

Keynote: The Language of Place

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Spatial cognition research has benefited greatly from insights and methodologies in linguistics, adapted for the purpose of understanding how we think about space. The ways in which people talk about spatial locations and relationships reflects, not directly but systematically, how they think about space; this fact has led to a rich diversity of relevant interdisciplinary research and outcomes including GIS applications.

So far, the focus has strictly been on notions of SPACE rather than PLACE. The distinction between the two is symptomatic for the typical perspectives adopted in this research field, in spite of its inherent disciplinary diversity. Spatial notions tend to be abstract, formalizable, and context-free (as much as possible). How humans conceptualise space may be rooted in their experience, but the experience itself is rarely addressed. Accordingly, research on perception and understanding of spatial environments has mostly focused primarily on the spatial aspects: where locations are, how they relate to each other, and how to get from A to B in familiar and unfamiliar environments. Route descriptions, for instance, have been investigated thoroughly in research, showing how we understand and talk about space when we need to find our way. However, such research rarely captures what really matters for us in our environment, except for some basic insights such as the importance of landmarks for spatial processing.

Place, in contrast, directly connects to human experience, perception, and appreciation. Appreciating an environment does not only mean knowing where places (and landmarks) are, but – much more importantly – knowing what these places mean to us, how we relate to them, what makes them special. Conceptualisations of place must therefore be explored on the basis of how humans live in the world: which kinds of places play what kinds of roles; what are the boundaries of places in terms of their pragmatic reality and human experience; how and under what circumstances are emotional attachments developed for specific places – and so on. Such perspectives may seem elusive and infinite, but the underlying principles are not: they can be tackled along similar lines as explored extensively in previous spatial cognition research. In my talk, I will explore relevant transferable research insights and methodologies towards an envisioned agenda addressing notions of PLACE through the lens of language.

Thora Tenbrink is a highly active interdisciplinary researcher and Reader in Cognitive Linguistics, and currently Director of Ethics at the College of Arts, Humanities, and Business at Bangor University. She is author of “Cognitive Discourse Analysis: An Introduction” (Cambridge University Press, 2020), “Space, Time, and the Use of Language” (Mouton de Gruyter, 2007), co-editor of three books on linguistic representation and dialogue, and has published more than 30 peer-reviewed journal articles in areas of language and cognition.