

Assessing spatial frameworks with object and direction probes

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An experiment tested the generality of the spatial framework analysis (Bryant, Tversky, & Franklin, in press; Franklin & Tversky, 1990) to a task involving accessing directions of objects from object-name probes. Subjects read narrative descriptions of a person surrounded by objects to the front, back, and sides, and beyond the head, and beyond the feet. They were then probed with object names for direction terms or vice versa. Response times conformed to predictions of the spatial framework in both cases, indicating that the spatial framework pattern does not depend on the use of direction terms in testing.

Recently, Franklin and Tversky (1990) and Bryant, Tversky, and Franklin (in press) have proposed that readers employ *spatial frameworks* to represent the layout of objects in a described scene. A spatial framework is a mental model that specifies the spatial relations among objects with respect to an observer in the environment. It is used to store, update, and retrieve information about locations of objects. Evidence for spatial frameworks has come from experiments in which subjects read narratives that describe an array of objects around or in front of an observer. For example, Franklin and Tversky (1990) had subjects read narratives that described themselves in a room with objects located to their front, back, sides, above their heads, and below their feet. As subjects were re-oriented in the narrative, they responded to direction probes that presented a particular direction (e.g., left), to which the subject responded with the object currently located at that direction.

The spatial framework analysis predicts readers' response times to such direction probes on the basis of properties of the human body and of the perceptual world, such as the gravitational axis. Specifically, upright observers should locate objects fastest along the head/feet axis because of its physical asymmetry and correlation with gravity. They should locate objects next fastest along the front/back axis, which is physically and behaviorally asymmetric but not correlated with a fixed environmental axis, and slowest along the left/right axis, which has little asymmetry. In addition, subjects should locate ob-

jects faster to the front than to the back, because the asymmetries of this axis so strongly favor front over back (Bryant et al., in press). When the observer reclines, the head/feet axis is no longer correlated with gravity, and it loses its dominance. In this case, subjects should be faster along the front/back axis than along the head/feet axis, but still slowest along the left/right axis. These predictions were confirmed by Franklin and Tversky (1990) with second person narratives and by Bryant et al. (in press) with third person narratives.

The purpose of the present experiment was to test the generality of the spatial framework analysis. Specifically, we wished to determine whether subjects access directions from objects as easily as they access objects from direction probes. Although the spatial framework analysis was tested in experiments presenting direction probes for objects, the same predictions follow for the reverse situation, presenting objects and probing for directions. On the other hand, some previous research suggests that objects are encoded in terms of their locations rather than vice versa. When spontaneously describing environments, subjects typically respond by first naming a location and then naming the object that goes there (Ehrich & Koster, 1983). Also, when solving geometric analogies, subjects prefer to determine the location of figures before other features of the figure, including its identity, and they perform more slowly and make more errors when required to solve the analogies in the reverse order (Novick & Tversky, 1987). This work suggests that directions, like locations, may have priority over objects.

In the present experiment, subjects read narratives that described a person in a room or other setting, surrounded by five objects to his or her front, back, and sides, and beyond the head and beyond the feet. During the narrative, the character turned to face different objects while standing and reclining. In half of the narratives, subjects

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were probed with direction terms, and they responded with the name of the object located at that direction; in the other half, they were probed with object names, and they responded with the direction at which the object was located. The type of probe was not mixed within a narrative. The primary measure in both cases was response time to the probe, categorized by direction.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 7 male and 7 female Stanford undergraduates who participated for credit in an introductory psychology class.

Narratives

Eight narratives, adapted from Bryant et al. (in press), described, in the third person, a different setting containing a character surrounded by five objects. Two versions of the narratives were employed, one containing only direction probes and the other only object probes. Within a probe type, there were versions of each narrative featuring a male and a female character. The settings and objects are listed in Table 1. Locations of objects were randomly selected, and the sizes of objects and the distances between them were all roughly equal within a narrative.

Narratives were presented to the subjects in two parts. The first, printed on paper, provided the name of the setting and a list of the five objects in the scene, then described the environment with respect to the character of the narrative. The second part of each narrative was divided into six blocks of probes and presented (via computer) sentence by sentence. Each block began with two sentences that oriented the character toward one of the five objects in the environment while the character was either standing upright or reclining. This was followed by two filler sentences that described the object currently to the character's front, without mentioning it by name. Following the filler sentences, the subjects were presented with a series of object or direction probes, each separated by two filler sentences, then reoriented toward another object. Object probes consisted of an object name that probed for the direction in which the object was located (with respect to the character). Direction probes were direction terms (front, head, left, etc.) that probed for the object currently located at the indicated direction. After three reorientations, the character changed posture from upright to reclining, or vice versa, and had two subsequent reorientations in that posture. In the reclining posture, characters laid on the back, front, or sides, and turned along the head/feet axis.

Procedure

The subjects were given detailed instructions prior to beginning and completed a practice narrative with accuracy feedback. The subjects were instructed to read the narratives for understanding because they would be asked questions about the directions of objects around the character. They were allowed to study the printed portion of a narrative for as long as they wished before returning it to the experimenter. The subjects then read the second part of the narrative on the computer screen.

The subjects were instructed, when probed with either an object name or a direction term, to press the space bar as soon as they knew the correct response, without sacrificing accuracy. The time that the subjects took to do this is the first response time, RT1. After the subjects

pressed the space bar, they indicated the correct response by selecting one of five numbered alternatives. The time to do this was the second response time, RT2. Probes appeared after every two filler sentences until all five objects or directions had been probed. Following this, a new block began with two sentences that oriented the character to a different object.

Design

The independent variables were direction (front, back, head, feet, left, and right), posture of the character (upright and reclining), and type of probe (object and direction). The dependent variable was the time subjects took to respond to probes with the appropriate object or direction (RT1).

Probe type was varied within subject, and the subjects completed four narratives in each condition. The four narratives of a given probe type were blocked, and the order of probe type was alternated across subjects. Approximately equal numbers of subjects were assigned to four random orders of presentation of the eight narratives. In half of the narratives, the character was initially reclining; in the other half, the character was initially upright. Likewise, half the narratives involved a male character and the other half involved a female character. These two factors were counterbalanced. Within a block, the order of probes was random. In half the narratives, the character turned clockwise; in the other half, the character turned counterclockwise. This was true in both upright and reclining postures.

RESULTS

Response times were categorized by direction for both the direction-probe and the object-probe conditions. RT2 data were subjected to a repeated measures analysis of variance that revealed no significant effects of type of probe, direction, posture, or any interaction. All subsequent analyses were performed on RT1.

Data from one direction-probe narrative of 1 subject and one object-probe narrative of another subject were discarded because the subjects made more than six (average of one per block) errors in these stories. Errors and outliers (response times greater than the cell mean plus two standard deviations) were eliminated from analysis. In the direction-probe condition, a total of six narratives from 6 subjects were not completed due to insufficient time; of the remaining data, 2.4% were errors and 5.2% were outliers. In the object-probe condition, a total of 12 narratives from 9 subjects were not completed due to insufficient time. Of the remaining data, 3.9% were errors and 3.7% were outliers.

Gender of Character

The relation between the subject's and character's gender had no effect on response times. The data of 5 subjects were excluded from this analysis because they failed to complete a narrative with a cross-gender character in at least one condition. A repeated measures analysis of variance revealed no effect of the match/mismatch of subject and character gender [$F(1,8) = 0.07$, n.s.], nor did this factor interact with any other.

Effect of Probe Type, Direction, and Posture

Table 2 presents the direction \times posture means over subjects, shown separately for the direction- and object-probe conditions. Type of probe did not affect response time [$F(1,13) = 0.29$, n.s.], and the subjects were no

Table 1
Scenes and Objects Used in Experiment

Scene	Objects
Navy Ship	anchor, antenna, cannon, flag, lifeboat
Halloween Party	bowl, ghost, mask, pumpkin, skeleton
Hotel Lobby	banner, barbershop, fountain, giftshop, tavern
Construction Site	bucket, jackhammer, ladder, shovel, wheelbarrow
Opera Theater	bouquet, lamp, loudspeaker, plaque, sculpture
Space Exhibit	map, meteorite, portrait, satellite, spacesuit
Barn	lantern, pail, rake, saddle, shears
At the Lagoon	bottle, frisbee, paddle, snorkel, towel

Table 2
Mean Response Times (in Seconds) to Direction and Object Probes

Posture	Direction					
	Head	Feet	Front	Back	Left	Right
Direction Probes						
Upright	1.57	1.55	1.69	1.93	2.57	2.00
<i>M</i>	1.56		1.81		2.29	
Reclining	2.50	2.49	2.09	1.89	2.69	2.80
<i>M</i>	2.49		1.99		2.74	
Object Probes						
Upright	1.65	1.83	1.87	2.07	2.52	1.97
<i>M</i>	1.74		1.97		2.25	
Reclining	2.50	2.30	1.81	2.28	2.60	2.59
<i>M</i>	2.40		2.05		2.59	

slower to answer object probes than to answer direction probes. Type of probe did not interact with either direction [$F(5,65) = 1.18$, n.s.] or posture [$F(1,13) = 2.76$, n.s.], and the patterns of response times were essentially the same in both probe conditions. Both direction [$F(5,65) = 7.14$, $p < .001$] and posture [$F(1,13) = 55.19$, $p < .001$], however, had large main effects, and their interaction was also significant [$F(5,65) = 8.59$, $p < .001$]. The subjects were faster overall in the upright posture than in the reclining posture for both probe types, as predicted by the spatial framework. The three-way interaction of probe type, direction, and posture was not significant [$F(5,65) = 1.63$, n.s.].

Type of probe did not influence response times, so the data were collapsed across this factor to compare directions. When the character was upright, head/feet (1.65 sec) was faster than front/back (1.89 sec) [$t(13) = 4.18$, $p < .01$], which was faster than left/right (2.27 sec) [$t(13) = 2.21$, $p < .05$]. When the character was reclining, front/back (2.02 sec) was faster than head/feet (2.45 sec) [$t(13) = 4.32$, $p < .01$], which was faster than left/right (2.67 sec) [$t(13) = 2.33$, $p < .05$].

Ordering of Directions

The ordering of individual directions was generally consistent with the predictions of the spatial framework for both postures, although some predicted differences between directions did not achieve statistical significance. Again, collapsing across type of probe, the ordering of directions in the upright posture was: head (1.61 sec) = feet (1.69 sec) = front (1.78 sec) < right (1.99 sec) = back (2.00 sec) = left (2.54 sec), where “<” indicates a significant difference at the .05 level and “=” indicates no significant difference [for head vs. feet, $t(13) = 1.05$, n.s.; for feet vs. front, $t(13) = 1.34$, n.s.; for front vs. right, $t(13) = 3.13$, $p < .01$; for right vs. back, $t(13) = 0.60$, n.s.; for back vs. left, $t(13) = 1.60$, n.s.].

However, head was significantly faster than front [$t(13) = 2.17$, $p < .05$], and feet was significantly faster than right [$t(13) = 3.26$, $p < .01$]. As predicted for in-

ternal environments in which the observer is surrounded by objects (Bryant et al., in press), front was significantly faster than back [$t(13) = 2.59$, $p < .05$]. When the character was reclining, the ordering was: front (1.95 sec) = back (2.08 sec) = feet (2.40 sec) = head (2.50 sec) = left (2.64 sec) = right (2.70 sec) [for front vs. back, $t(13) = 1.22$, n.s.; for back vs. feet, $t(13) = 1.31$, n.s.; for feet vs. head, $t(13) = 1.13$, n.s.; for head vs. left, $t(13) = 0.12$, n.s.; for left vs. right, $t(13) = 0.68$, n.s.]. However, front was significantly faster than feet [$t(13) = 2.99$, $p < .05$], back was significantly faster than head [$t(13) = 3.25$, $p < .01$], and feet was significantly faster than left [$t(13) = 2.21$, $p < .05$].

Constant and Vertical Dimensions

The relative advantage of the head/feet axis in the upright posture was not derived from the fact that the objects on this axis remained constant. Objects along the head/feet axis were also constant in the reclining posture, but the subjects were faster to front/back. Also, in the reclining posture, all directions except head and feet were associated with the gravitational axis of the environment at some point; however, the mean vertical response time (2.35 sec) was longer than that of front/back (2.02 sec).

Effect of Initial Posture

In half of the narratives, the character began upright, and in the other half, the character began reclining, but the initial posture in which a scene was learned did not affect response times. A repeated measures analysis of variance revealed that the three-way interaction of direction, posture, and initial posture was not significant [$F(5,80) = 1.94$, n.s.].

Individual Patterns

Individual subjects’ patterns of response times within each posture were consistent with the predictions of the spatial framework model (i.e., for the upright posture, head/feet < front/back < left/right; for the reclining posture, front/back < head/feet < left/right). Seven of the 14 subjects produced the expected patterns in both postures (binomial probability < .0001). Eleven of the 14 subjects responded faster to front than to back in the upright posture (binomial probability < .05). There was no effect of subject gender on response times [$F(1,12) = 0.12$, n.s.], and this factor did not interact with any other.

DISCUSSION

The results of this experiment replicate the spatial framework analysis for object and direction probes. The predicted pattern of response times, based on asymmetries of the human body axes and the correlation of the head/feet axis with gravity, was observed in both probe conditions, and subjects were as fast to respond to object probes as to direction probes. Thus, the sort of probe did not determine relative or absolute response times to access spatial relations. Rather, features of the observer’s body and posture in the described scene organize a reader’s knowledge of objects and their locations in the environment. These results indicate that (1) the spatial framework does not depend on the use of particular direction labels (front, left, head, etc.) to probe readers’

knowledge of described scenes and (2) subjects have equivalent access to spatial relations when cued with the names of objects with direction terms.

One issue not fully approached by this experiment is whether the spatial framework pattern reflects a verbal effect or a more fundamental difference in the way people perceive and think about space. Research on left/right and up/down discrimination has suggested that differences in the speed with which people can locate objects on particular dimensions may depend on the spatial terms used to refer to those dimensions. For example, Sholl and Egeth (1981) found that the typical confusion of left/right relative to up/down depended on the use of particular verbal labels such as "left" and "right" or "east" and "west." When letters or symbols have been used to refer to direction, left/right and up/down were found to be equally discriminable (Maki, 1979; Maki, Grandy, & Hauge, 1979). Such findings imply that the difficulty in processing certain spatial dimensions results from the difficulty in processing verbal terms associated with those dimensions. The spatial framework pattern of response times to locate objects in a described scene might then reflect the time to interpret the spatial terms used to probe subjects.

One difficulty with such an account is that a different pattern of response times was observed depending on the posture of the observer—specifically, relative response times to head/feet and front/back (Bryant et al., in press; Franklin & Tversky, 1990). Also, judgments of left/right have been found to be more difficult than judgments of up/down in the absence of spatial words, when the positions of objects could not be predicted beforehand (Maki & Braine, 1985). The present results also suggest that it is the organization of spatial information in readers' mental models that predicts time to access an object or direction. The same analysis of body asymmetries and relation to gravity accounts for observed response times in both cases, although responding to direction

probes entails comprehending spatial terms and object probes producing a direction term.

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