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ON THE GAIT OF TIME

*Time runs out, time flies, time goes by; die Zeit vergeht; le temps passe et court; tempus fugit; el tiempo pasa…*

Expressions like the above are common in most languages and often elicite comments in cognitive semantics, where it is regularly assumed that they are manifestations of a conceptual metaphor, TIME IS SPACE. This is the case in Turner and Fauconnier 2008.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the mental-space based theory of that article, space and time are treated as separate ‘input’ domains, not as ‘source’ and target’, as in conceptual metaphor theory, but rather as separate ‘sources’ to a ‘target’ blend, corresponding to the content of the quoted sentences. Time comes from the input Time, and run, go, fly etc. come from the input Space. How the Time input contributes is unclear; Space contributes by providing ‘moving object’. So time becomes a moving object in the blend. This is essentially what is said.

In this note, I am going to offer a critical comment to that analysis. Someone may utter, for example: “Oh, see how time flies, we have to hurry up now!”; the meaning effect of this construction is emotional, and the imagery of the ‘flying’ time is vivid enough to make the expression truly metaphorical, that, is, experienced as a predicative mapping between themes belonging to distinct semantic domains – one natural and animal, the other social and human. The former is activated as generic in the predication (flying is a generic property of birds), whereas the latter is activated as deictic in the predication (time is flying right now, where we are sitting, so absorbed in our doings that we are forgetting what time it is, and that we should be moving on).

In order for the (presentational) mental film of the flying bird to map onto temporal experience, in the expression “Time flies!”, this (referential) experience has to already possess a given phenomenological structure. In fact, time does possess such a structure, which is independent of the fly metaphor. As all themes of mental representation, temporal items are intrinsically schematized. Here is my suggested account of this schematization: The subject is situated in a presence frame inserted between the realm of things past and things future. Events happen to the subject as emerging from the future and disappearing into the past; the subject itself is inversely emerging from the past and oriented towards the future. Events and subject of experience ‘meet’ and ‘clash’ more or less dramatically in the presence frame. The subject’s own acts are equally experienced as originating in the future, as plans, and ending in the past, when they are ‘over’, whether they are then completed or not. Time, in the presence frame, furthermore has an inherent metric, in that the subject can generate countable beats by a reflexive bodily activity called rhythm; the subject can intentionally express regular series of ‘nows’ through movements of certain body parts, rhythmically realizing tactile cascades of such beats and immediately perceiving them: reflexive self-perception – the body addressing itself, so to speak, by generating its own periodic sensations – is a constitutive aspect of subjectivity. Subjectivity is inherently rhythmic. Inter-subjectivity, correspondingly, begins in rhythmic attunement between the bodies of subjects perceiving each others’ expressions as they perceive their own and as the other’s experiences them themselves. The phenomenological instance called ‘consciousness of time’ (Zeitbewusstheit) relies on, or even consists in, this potentially shared rhythmic self-perception, alias: reflexivity. Shared reflexivity underlies shared attention.

When events enter into the subjective presence frame, they are received through this basic, rhythmic pulsation of consciousness, whether its bodily expression is motorically manifested or suppressed. Before events happen, they can be expected, and the subject can thus prepare bodily and mentally for their reception, because the phenomenological metrics allows the subject to project the beat cascades into the future. In that case, an event traverses a metrically stable ‘expectation space’ immediately before arriving in the presence frame; having thrown a stone into a deep well we expect and wait for the resounding splash of its hitting the water. Subjects thus attune to the surrounding world of events; expectation rhythm will often match the rhythm of perceived events, which will make the feeling of time vanish; but events can ‘slow down’ and create a feeling of temporal expansion, or they can ‘speed up’ and let us feel a temporal contraction. This plasticity of time is inherent in human time consciousness. It can evidently be caused either by external changes in event rhythm or by internal changes, occurring in the subject’s rhythm of expectation and present experience.

“Time flies”, when we experience temporal contraction, while time “drags” due to temporal expansion; we can metaphorically activate a bird or a snail, respectively, and map the generic motoric style of this figurative being onto the experienced rhythmic relation between subject and event – which is eventually what we call ‘time’. The result is a specific temporal “gait”, as my note title says.

What we see as a ‘moving object’ in the metaphoric blend created by the verbal expression is ‘time’ in this sense: the elastic co-presence of event and subject.

I suspect that when we say that “time flies”, we mean that it flies away from us, so if we wanted to hold it back, it would no longer be possible, since it is already almost gone: the animal is already almost absent, so what was possible when it was present, is now becoming impossible. “There is still time” would express the good news that the possibilizing circumstance of what is possible is not yet gone into the past. This expression is not even metaphorical at all. Time is not a metaphorical construct, despite the fact that we can refer to time metaphorically, thereby producing certain meaning effects – typically modal and emotional.

A phenomenology of time will find conceptual metaphor CP ontologically overestimated, since no metaphor can create time experience itself, which is what CP claims. It will furthermore find the “Rethinking” conceptual-cum-blending analysis methodologically impaired by its arbitrary postulations of mental spaces, domains, and emergent entities.

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1. See M. Turner and G. Fauconnier, 2008, “Rethinking Metaphor”, in (ed.) R. Gibbs, Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. “Time as space is a deep metaphor for all human beings.” The point of the article is to show that many spaces are involved. The authors’ first – self-made and context-free – example, “*Three hours went by, and then they had dinner*,” shows that “we have not merely projected units of measurement onto time, but also turned those units into moving objects. This does not come from projecting units of measurement onto time. In the domain of space, a unit of measurement is not a moving object. These are incompatible sorts of elements. But in the blend, we project onto a temporal experience both unit of measurement *and* moving object from the domain of space. Incompatible elements in the domain for space are thus fused to identity for time in the blend. The notion of hours as simultaneously moving objects and units of measurement is emergent in the blended space.”

   So ‘hours’ are from a domain of space, not from time. ‘Going by’ is from space, not from time, and ‘hours that can go by’ are spatial units of measurement that miraculously start to walk around, when they are imported to a blend with ‘time’ from the domain of time. That is the analysis offered.

   I would like to comment that I do not think there is a “domain of space”, since all imaginable domains inherently have spatial extension, not by metaphor but by the very fact of being imaginable. The notion of “domain” needs clarification; if it is not experiential, I think it is meaningless. Experiential domains are cognitively real semantic areas of phenomena appearing to experiencers in the human life world. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)