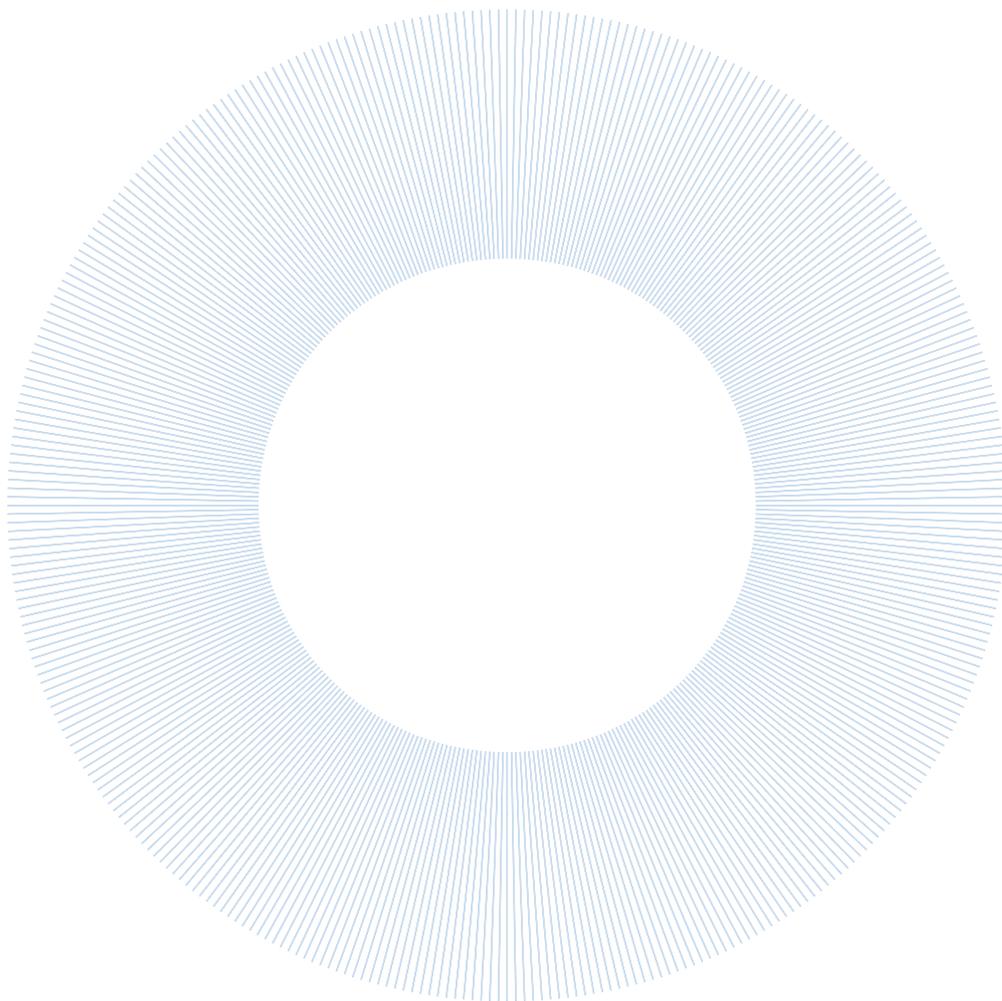# Reading Images, Reading Words: Visual and Textual Conceptualization of Barriers and Containers

Barbara Dancygier

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READING IMAGES, READING WORDS: VISUAL AND TEXTUAL CONCEPTUALIZATION OF BARRIERS AND CONTAINERS

Cognitive poetics, a relatively new discipline, suggests that interpretation of various artifacts, primarily but not exclusively textual ones, relies on conceptualizations prompted by forms used – words, images, sounds, etc. This paper looks at examples of texts, image and film, to consider avenues of interpretation prompted by conceptual structures much less specific than words or visual artifacts. Such basic spatial structures, called image schemas, were proposed as skeletal concepts underlying a range of unrelated uses – for example, many expressions which imply an upward portion of a vertical scale ('look up to someone, rise to the challenge', etc.) are understood in a positive way, while the 'down' examples signify negative meanings. However, evidence of the underlying conceptual structures in meaning emergence is primarily linguistic, and thus requires some independent confirmation. Looking at textual artifacts alongside visual ones offers an opportunity to confirm the role of schemas through an additional modality – if images and text depend on the same schema to suggest similar meanings, this offers additional evidence of the role of such concepts. This paper investigates various instantiations of the schemas of BARRIER and CONTAINER, to show how they prompt interpretations of very similar nature, though additionally complicated by concepts such as viewpoint.

Human experiences of interaction with objects and space lie at the foundation of a number of more complex ideas, artifacts and thought patterns. Recent research on the role of such experiences inspired much work on the so-called image schemas – skeletal structures, often spatial in nature, which do not represent specific objects or features of landscape, but underlie a range of experiences (cf. Johnson, 1987; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999; Hampe, 2005; Gibbs, 2005). The concept of image schemas has been used by cognitive linguists working with the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, one of the tenets of which is that metaphor is not just a matter of linguistic choices but rather a matter of conceptualization. Image schemas participate in the emergence of metaphors but are not so rich in content. For example, we can talk about the schema of a PATH, as a simple straight line through space, but we use the schema in elaborate construals of life experiences, spatial ones, such as walking along a designated path to a destination or finding the way to a spatial location, but also abstract, richly metaphorical ones, such as discovering a way to reach a goal in any domain of life. PATH, in this understanding, is not a specific path leading anywhere, but an abstraction making it possible for people to understand various situations which have a shared understanding of a concrete or abstract path.

Some schemas, like PATH, are very simple. But, as Mandler and Cánovas (2014) argue in a recent paper, more complex configurations may be built out of basic schemas such as PATH. For example, combining PATH and CONTAINER allows us to think about various situations in terms of going INTO or OUT OF bounded regions. The composite nature of schemas, as I argue below, additionally yields more complex (though not necessarily metaphorical) interpretations of various artifacts, by adding the possibility of viewpointed construals. In this paper, I show some

implications of a complex schema of a BARRIER – a structure causing OCCLUSION, preventing motion in and out of CONTAINERS or providing protection against other agents approaching us. The concept of a barrier correlates with some of the very basic experiences of our lives, starting with childhood games relying on OCCLUSION, BLOCKED MOVE and similar concepts. There is a range of such experiences, and they often trigger emotional responses, as a result of the embodied patterns they evoke (cf. Prinz, 2002 and 2004 for a discussion of emotions and embodiment).

The concept of a BARRIER is skeletal and so in various representations it may yield less directly targeted meanings. In many situations, a barrier constitutes a CONTAINER – a type of BARRIER which designates a region in space. Both BARRIER and CONTAINER are likely to yield a range of interpretations because of the added construal of viewpoint – a barrier may be preventing us from moving, doing or seeing things, but it may also protect us against intrusion. This addition of viewpoint complicates the concept used (Dancygier, 2016; Dancygier and Sweetser, 2012; Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2016).

Some of the negative connotations of barriers have been very clearly expressed by Robert Frost in his poem *Mending Wall*: 'something there is that doesn't love a wall; that wants it down'. The emotional responses to barriers such as walls relate to viewpoint – the sense of being restricted, deprived of interaction, unable to see, etc.; artistic and persuasive representations of barriers (such as walls) often portray the need to overcome them or have them torn down. This is quite clear in various pieces of street art or political speeches given at events related to the persistence or removal of the Berlin Wall. 'Wanting walls down' seems to be indeed a common sentiment.

Image schemas such as a BARRIER may constitute the basis of a broad range of artifacts, visual and textual alike. In this short paper I want to consider an example from film – Babel, directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu – and match it against some textual examples displaying very similar understanding of barriers. While the examples are not connected in any way, the juxtapositions are valuable, in that they can be treated as indications of similar conceptual patterns, regardless of the communicative medium. Evidence of conceptualization patterns cannot be naturally obtained through statistical analysis of data or through experiments. Often, especially in the cases of creative artifacts (like poetry or film), close reading and the analysis of stylistic choices remain as primary sources of judgments about meaning. However, the differences between the textual and visual medium are striking, and thus the approaches are often very different. Looking at the two expressive modalities through the lens of image schemas offers a basis for a more satisfying, crossmodal concept of meaning.

Some scholars (especially semanticists and literary critics) talk about textual meanings with some confidence, because words are assumed to be a relatively reliable source of information on meaning – we are expected to know what words mean. Although it is also widely recognized that textual artifacts may yield different interpretations, the basic senses of words dictate a level of meaning which is shared. It is somewhat different with images – they may represent objects, places, people, etc., but their meaning is usually expected to be richer than that. A Van Gogh representation of sunflowers may inspire various comments about color, brushwork, technique, etc., but it would typically not be claimed to 'mean' something beyond what is represented. Still, some images may reveal crucial information, which can then be interpreted 'to mean' something not directly represented. If, for example, two photographs show two stages in the history of a glacier, and the older one shows a powerful stream of ice while the more recent one shows it to be depleted to a small trickle, then we might talk about the photographs 'meaning' something – e.g. that global warming has advanced. The photographs do not mean

that on their own, but in contrast and in the context of other available information, they receive an interpretation. Cross-modal analysis may overcome the restrictions imposed by the medium used and yield a more pervasive view of meaning.

The question I want to explore here, then, concerns the role of image schemas in meaning emergence across some textual and visual examples. If such correlations can be found, at the level less obvious than the objects or situations represented, then perhaps we can suggest that comparing meaning effects across communicative modalities yields evidence of recurring conceptualization patterns, beyond very personal and one-off interpretation of any given artifact.

Importantly, I argue for an approach, broadly supported by cognitive linguistics, whereby linguistic or non-linguistic artifacts do not simply 'express' meanings. Readers and viewers play an active role, constructing meanings on the basis of available knowledge, typical conceptual patterns, but, first of all, the linguistic or visual choices represented by a given artifact. Meanings are thus emerging as a result of these meaning-construction processes at work. The interaction between prompts provided and concepts used is what yields an interpretation. What I argue here is that the unconscious reliance on image-schematic patterns present in human experience guides meaning construction in important ways.

The film I chose, *Babel*, is a composite of three sub-plots. In one, Richard and Susan, an American couple, travel in Morocco; at the same time, two boy goatherds test a new rifle their father bought and gave them to protect the herd from jackals. As one of them thoughtlessly shoots at a bus, he hits a woman inside – the woman is Susan. The second story happens in Japan, where a Deaf teenager, Chieko, makes various attempts to connect to people around her; the third story takes place in San Diego and then in Mexico, as Amelia, the Mexican nanny of Richard and Susan's children, tries to attend her son's wedding near Tijuana while also caring for the children – as a result she nearly dies in the desert, along with her charges, when her nephew attempts to escape after his car is stopped at the border. It has often been commented that the film depicts the role of coincidence and chance in the way life stories develop, somewhat similarly to the butterfly effect scenario. Chieko's father hunts in Morocco and gives his rifle to his local guide, who sells it to another man, whose sons test it. In the end, Susan is wounded as a result of a series of coincidences, rather than a plot to kill her. Consequently, the couple's stay in Morocco is prolonged and Amelia decides to take the children to the wedding in Mexico, which ultimately leads to her deportation from the US. Unpredictability rules – this seems to be the message many viewers take from the film.

The second theme is that of impossibility of communication across cultures – as is clearly suggested by the title. Morocco, the USA, Mexico – in all of these countries characters are driven by similar human motives, but cultural differences and the interactions across those cultures lead to dramatic situations, caused by the impossibility of understanding 'the other's' way of life. I want to argue that the second theme is in fact prompted first of all by the way it is filmed. National and even linguistic borders can be crossed, cultural barriers cannot. The film's use of barriers, containers and open spaces highlights the movie's theme in unexpected ways.

The cinematography of the film is quite striking. Most scenes are shot in very open, impersonal spaces – the bare, sun-baked hills of Morocco, the desert near the US/Mexico border, the sea of buildings that is Tokyo. In most of these scenes, the landscapes seem boundless and nondescript, leaving the characters small and helpless, exposed to the never-ending expanse of space. In contrast, many other scenes are shot in cars and shady rooms, where the boundaries are limiting the available space in very conspicuous ways. The fact that such contrasts occur so

often triggers an effect, such that the sense of space is becoming an important factor in how we receive the film.

The empty distances represented seem also to change the perception of objects. In a crucial scene of the film, the herder boys stand high up on a bare hill, looking down at the valley and the grey ribbon of the road in it. They have been shooting at nearby rocks, but they want a more challenging target. Just then, a bus appears from behind a hill, looking almost like a beetle from a distance. One of the boys shoots, but they cannot be sure if the bus has been hit. It moves on, lazily, with no change of pace. Throughout the scene, we are looking at the bus from the boys' perspective – a moving object in the distance, that is all. They never get on that road, do not travel on buses and spend their lives in the empty, dry hills surrounding them. In the shooting scene, they do not conceptualize the bus as a vehicle, a container with an interior and people inside. Rather, they see it simply as a moving three-dimensional solid object. Then, as the bus stops, they realize that Yussef did not just hit a moving object – he had hit a human being inside. The bus is no longer a solid object – its walls are a barrier protecting people inside it and that barrier has just been penetrated. What is inside is now the scene of a suspected terrorist attack.

The second of *Babel*'s stories takes place in Mexico. Amelia, the nanny, left alone with the children, takes them with her across the border, to attend her son's wedding. When they are coming back, the border agents want to be sure that the children were in Mexico with their parents' permission. Sitting in the car, Amelia is trapped, answering questions, until her nephew, the driver, decides to run without waiting to be permitted to enter the US, and drives out into the desert to avoid the chase – another barrier crossed, this time forcefully. He then leaves Amelia and the children in the desert – a huge, open, scorching space, in which Amelia wanders aimlessly, trying to save the children. The irony is clear. She has crossed important barriers – national, legal and emotional (she now knows that her love for the children does not give her the right to care for them as she chooses). She ended up in a place without barriers – the desert, but it became the hardest of barriers because she could not escape from it. After she is finally found and saved, she is deported – forcefully made to cross a barrier she did not want to cross. The contrast between the desert scenes and the scenes in cars and police offices is striking.

In the third of the stories, Chieko, the Deaf teenager, is grieving for her mother, who had committed suicide, and is struggling to create a connection between herself and the world around her. She communicates with her father and her Deaf friends from school, but wants to reach beyond the barrier of her silence. She acts as if she were starved for sex, but in fact it is clear she needs to escape from the prison of a world where no signals reach her, physically and emotionally, and in which she is forever seen as disabled – a very isolating situation in Japan, where disability is alienating. In a way, Chieko deals with the hardest of barriers – her own body. Her consciousness, her thoughts and her feelings are locked in there, and thus cannot be naturally communicated to others.

One of the scenes gives a very interesting representation to Chieko's drama. She is with some teenage boys and one of her Deaf friends in a disco. Lights are flashing, the music is loud, everyone is dancing. The whole scene in the disco is filmed from two alternating perspectives. For part of the time we watch Chieko dancing and we hear the music. She looks just like any other girl in the disco, moving to the rhythm of the music, which she probably feels as vibrations, since she cannot hear it. She looks happy, completely absorbed by the dance. The viewers are observers of the scenes, and could in fact not be aware of Chieko's deafness. In the alternating shots, we are seeing the disco scene from Chieko's internal perspective. There is no

sound, and all we see is flashing red and purple lights. This is the moment in the film when the ultimate barrier and container, the body, is the focus.

The scene seems to carry the central message of the movie – the inevitability of being locked in one's own experience, and our inability really to understand anything from a perspective other than ours. In other subplots, the message is constructed through dramatic consequences of ignoring barriers, in the Chieko subplot, the message is brought to the most salient, embodied plane. Others are outside, we are inside. Nobody can reach out of their own space, and nobody can reach into the inner space of another person. Communication is crucial to our lives, and yet we are not able to communicate what matters most – our selves. The body is the most impermeable of barriers – being on one side of it may mean being denied access to the other side.

And yet, the film's open and boundless spaces also carry a message of a different kind – most of the barriers are man-made. Borders, police barriers, cultural norms, prejudices against race, culture or disability – all these have been created by humans. But humans will also always try to cross the barrier between the visible body and the invisible mind. There are two scenes which suggest that. Crucially, both scenes rely on downplaying the role of language. In the context of the film where several languages are used (English, Arabic, Berber, Spanish, Japanese, sign language), the silent scenes are particularly salient.

After Susan, the American tourist, is shot through the window of the bus, she is taken to a village, awaiting help. This takes some time, as the suspected terrorist nature of the shooting is investigated by the governments involved. Susan is laid on the floor of a mud hut. The only person in the hut is an old woman, sitting on the floor at some distance from Susan. Throughout the dramatically long time Susan remains on the floor, as her husband tries to communicate with the authorities, the old woman is there, completely silent, watching the scenes passing in front of her eyes with no visible reaction. And yet, this silent human presence matters. There is no verbal communication, and the two women never attempt even to look at each other in any meaningful way, but sharing the shady, empty and secluded space of the hut becomes important. It suggests a level of sharing the experience, of being separated from the world outside, within the bounds of that space of suffering, where time passes so slowly as to be impossible to appreciate.

The other scene happens in Chieko's story. In the final episode, Chieko is visited by a policeman. She seems to like him and trust him. Trying to reach him, she takes off her clothes – again using potential sexual contact as a way to break the barrier of silence and solitude in which she lives. The man senses the drama but is too shy to do anything. He leaves, taking with him a written note from Chieko. We never learn what she wrote to him but it is clear that it moves him deeply. Language has again been erased from the communication. After he leaves, Chieko, still naked, goes out onto the balcony – high up, exposed to the entire glimmering and impersonal space of the city of Tokyo. This final attempt to use her body to become a part of the world surrounding her is a silent and moving act of desperation. Just then, Chieko's father returns home and, seeing her, covers her with his coat, putting his arms around her.

This simple gesture finally gives Chieko a safe space to be in. The barrier of her father's protective embrace has a different viewpoint – it becomes a safe enclosure, not a symbol of impermeable separation. Barriers can be read in two different ways, depending on the conceptual viewpoint. Either they prevent us from freely seeing beyond the dividing line, communicating across it or moving forward, or they protect against unwanted influence from beyond the barrier. Chieko has

been trying to escape through the barrier of her silence throughout the movie, but in the final scene she is protected by the arms of her father; a very meaningful gesture in this context.

The visual and auditory focus on barriers in the film is a stylistic choice which contributes greatly to how the movie is understood. In the second part of my discussion, I want to raise the question of a textual representation of the BARRIER schema. There are clearly many texts exploring the psychological and emotional significance of barriers, but I am particularly interested in an example where the schema is used to represent a set of meanings very much like the ones I find in *Babel*. The Nobel prize winning poet, Wisława Szymborska, often writes about very simple and embodied experiences to explore the human condition. One of her poems, *Psalm*, translated from Polish by Stanisław Baranczak and Claire Cavanagh, contains the following fragment:

> Oh, the leaky boundaries of man-made states!
> How many clouds float past them with impunity;
> how much desert sand shifts from one land to another; how many mountain
> pebbles tumble onto foreign soil in provocative hops!
>
> Need I mention every single bird that flies in the face of frontiers
> or alights on the roadblock at the border?
> A humble robin - still, its tail resides abroad
> while its beak stays home. If that weren't enough, it won't stop bobbing!
>
> […] Only what is human can truly be foreign.
> The rest is mixed vegetation, subversive moles, and wind.

The poem is often read in terms of the contrast between human civilization and nature. One might also read it more specifically, as I would, as a commentary on the unnaturalness of the structures that human civilization forces our minds into. The image of the bird flying freely to alight on the roadblock is particularly evocative of the discussion of BARRIERS above. I find the meaning of the poem strangely similar to the meaning of the movie. In the context of *Babel*, the landscapes described by Szymborska are unexpectedly evocative of the cinematography used by Iñárritu. Dry, sandy, rocky hills of Morocco, the parched desert of Mexico, the glimmering space of Tokyo, all are landscapes where borders are not visible, and where nature moves freely, while people exist in enclosures and are guarded by barriers of all kinds – all of them man-made, whether materially, culturally or psychologically. What the movie adds is the most impermeable of barriers – that of the very human body. The poem seems to rely on the same images and, first of all, on the same image schemas of BARRIER and CONTAINMENT, to make a very similar point about the human condition. Being foreign is the very essence of the tragedies described in *Babel* – whether they affect people in different countries and cultures or living in different communicative ghettos. Not understanding 'the other', in both the poem and the film, is framed through a similar contrast. On the one hand there is the stasis of familiar landscapes and the almost invisible motion of the tiniest particles constituting that landscape – sand, pebbles, clouds. On the other hand, there are impermeable barriers blocking communication and shared viewpoint.

Quite surprisingly, the final 'free' element mentioned by Szymborska is the wind – invisible motion of air. In *Babel*, one of the most memorable shots also builds its meaning that way. The two boys in Morocco are consistently seen fretting and fighting, usually not smiling. After the climax of the story, with one of them imprisoned and the other dead, we get a very short glimpse, a memory of them both smiling happily, and both doing the same – on the top of a hill, leaning their bodies against the strong wind, supported by it, free of the restrictions of their body weight.

The two artistic works discussed above are both examples of how creativity can build similar meanings around images or words when they rely on the same image schema. Naturally, such creative effects can be observed also in contexts where language is used persuasively, as in political speeches. Over the years, many politicians have spoken at or about the Berlin Wall, invariably portraying it as a symbol of oppression, restriction of human rights and division among people who should live together in peace.

Let me look at just two such examples, since they add important ideas to the analysis above. In 1987, when the Berlin Wall still stood, Ronald Reagan said:

> Behind me stands a wall that […] divides the entire continent of Europe. From the Baltic, south, those barriers cut across Germany in a gash of barbed wire […].
> As long as this gate is closed, as long as this scar of a wall is permitted to stand, it is not the German question alone that remains open, but the question of freedom for all mankind.

The crucial expressions are 'a gash of barbed wire' and 'this scar of a wall'. Both use the image of Germany and the city of Berlin as a living body, maimed and painfully divided. The actual material barrier separating East and West Berlin is talked about as a metaphorical violation of a body. Clearly, the barrier in this case is seen in such painful terms that Reagan's call for the demolition of the wall is not a call for destruction but for healing an unnatural divide. Unlike in *Babel* and *Psalm*, the barrier Reagan talks about is real but its significance is political and moral, in the same way as the barriers discussed earlier. In this case, the body is evoked again but as an organism that needs to remain whole and unharmed.

Many years later, in 2013, Barack Obama, again while standing where the wall used to be, refers to:

> […] citizens who choose whether to be defined by a wall, or whether to tear it down. […] Will we live free or in chains?
> And as long as walls exist in our hearts to separate us from those who don't look like us, or think like us, or worship as we do, then we're going to have to work harder, together, to bring those walls of division down.

The image here is even more complex. The wall does not exist any more, but divisions among people still do because we allow our emotions to sustain prejudice. The Berlin Wall remains a symbol of wrongful separation, created and maintained by people. This is a message very much like the one in *Babel* – space may be open, but divisions exist until we work to tear them down.

Such conceptualizations are also common in the context of street art, where the very material base of art is typically the surface of a wall. I discussed Banksy's art as 'unwalling the wall' in another paper (Dancygier, 2016), but here I want briefly to mention another example. One of Banksy's wall pieces has a runner in a race approaching the viewer. Between the runner and the viewer there is a length of tape, presumably the finish line, but it is in fact a yellow police tape, saying 'danger – do not cross'. The significance of the barrier here is again quite complex, and depends on the viewpoint and the understanding of the continued motion of the runner (see Talmy, 1996, and Matlock, 2004, for a discussion of 'fictive motion'). From the runner's perspective, he seems to be reaching his goal, the end of the race, winning. From the perspective of the passer-by, he is prevented from entering the area of the street, as a place of criminal activity and danger. The two sides of the barrier are essentially different – the world of sports and fair competition versus the street-world, potentially dangerous and out of bounds. The happy race does not end well. Banksy's political views are well known and so his choice of making the runner black also defines this barrier as a barrier of prejudice. Complexities abound, solely on the basis of the two viewpoints and two sides of the barrier.

To sum up, the range of artifacts is broad, and there are a variety of means through which the BARRIER and CONTAINMENT schemas are evoked. But in all the cases considered, such evocation yields meanings of similar kinds, in each case dependent on the experiential viewpoints prompted by being faced with barriers or locked in containers. Further work needs to be done to investigate the role other image schemas play in the emergence of abstract meanings, in various creative artifacts.

In cognitive linguistics and poetics, it is often argued that embodied concepts underlie abstract concepts, in complex ways, but still consistently (see, for example, Gallagher, 2005, and Shapiro, 2010). The work typically discusses the emergence of linguistic forms representing abstractions. Here, I attempted to add two types of considerations. On the one hand, it seems productive and possible to consider more basic levels of embodied conceptualization and give more texture to the experiences connected to image schematic concepts. For such analyses to be productive, however, we need to enrich basic spatial schemas such as a barrier or a container with the understanding of how they profile experiential viewpoints. On the other hand, there is a potential area of study going beyond linguistic items. My overview of complex artifacts such as a film, a poem, political speeches and street art suggests that the discussion of embodiment, spatial cognition and viewpoint could enrich our understanding of the ways in which we interpret various textual and visual artifacts – creativity of all kinds. Ultimately, such studies might lead to a renewed cognitive investigation of various forms of creativity (for comparison, see Turner, 2006). The range of artifacts is potentially very broad, so that verbal art and persuasion can potentially be discussed alongside visual forms of expression, narrative and non-narrative alike. It is a goal worth pursuing.

Finally, the shared aspects of interpretation prompted by several rather different types of artifacts suggests a fruitful direction in the work attempting to clarify the relationship between concepts and language. Cognitive linguistics often argues that language is 'a window to the mind' and postulates conceptual structures on the basis of linguistic usage. However, the same usage is then used to support a reverse reasoning – so, 'if it's in the mind, it is also in language, and if it is language, it is also in the mind'. Adding a non-verbal modality to these considerations offers a way to think about underlying conceptual structures, such as image schemas, in relation to all meaningful artifacts – linguistic, visual or multimodal. Studies relying on multimodal examples thus offer additional support to claims about underlying conceptualizations.

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