Mental Spaces, Conceptual Distance, and Simulation:
Looks/Seems/Sounds like Constructions in English

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The use of grammatical forms (e.g. aspect) is cognitively motivated by our ability to simulate actions (Barsalou 2009, Matlock 2011). The aim of this paper is to show that the claim holds in another grammatical domain, evidentiality (EV)/epistemic modality (EM). This study particularly explores *looks/seems/sounds like* constructions in English, in which conceptual distance is encoded by the speaker's posing his/her epistemic stance such as certainty and conjecture, toward an event at issue. This paper shows that this distancing effect (Dancygier and Sweetser 2005) is cognitively real by conducting a simulation experiment to show that priming of conceptual distance in construing the linguistic EV/EM marking affects people's simulation of measuring physical distance.

In mental spaces theory (MST) (Fauconnier 1997, Kwon 2012), to construe the English *looks/seems/sounds like* constructions requires an additional layer of mental space so that the observer poses farther conceptual distance toward an event that is observed than an utterance without any EV/EM element.

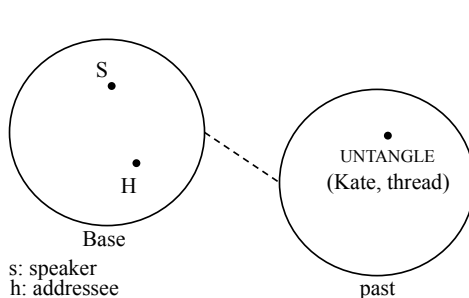(1)   Kate untangled a thread.
(2)   Seems like Kate untangled a thread.

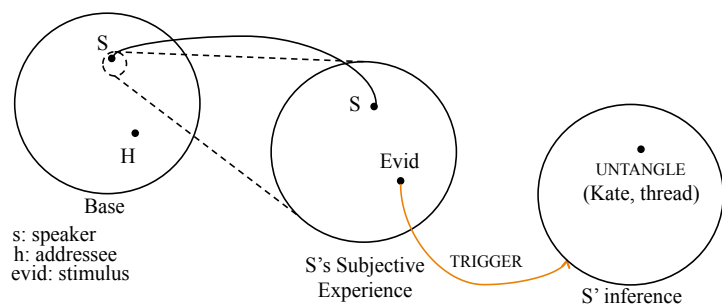**Figure 1**. MST representation of (1)   **Figure 2**. MST representation of (2)

In Figure 1, the utterance in (1) evokes a past tense space in which the focal event of Kate's untangling has taken place. In contrast, the utterance in (2) evokes two mental spaces in chain as shown in Figure 2. The speaker's (S) subjective experience space indicates that the speaker has perceived some stimulus accessible (Evid) in the context and that it triggers the speaker's inference. The increased conceptual distance between the speaker in the Base and the focal event in Figure 2 yields the interpretation of the speaker's distanced stance towards the focal event in (2) (Kwon 2012).

This paper conducts an experiment to see psychological status of the encoded conceptual distance. It tests a hypothesis that simulation of the conceptual distance encoded in the *seems like* construction affects people's measuring of physical distance. Two groups of linguistic stimuli (17 sets, including 3 control sets) – neutral statements and EV/EM statements – are exposed to two groups of subjects (35 people each), respectively. The average numbers of the collected answers for the examples indicate that the priming by the EV/EM construction seems to be in effect; the subjects exposed to the target sentence with *seems like* answer higher number than those to the neutral ones. The result suggests that the conceptual distance created by the added-up layer of a mental space in the model above is related to the cognizer's cognitive ability to measure physical distance (501 words).

References

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