we used two offline tasks to probe spatial representations underlying the meaning of conjunctions. In the first drawing study, participants created schematic sketches of conjunctions; in the second rating study, they rated schematic spatial diagrams on how well they represented different conjunctions. Both drawing and rating tasks have been used to study spatial representations activated by language, but only for concrete and abstract content words (Richardson et al., 2001). If conjunctions also co-opt spatial schemas to keep track of conceptual relations between conjuncts, then we should see a reliable, systematic use of spatial properties like distance, size, or containment to represent different conjunctions.

**Experiment 1: Drawing study**

Experiment 1 used a drawing paradigm to examine whether representations of space are used to understand and visually depict the relationships expressed by four conjunctions (and, or, but, and either... or). If spatial representations are co-opted, then participants should systematically use spatial information to differentially represent the relations expressed by conjunctions. Alternatively, if conjunctions relate the meaning of the conjuncts in an abstract or logical fashion, no reliable differences in the use of spatial information should emerge.

**Method**

**Participants** 108 native speakers of German completed the drawing task. They all gave informed consent and received monetary compensation for their participation.

**Materials** Three German conjunctions (und ‘and’; aber, ‘but’; and oder ‘or’) and a German correlative conjunction (entweder... oder, ‘either... or’) were presented on a single sheet of paper (Fig. 1). Each conjunction appeared as “Object X conjunction Object Y” at the top of a blank square. Participants could select objects and frames for their drawings (Fig. 2).

**Design and procedure** In a within-subjects design, with conjunction as a factor (‘and’, ‘but’, ‘or’, ‘either... or’), each participant was instructed to make one drawing for each conjunction (see Fig. 1) using the objects in Figure 2. Participants saw two examples for the prepositions with and without. They were told that there were no correct or incorrect answers. The order of the conjunctions (Fig. 1) was counterbalanced.

**Analysis** We examined the drawings’ spatial dimensions of distance, containment and size. Distance was defined as millimeters (mm) between objects’ centers; containment codes whether objects were (or weren’t) separated by one or more frames; size codes whether the objects had the same or a different size. Normalized distance scores (z-scores) were analyzed with linear mixed effect regression (LME, lme4 package for R statistical software). Mixed-effects models are suitable for analyzing unbalanced data and capture participants’ variation around multiple fixed effects similar to ANOVAs (Quené & van den Bergh, 2008). Our LMER modeled distance with conjunction as fixed effect, participant as random intercept, and the fixed effect as random slope.

For the analyses with containment and size, we calculated the percentage of representations that used these dimensions (e.g., containment was scored as present when an object was drawn with a frame around it, and size when differently-sized objects were used). A binomial test evaluated whether these percentages differed significantly from chance.
Results
Distance Figure 3 shows the normalized mean distances between objects by conjunction. A positive deviation from zero (the intercept and grand mean) indicates objects were drawn farther apart than the grand mean object distance; a negative deviation indicates they were closer together. Figure 3 illustrates that while objects were drawn farther apart than average for ‘either… or’ and ‘or’, they were drawn closer together for ‘and’. Object distance for ‘but’ did not differ from average. The LMER\(^1\) model confirmed a main effect of conjunction for distance (p<.001).

![Normalized Mean Distance per Conjunction](image)

Figure 3: Normalized mean distances between objects for each conjunction. Error bars represent standard errors.

Post-hoc comparisons (Bonferroni corrected) confirmed shorter between-object distance for ‘and’ than any of the other conjunctions (p<.001); objects for ‘either…or’ were significantly farther apart than those for ‘but’ (p=.01). The difference in distance between ‘or’ and ‘but’ did not reach significance (p=.24; uncorrected p=.037), and ‘either…or’ and ‘or’ did not differ (p=1).

![Participant Percentage](image)

Figure 4: Participant percentage using containment (upper graph) and size (lower graph) for each of the conjunctions.

Containment & Size Figure 4 illustrates, for each conjunction, the percentage of participants who used frames around objects and different object sizes in their drawings.

For ‘but’, the use of containment did not differ from chance (47%, p=.6). Instead, differently-sized objects distinguished the conjuncts (62%, p=.017). For ‘either… or’, containment (61%, p=.026), but not size (36%, p=.008) was used above chance. For ‘or’, the use of containment did not differ from chance (47%, p=.6), but differences in size were systematically avoided (37%, p=.012). Finally, drawings for ‘and’ avoided the use of containment (28%, p<.001) and used size at the level of chance (46%, p=.4).

Discussion
As predicted, different conjunctions were reliably associated with particular spatial dimensions. When two objects were conjoined by ‘and’, they were drawn close together and not separated by frames. By contrast, for ‘or’ and ‘either…or’ objects were drawn farther apart and separated by frames. Finally, depictions of ‘but’ relied on size to contrast the objects, but made no use of containment or distance. These conjunctions, therefore, elicited reliable spatial depictions in the absence of content words or linguistic context.

But do these results reflect spontaneous associations between conjunctions and space, or task-induced strategic reflection? To rule out that participants interpreted all four conjunctions and planned their sketches, perhaps to contrast them, we conducted a self-paced rating study based on the results of Experiment 1. In the rating study, participants only saw one conjunction-schema pair at a time. If sketches served to contrast the conjunctions, then use of space should disappear, or at least be greatly diminished in the rating task when only one pair is rated at a given time.

Experiment 2: Rating study
Each conjunction (‘and’, ‘or’, ‘but’, ‘either…or’) was paired with each of eight spatial schemas, designed to contrast three spatial dimensions: distance, containment, and size (Figure 5). These conjunction-schema pairs were randomly presented, so that participants could not predict the ensuing schema-conjunction pair. If the use of spatial information was not strategic, then ratings of how well a given depiction illustrates the meaning of a conjunction should replicate findings from Experiment 1. Specifically, we predict higher ratings for ‘either…or’, and ‘or’ when paired with schemas representing far (vs. close) distance and separated containers (vs. objects-contained). By contrast, ratings for ‘and’ should be higher with schemas representing close (vs. far) distance and objects-contained (vs. separated containers). Finally, we predict no differences for ‘but’ on distance- or containment-related schema ratings, but higher than average ratings for size-related schemas.

Method
Participants A further twenty-four native German speakers completed Experiment 2. They all gave informed consent and received monetary compensation for their participation.

Materials Figure 5 shows the schematic depictions. Seven visual schemas covered the three dimensions analyzed in

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\(^1\) We report p-values calculated using a MCMC simulation (R code: pvals.fnc) for a mixed-effects model without random correlations. The R code is: lmer (distance ~ conjunction + (1|participant) + (0+conjunction | participant), data).
Experiment 1 (i.e., distance, containment, size, Fig. 5, A-G); an eighth schema served as a baseline (Fig. 5 H). Each schema was presented on the computer screen with each one of the four conjunctions from Experiment 1.

Design and procedure A within-subjects design, had schema (eight schemas; Fig. 5) and conjunction (‘and’, ‘or’, ‘but’, ‘either…or’) as factors. Participants rated each possible pairing on how well a schema depicted a conjunction using a 7-point scale (1=very bad to 7=very good). Items were presented one at a time on a computer monitor, and participants responded self paced. Experiment Builder v10.6 software (SR Research) recorded responses and randomized trial order.

Analysis For each conjunction, we normalized participants’ raw ratings relative to their rating of the baseline schema H by subtracting their baseline rating from their other ratings\(^2\). Thus, within a conjunction, schemas that were judged more acceptable than baseline received a positive score, but a negative score if they were less acceptable than baseline.

Schema ratings were split into three subsets, based on the three spatial dimensions analyzed in Experiment 1. The distance subset included ratings for far and close schemas; the containment subset included ratings for one-container, two-containers and objects-contained schemas; and the size subset included ratings for big and small schemas. Each set of normalized ratings was then analyzed separately using an LMER model, with schema and conjunction as fixed effects, participant as random intercept, and the main effects and interaction of the fixed effects as random slopes. Planned dependent t-tests (Bonferroni corrected) compared ratings for each schema within conjunctions.

Results

Distance The LMER showed neither main effects of schema nor conjunction ($p$s>.29). However, as predicted, schema and conjunction interacted ($p=.011$), with higher ratings for the far schema for ‘and’, but the close schema for ‘either…or’ and ‘or’ (Fig. 6).

Planned pairwise comparisons assessed the effect for each conjunction. For ‘but’, ratings did not differ for the far and close schemas ($p=.92$). For both ‘either…or’ and ‘or’, by contrast, the far schema received higher ratings ($p<.001$ and $p=.018$, respectively). The pattern reversed for ‘and’, for which the close schema was reliably preferred ($p<.001$).

Containment LMER analyses showed a reliable main effect of conjunction ($p<.002$) but not of schema ($p=.3$); schema and conjunction interacted, as predicted ($p<.001$, Fig. 7). Planned pairwise comparisons examined containment preferences for each conjunction. For either…or’, the two-containers schema—which maximally separates the two objects—was rated higher than both the objects-contained and the one-container schemas (both $p<.001$). Similarly, for ‘or’, the two-container schema was significantly preferred over the one-container schema ($p=.002$), and was marginally preferred over the objects-contained schema ($p=.08$; uncorrected $p=.027$). By contrast, for ‘and’, the objects-contained schema—which groups both objects together—received the highest ratings among the containment-related schemas. The one-container schema was significantly disliked, compared to both the objects-contained and the two-container schemas (both $p<.001$, $ps$ for the other comparisons, n.s.).

Size The LMER showed a main effect of conjunction ($p=.002$). Schems that highlighted differences in size were rated highly for ‘but’, nevertheless, dispreferred for all other conjunctions (Fig. 8, other $ps$ n.s.).

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\(^2\) For instance, if the and + baseline schema was rated as a 4, and and + objects-contained was rated a 6, the normalized rating for and + objects-contained was 6 - 4 = 2.
If conjunctions are associated with spatial representations, then this may even account for some of the varied senses of and and or that have been discussed in the literature (e.g., Culicover & Jackendoff, 1997). For instance, since time is also associated with spatial representations (e.g. Santiago et al., 2007), an implicit schematic spatial representation of the conjuncts could perhaps also induce a temporal ordering.

Where does this leave the relation between lexical semantics and logic? Perhaps closer than ever. In their book on the conceptualization of mathematics, Lakoff and Núñez (2000) suggest that “much of what is often called logical inference is in fact spatial inference mapped onto an abstract logic domain” (p.43). If so, then reasoning about logical relations, such as and and or, may rely on “metaphoric” representations of containment and distance (see, e.g., Boot & Pecher, 2011; Guerra & Knoeferle, 2012). If both the semantics of conjunctions and formal logic turn out to rely on space, then natural language semantics may be closer to formal logic than recently supposed—if we’re willing to accept an appropriately naturalized version of formal logic, and an appropriately embodied version of lexical semantics.

Indeed, a question that remains unaddressed is whether schematic spatial information plays a spontaneous role in the real-time comprehension of conjunctions, when space is not an explicit part of the task. Suggestively, this is the case for content words. Richardson and colleagues (2001) used two offline norming studies to elicit schematic spatial representations associated with both concrete and abstract verbs (e.g. give, respect). They later found that these spatial schemas systematically influenced real-time comprehension of the associated verbs (Richardson et al, 2003), suggesting that the schemas elicited by the offline tasks were active during online language processing. We hypothesize that similar spatial processing may occur during the processing of conjunctions—that is, that the online comprehension of conjunctions may also involve schematic spatial representations of the kind examined here. Such online measures are necessary before we can draw definite conclusions about the semantics of conjunctions.

We do know, however, that conjunctions such as either—or modulate online sentence comprehension (e.g. Frazier, Munn & Clifton, 2000 for and-coordinations). In a reading study, Staub & Clifton (2006) examined the effect of the presence or absence of the word either on reading times for the second conjunct of or-coordinated structures (both for noun phrases and independent clauses). They found that the presence of either facilitated the reading of the content that followed the word or. These findings showed that conjunctions (and, either— or) can influence online sentence interpretation. Future studies should investigate whether these online effects extend to influences on spatial processing.

**Conclusion**

We have shown that different conjunctions are distinctively associated with spatial dimensions of distance, containment, and size. In both a drawing and a rating task, people
associated ‘and’ with closeness and containment; ‘or’ and ‘either…or’ with distance and separation; and ‘but’ with contrasting size. Future work will investigate whether these schematic spatial properties are activated during online comprehension, and determine their functional contribution. Nevertheless, the present experiments highlight the use of space to distinguish abstract grammatical relations, suggesting the meaning of different function words can be expressed through distinct visual spatial representations.

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