

How Spoken and Signed Language Structure Space Differently

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Abstract: Spatial concepts are structurally represented in spoken language by a 3-level system. At the componential level, there is a relatively closed universally available inventory of fundamental spatial elements. At the compositional level, elements of the inventory combine in particular arrangements to form whole spatial schemas. Each language has a relatively closed set of "pre-packaged" schemas of this sort. And at the augmentive level, the system includes a set of processes that can extend or deform pre-packaged schemas, enabling a language's particular set of schemas to be applied to a wider range of spatial structures. Signed language structurally represents space with a different system seemingly more like visual parsing. It can mark finer spatial distinctions with its inventory of more structural elements. It can represent many more of these distinctions in any particular expression. It represents these distinctions independently in the expression, not bundled together into pre-packaged schemas. And its spatial representations are largely iconic with visible spatial characteristics. The findings suggest that instead of some discrete whole-language module, spoken language and signed language are both based on some more limited core linguistic system that then connects with different further subsystems for the full functioning of the two different language modalities.