Establishing and extending real space blends:
The consistent use of gesture space in multimodal narratives

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Meaning-making is a situated, multimodal process which recruits a range of cognitive structures. Although most work focuses on conceptualization in individuals, recent work points to the way collaboration between people can affect both conceptualization and expression (e.g. Galantucci et al., 2012). In light of this, we investigate the co-construction of narrative space in multimodal narratives to see how the use of physical space changes in dyadic communication. We focus on the collaborative construction of real space blends (Liddell 2003), and use them to answer questions related to the use of shared gesture space, and the stability of shared real space blends.

Real space blends are the combination of physical, gestural space with mental space structure. Co-speech gestures often represent some aspect of the accompanying speech (Kendon 2004; McNeill 1992). For example, they may direct attention to details, such as spatial relations between entities or the embodiment of characters. Recent work has pointed to the spatial organization of physical space around dyads (Stec and Sweetser, 2012): different aspects of a narrative (foregrounded vs. backgrounded information vs. quotes) or communication (interactions with the addressee vs. the narrative vs. meta-comments) are often kept separate by means of body orientation or gesture alone. And differences in the status of information, such as reported speech vs. fictive interaction (Stec, 2012), have been shown to affect gesturing style.

In this study, we focus on the narrative space of one dyad in our corpus of semi-spontaneous autobiographical narratives: "Pink" and "Black". This pair demonstrates particularly stable use of real space blends. In particular, Black often shows that she follows Pink's narrative by interacting with the characters Pink describes, grounding these fictive interactions (cf. Pascual, 2002) in the real space blends Pinks establishes as part of her own narrative. In other words, we see dynamic, situated coupling which is based on the appropriated use of pre-established real space blends: Black literally uses Pink's real space blends in order to facilitate discussion of the events and characters described therein, often reaching far into Pink's space in order to do so.

By investigating Black's contributions, we can see how real space blends play both an organizational and creative role in discourse. When telling her own stories, Black displays certain non-verbal preferences which contrast to those used when playfully interacting with Pink's narrative space. We notice differences both in terms of the embodiment of different characters and in terms of the narrative spaces employed. Despite these differences, Black is remarkably consistent and dedicated to the real space structure established by Pink in her narrative. Whereas previous work has focused on individual use of real space blends in single turns, our data suggest that real space blends used in collaboration can be both mutually accessible and stable across longer stretches of discourse.

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