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Mediated characters: Multimodal viewpoint construction in comics

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Abstract: I analyze multimodal viewpoint construction in comics to engage with how modalities function within the medium as a specific discourse context with distinct conventions and material qualities. I show how comics employ established storytelling practices with character, narrator, and narrative viewpoint levels, while building up and interweaving these through strategic uses of the modalities of the medium. I mobilize the cognitive theories of embodiment, domains, mental simulation, and mental space blending as an analytical framework. I examine the asynchronicity of viewpoint elements between modalities and their synthesis into composite character viewpoints in several examples. I show how modalities can be prioritized and their different qualities and functions strategically manipulated for viewpoint construal. These brief examples show the complexity inherent in multimodal communication and interpretation and the usefulness of encouraging the medium-specific and interdisciplinary analyses of cultural works from a cognitive linguistic perspective.

Keywords: multimodality, conceptual integration, viewpoint, embodiment, domains, mental simulation, comics and graphic novels

1 Introduction

As embodied creatures, people experience the world from a specific multisensory position, and interact with the world and each other from it. Viewpoint refers to this mental position and includes both concrete sense perceptions and abstract concepts. It allows people in social interactions to align and compare different roles and values and to assess or integrate varied perspectives. Viewpoint is a crucial component of communication across a range of expressive modalities in natural and mediated forms (see Dancygier and Sweeter 2012). In many contexts, multiple modalities work together to construct viewpoints, such as through the natural use of co-speech gesture, speech tonality, and inflection.

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Similarly, mediated forms of communication – including print, film, digital interfaces, and textiles – act to constrain which and how modalities can be employed and viewpointed, which includes developing discrete discursive and generic conventions. Viewpoint phenomena suffuse communication, and the modalities at the disposal of communicators inform the representation and interpretation of viewpoints.

Disciplinary engagements succinctly illustrate the ubiquity of viewpoint across modalities. Most notably, it pervades language use, including grammatical and semantic features like deixis, modals, and epistemic stance (Dancygier and Sweetser 2012). For mediated language, literary studies have long discussed viewpoint in terms of perspective and focalization, which contribute significantly to interpretations of narrators, characters, and events (Dancygier 2005, 2012; Horstkotte and Pedri 2011). Similarly, art theorists analyze viewpoint phenomena well beyond the notions of perspective and figuration, seen, for instance, in the distinctions between *seeing-in* (what is represented as a perceptual space) and *seeing-as* (how interpretations extend beyond what is represented. See Newall 2011). As I discuss later, while images might seem to communicate straightforwardly through resemblance or iconicity, their variable formal features can significantly reconstrue content (Fukada 2016; Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996). Similarly, in embodied communication, viewpoint informs interpretations of gestural uses of space and gaze (Sweetser 2013), including in relation to visual art (Mittelberg 2013) and comics (Narayan 2012). Multimodal communication studies that integrate viewpoint, therefore, present fruitful interdisciplinary spaces between cognitive linguistics, other cognitive sciences, and studies of art, literature, and culture.

The constrained environments of mediated communication highlight issues of multimodal viewpoint construction, since media limit expression to the possibilities offered by the available modalities along with their associated discourse types, genres, and conventions. For cognitive approaches, these issues include clarification of how embodied theories of meaning apply to multimodal mediation and comprehension. As I argue, knowledge of cognitive domains, mental simulation, and mental space integration (blending) in particular is crucial to the analysis of multimodal viewpoint construction. Furthermore, I show how the material limitations of media and their associated discourse conventions contribute to multimodal meaning and require a medium-specific cognitive analysis.

In this paper, I focus on the medium of comics (graphic narratives¹), which typically communicates through the combination of pictographic, linguistic,

¹ While popularly employed as a synonym for comics, many scholars dislike the term *graphic novels* for several reasons, including the implication that comics only come in long fictional

indexical, and iconic signs, and through the sequential layouts of panels, all of which have a range of viewpoint prompting features and conventions. Comics typically include three interlinked viewpoint levels commonly associated with storytelling across media, which include character, narrator, and broader cumulative narrative viewpoints. Each level of multimodal viewpoint construction is itself informed by many elements – such as a character presenting a combination of emotional, ideological, and temporal qualities – and are, thus, best understood as *composite viewpoints*. They can also vary in their distinctiveness through a range of possible viewpoint compressions, such as of character with narrator, or narrator with narrative viewpoint (see Dancygier 2012, esp. Ch. 3), which I address briefly with my final example. Primarily, I focus on the multimodal construction of character viewpoints, while signaling to how they might inform and be informed by higher order levels as well as medium-specific qualities of layout. I concentrate on panel composition because it is the primary site of multimodality and character viewpoint construction in comics.

Analyzing comics comes with several challenges, since studies of comics have long struggled with how best to describe the medium (see Meskin 2009) and lack a consistent theory of communication that brings together their multimodal contents (Cohn 2012: 96). Furthermore, critics have long emphasized visual cues as the core of the medium. For example, Scott McCloud (1994) emphatically affirms comics as “sequential art” and Thierry Groensteen focuses on the “iconic solidarity” of their “interdependent images” (2007: 18). This visual emphasis comes at the expense of verbal analyses (Miodrag 2013). However, scholars are increasingly engaging with how creators opportunistically and strategically employ modalities and other material features and conventions of comics, considering them to be “an art of tensions” (Hatfield 2005: 32). Similarly, Aaron Meskin (2009) describes them as “hybrid art form” that readers understood through knowledge of a range of historical, artistic, literary, and cultural ideas, or “multiliteracies” (El Refaie 2009).

Despite engaging with this medial variability and background knowledge, critics still typically and problematically assume, rather than analyze, *how* readers build comprehension: “analysts still tend to regard the meaning of cartoons as self-evident and to take the validity of their own interpretations more or less for granted” (El Refaie 2009: 182). Moreover, when addressing reading comprehension, synthetic processes remain predominantly image-focused and underdeveloped, even in recent cognitive approaches. For instance, these studies analyze

forms, rather than including fiction and non-fiction as well as short strips and long series. *Comics* and *graphic narrative* are used here as the most neutral terms for the medium (Chute 2008).

the “visual language of comics” (Cohn 2013), degrees of iconicity in caricature (Kendall et al. 2016) and speech balloons (Forceville 2013), visual representations of action (Kukkonen 2013; Potsch and Williams 2012), and visual metaphors (El Refaie 2013; Forceville 2005). These studies show the crucial role cognitive research can play in clarifying issues of visual comprehension in comics, but require a cohesive multimodal model of meaning construction, which I offer here.

To develop and illustrate my cognitive approach to multimodal viewpoint construction, I analyze three examples of how modalities operate independently and synthetically, and in medium and discourse-specific ways. Cognitive linguistics offers important explanatory frameworks that clarify and strengthen analyses of multimodality because it emphasizes the experientialist grounding of cognition, in particular the rich embodied interactions between perception and conceptualization. I show how the strategically exploited hybridity of modalities significantly impacts the construction and interpretation of character viewpoints. Even through this limited focus, I show how the analysis of multimodality in mediated communication offers cognitive linguistics an opportunity to test theories of conceptualization across cultural phenomena, to examine differences in how modalities prompt viewpoints, and to locate the degree to which medium-specific qualities strategically exploit presumed universal cognitive processes. The analytical tools of cognitive linguistics hold up well under multimodal application and scrutiny, while being pushed towards more modal and medial specificity.

2 Comics, viewpoint, and cognition

Each medium constrains the modalities and discourse conventions at the disposal of the creator. To assess multimodal viewpoint construction requires knowledge of the medial system and how it draws specifically on cognitive structures and processes as part of the dynamic embodied meaning system. Intricate interactions between perception and conception ground this system in what has been variously called *ception* (Talmy 1996) or perceptual symbols (Barsalou 1999). Readers activate lived experiences – from basic sensorimotor schemas up to cultural knowledge – to flesh out and interpret limited communicative cues. Because meaning is embodied, it is grounded in a multisensory reality that facilitates multimodal understanding. Media strategically draw upon aspects of this wider multisensory reality through their multimodal composition.

For the medium of comics, crucial components of its compositional system can be glimpsed in a single sparse panel (Figure 1) from Stan Lee and Jack



Figure 1: A panel by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby.

Kirby's 1965 *Captain America* story, "Among Us, Wreckers Dwell" (Lee and Kirby 1965, reprinted in Eisner 2008: 131). (Sequences of panels will be discussed later.) Most obviously, the image depicts the characters and actions through a sparse pictographic style and indexical motion and impact lines, while the conventionalized iconography of the speech balloon (itself a varied unit of expression: see Forceville 2013) reports Captain America's (hereafter CA) verbal statement. These representational cues develop distinct character viewpoints, one each for hero and villain, through the assumed uniqueness of both individuals. As this example shows, comics are composed of pictorial, iconographic, indexical, and verbal modalities (and the schematic qualities of sequences and layouts of panels as well), which include various compositional possibilities and restrictions. For instance, images may include, among other things, details about (1) environments – including specific visual perspectives, proximity to events, density or complexity of visual cues, as well as details about locations, objects, and features – and (2) characters or other actors – including their body types, attire, facial expressions, movements, and interactions. While pictures adeptly present a third person perspective (thereby often establishing an epistemic viewpoint in the story world), and can construe the content through a range of stylistic and representational choices, they seem less equipped to

reflect a first person perspective.² Thus, the modality of language plays a crucial role in viewpoint development in comics, as it is conventionally embedded in and around images through narrator text boxes and captions, character speech and thought bubbles, as well as embedded environmental cues, such as sound effects, signs, and logos. The linguistic contributions can add both subjective details of specific character viewpoints and more global details about the narrative viewpoint or the epistemic viewpoint of the storyworld. Both images and language can also easily incorporate indexical, metaphorical, and other creative combinations of cues to develop rhetorically and conceptually rich content (see El Refaie 2009; Forceville 2008; Gibbons 2012). A theoretically viable model of comics and cognition must be able to account for this range of multimodal possibilities and their interpretations.

Such a model should begin from the embodied grounding of cognition in perception. The panel acts as a window of attention or “attentional unit” (Cohn 2013: 56–59) that opens into, and focuses on, a particular pictured aspect of a wider story world. Thus, the panel frames an image that acts much like language in how it focuses and directs attention in discursively relevant ways (see Langacker 2001; Talmy 1996). Research into information graphics similarly shows that segmentation, alignment, and arrangement of multimodal elements, including into sequential units, significantly helps guide reader attention and facilitates comprehension (Holsanova et al. 2009; see also Cohn and Maher 2015; Foulsham et al. 2016; Kendall et al. 2016). Furthermore, image and language comprehension research confirms that readers draw on embodied knowledge to make inferences about multimodal cues (see Gibbs 2006). For instance, readers infer that the half drawn hat or shoe in the panel above is in fact whole (based on perceptual processes of object completion), just cut off by the frame. Similarly, while the background is blank, we assume a more detailed action space (and import cues from prior panels to contextualize the action as well). Importantly, the sparsely composed setting focuses reader attention onto salient features in the panel, such as character-specific expressions, postures, and interactions, which expedites the comprehension and interpretation of the panel (Kendall et al. 2016; Kukkonen 2013). As evidenced through work like this, Will Eisner lauds Kirby’s skillful creation of “heroic images that exude sheer power”, produced through his ability “to effectively portray people in extreme actions [through] simplification and exaggeration” (2008: 127). As I show in later examples, perceived qualities of representational cues, including stylistic features beyond the simplification seen here, inform the perception and

² First person visual perspectives are certainly possible (such as in first person “shooter” video games), just not dominant as a pictorial strategy in comics.

construal of characters, environments, and events, all of which impact viewpoint construction. As perceptual units of composition, panels direct attention and present a narrative and epistemic viewpoint into the storyworld and foreground multimodal details that contribute to character and narrator viewpoint constructions.

While panels and representational styles direct attention and inference processes, readers understand specific modalities through their embodied grounding and contextualization in the cognitive structures of domains. In his work on semantics, Charles Fillmore (1982, 2003) shows how multimodal information networks about things, roles, values, and interactions structure cognitive frames or domains of knowledge (see also Clausner and Croft 1999). (While Fillmore prefers *frame*, here I employ the analogous term *domain* so as not to confuse the frame of the comics panel with a cognitive structure.³) An embodied or mediated sign activates and foregrounds a particular element of an entire domain network, and this network is necessary for the interpretation of a given sign. For the Lee and Kirby example above, CA hitting the villain prompts the fight domain. This domain helps readers make inferences about the interaction, including possibilities about roles (as opponents, instigators, aggressors, heroes), values (their motivations, justifications, as well as physical prowess), and types of fighting (boxing match, war, street fight). Similarly, the speech balloon conventionally prompts the domain of spoken discourse, and the language itself invokes more specific domains of political ideology through the concept of freedom. These domains share the common notion of goal-oriented interactions between subjects: the fight domain gives the language a distinct context, which in turn refines what is activated in the fight domain to connect political motivations between domains. This refinement connects the goal of winning the fight with CA's spoken emphasis on freedom (and presumably a particularly American perspective on liberty and governance), and draws upon the Western culturally specific metaphorical notion of ARGUMENT IS WAR (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). As can be seen, domains facilitate inferential and metaphorical thinking within and between modalities by activating and foregrounding relevant multimodal elements. The theories of mental simulation and mental space blending elaborate how these specific inferences and connections inform comprehension.

Mental simulation activates sensorimotor and conceptual networks in domains as part of meaning construction (Barsalou 1999; Bergen 2012; Zwaan 2009).⁴

³ See Cienki (2007) for more on the connections between the theories of frames and domains.

⁴ I am mindful here of Hickok's (2014) important critique of mirror neuron-based simulation theory as overhyped and incomplete. However, as Hickok admits, language and image

Simulation provides the dynamic animating force behind the interpretation of modalities, including metaphorical compositions (see Gibbs and Matlock 2008). Simulation is particularly important for understanding the bodily movements and force dynamics involved in the altercation above and connecting them to relevant domain knowledge about fighting, conversation, and politics. The conventional use of indexical cues of motion and contact lines further aid comprehension by isolating how objects and bodies move and connect at a gestalt or schematic level (see Cohn 2013: 37–40; Cohn and Maher 2015; Kukkonen 2013; Potsch and Williams 2012). These lines are activated as readers simulate the paths and embodied knowledge of CA's raised fist to reverse engineer the upper-cut that knocks the villain down.⁵ Similarly, the motion path of the villain's head connects at a specific spot to the fist's motion lines, which is highlighted by impact lines, suggesting where the fist made contact. Importantly, simulation of these visually represented actions (via image and index) and domain knowledge of fighting helps expand the temporal viewpoint of the image from simply seeing a man mid-fall to include the entire duration of the punch and fall. Simulation temporally extends a snapshot of two figures to include more complex event structure.

The temporal viewpoint of the image contrasts with that presented by the language. Linguistic analysis aside, it is important to note that simply simulating the time it takes to say CA's comment presents readers with another temporal viewpoint on the scene, since the duration of the spoken language is substantially longer than the viewpoint presented by the image. In terms of temporal viewpoint, the pictorial and verbal modalities are *asynchronous*, even while being co-present, which differs substantially from a case like co-speech gesture. Yet, this asynchronicity is hardly an impediment to comprehension. The medial tension between asynchronous viewpoints produced by the simulation of images and words appears to easily meld into a cohesive understanding of character viewpoints.

To better reflect how salient features from asynchronous modalities integrate into composite character viewpoints, I draw on the theory of *blending*.⁶

comprehension processes draw heavily from sensorimotor systems at a higher networked level of cognitive architecture than discrete neurons. It is at this higher level of networked cognition that I use the term mental simulation, a usage that I believe resonates with the cognitive linguistic and psycholinguistic research (see also Gibbs 2006; Gibbs and Matlock 2008; Richie 2008).

5 For a cognitive analysis of lines in visual poetry in relation to fictive motion and comprehension, see Borkent (2010, 2014).

6 While often called “conceptual integration theory”, this abrogates (in name only) the role of perception in embodied meaning. Perhaps “ceptual integration” is better, to acknowledge the role of perception in mental space construction too. Blending is nicer shorthand.

Blending, as a development of mental spaces theory (Fauconnier and Turner 2002; Sweetser and Fauconnier 1996), describes how cues prompt the selective activation of embodied knowledge, such as domains, through simulation, into temporary mental spaces that build in-the-moment multimodal understandings of prompts. Mental spaces are online packets of knowledge that can selectively or completely project content together to produce a synthetic meaning in a blended space with emergent structure. This emergent understanding can then be reflected upon as its own unique meaning (as cohesive multimodal mental imagery), can be projected back into the original mental spaces for comparison, or can be compressed or extended and built upon in subsequent blends (all of which will be discussed).

The selective construction of mental spaces and blends are context (and medium) dependent and reflect cognitive biases that synthesize asynchronous cues. Likely the human, goal, and object-oriented biases of cognition direct readers to focus on a higher order, composite level of viewpoint: What is happening? Who is winning? And, what does this mean for the narrative? Character and narrative viewpoint interests supersede the temporal viewpoint anomalies between modalities. Barbara Dancygier (2012), along with a detailed discussion of character and narrator viewpoint construction, shows that storytelling practices themselves act as culturally specific domains by providing coherent concepts about narrative roles and values, such as about different types of characters, narrators, and events (see also Cohn 2014). Thus, blending specific prompts with generic roles and values helps readers integrate new cues with the appropriate narrative and viewpoint level. As Dancygier notes, narrative spaces (or domains) “profile a number of possible viewpoint options in order to construct a topology suitable for narrative processing” (2012: 61). This is the case with CA and the villain above, who each anchor character viewpoint elements through their role as either protagonist and antagonist. Viewpoint details can be elaborated or erased as the story progresses, depending on subsequent inputs. The character blends also exist within a wider shared story space, which includes the story world (in this case, a fictionalized World War II America) with its own narrative and epistemic viewpoint (a patriotic American stance against the Nazis).

Blending analysis charts these viewpoint levels and how readers comprehend and update them. For instance, CA, the nationalist hero, has an emotional, political, and physical viewpoint that is distinct (except in gender) from that of the villain, and which is developed pictographically, indexically, iconographically, and verbally. In the pictorial modality, CA’s raised fist lends a victorious viewpoint element to the image derived from the fight domain (especially boxing). The visual orientation of the two opponents, with CA standing in a dominant position above the falling villain (reinforced by the low visual

perspective overall), establishes CA's physical authority, and suggests a patriotic, forceful, and diligent physical and psychological character viewpoint. He stands in stark juxtaposition to the enfeebled, falling villain. Rhetorically, the pictorial modality reinforces the emphasis on "free men" in CA's verbal statement, and as his voice, the verbalized political viewpoint aligns with his physical prowess. Furthermore, CA's finely muscled body and his flag-based costume helps develop metonymic and metaphorical interpretations of him as the embodiment of American superiority (see Bergen 2003). CA's composite protagonist character viewpoint is controlled, strong, and assertive; he expresses a Western democratic and individualist position, and enforces it with strength and skill. The emergent character viewpoint is comprised of multimodal cues, including physical features and posture, visual perspective, and verbal content and intonation.

The villain's character viewpoint contrasts with CA's viewpoint, and is constructed largely by simulating the oppositions inherent in the domains of stories (as antagonist), politics, and combat. As CA's physical opponent, the foreign operative becomes aligned with the political and social oppositions as well. Readers may assume that, as an agent of Der Fuehrer, the villain's viewpoint includes an investment in collective totalitarianism, coercion, sabotage, and other evils. The POLITICAL ARGUMENTS ARE PHYSICAL CONFLICTS metaphor reinforces these oppositions.⁷ Thus, viewpointed content, while not always overtly expressed in each panel, can emerge in blended spaces by simulating inferential interactions with roles and values in other mental spaces, including other emergent character viewpoints.

Beyond these building blocks of comprehension, how readers interpret these emergent properties of the panel is up to some debate, of course. For instance, scholars might critique the narrative viewpoint for its patriotic, militaristic propaganda. Chris Murray calls such comics "*popaganda*," which promote patriotic and carnivalesque imagery that revel "in the humiliation of the enemy" (2000: 143). Much more could be said about this comic, including about its historical contexts and audiences, which would nuance the analysis of the potential domains involved in understanding it. The embodied blending framework described here supports these more extended engagements by providing a precise model of how both represented and inferred qualities of domains compound into multimodal comprehension. In the next sections, I will remain focused on examining further strategic manipulations of the medium to construct character-level viewpoints.

⁷ I cannot dwell here on the substantial conceptual metaphorical contributions to blends (see Bergen 2003; Grady 2005).

3 Viewpoint externalization and graphetic cues

Elaine M. Will's excellent graphic novel *Look Straight Ahead* (2013) explores the mental breakdown and schizophrenia of Jeremy Knowles, a high school student and artist. To reflect Jeremy's loneliness, creativity, and desire for meaning, Will employs a wide range of strategies to externalize Jeremy's perceptions. Predominantly, she illustrates his thoughts as part of his environment, so that we see him walking through his daydreams, interacting with unreal figures, synaesthetically experiencing music as shapes and colours, and visualizing his emotional responses to others through visual and multimodal metaphors. I limit my discussion to one brief example to show how the affordances of modalities can be exploited for character viewpoint construal. Most notably, the written quality of the linguistic modality functions as a form of strategic viewpoint externalization that helps illustrate mental turmoil.

In Figure 2, Will presents Jeremy walking and thinking, first through a panel pictographically composed of a longer perspective with no accompanying language, and then through a second panel with a semi-close up image with thought balloons. The second panel, which I will concentrate on, places the reader within a more intimate proximal perspective to Jeremy's side than the more distanced perspective in the first panel. This shift in visual access correlates nicely with the focus on his thoughts, introduced through conventional



Figure 2: Selection from Elaine M. Will's *Look Straight Ahead*.

thought balloons. The second panel also includes pictorial changes to hue (from light to dark tones) and environmental cues (the cross-hatching). The differences between panels suggest possible inferences about Jeremy's viewpoint and its impact on his actions. A blending analysis of the second panel shows how his subjective viewpoint obscures the objective, epistemic viewpoint offered of the story world in the first panel.

The integration of conventional thought representation in the second panel introduces a first-person character viewpoint to the mental space by allowing us to glimpse his mind, qualities of which his slumped posture only hint at in the previous panel. However, the redactions of the text, which draws on the wider domain of handwritten textuality, obscures most words, giving brief glimpses of a few, most notably "leave" located just above Jeremy's head. The domains of thought balloons and handwriting both share the properties of self-representation, albeit with quite different senses of intentionality and control. Nonetheless, the blend of thought reading with redacted writing suggests an emergent character viewpoint in which Jeremy is actively censoring himself. Simulating the movements of redactions also reinforces the sense of a willful action. He seems to participate in the muddling his own thoughts. Through these graphic means, by writing and redacting, Will visualizes and nuances Jeremy's character viewpoint blend to include an internal conflict and confusion. This conflict reflects as well the underlying cognitive work of the SPLIT-SELF conceptual metaphor, like that expressed by the phrase "I'm not myself today" (Lakoff 1996). The metaphor is expressed multimodally in the blend.

This split-self blend extends from Jeremy's thoughts into his environment. The redactions in his thoughts map to his surroundings, wherein his mental confusion connects to visual perception. The emergent blend suggests that his internal struggles cloud his judgment *and* his visual perceptions. He is no longer "seeing straight" and is getting swallowed up by his own confused thoughts as they literally fill in around him. Here we can see "cross-modal resonances" (El Refaei 2013) emerging through the SPLIT SELF metaphor to develop a unique character viewpoint. Importantly, shared features, such as his hoodie and haircut, facilitate comparisons between panels, which maintain the mapping of the two figures together as the same character (a mapping Fauconnier and Turner 2002 list amongst the *vital relations* for blending), while showing the implications of his mental distress on his perceptions.⁸ Moreover, comics scholar Jan

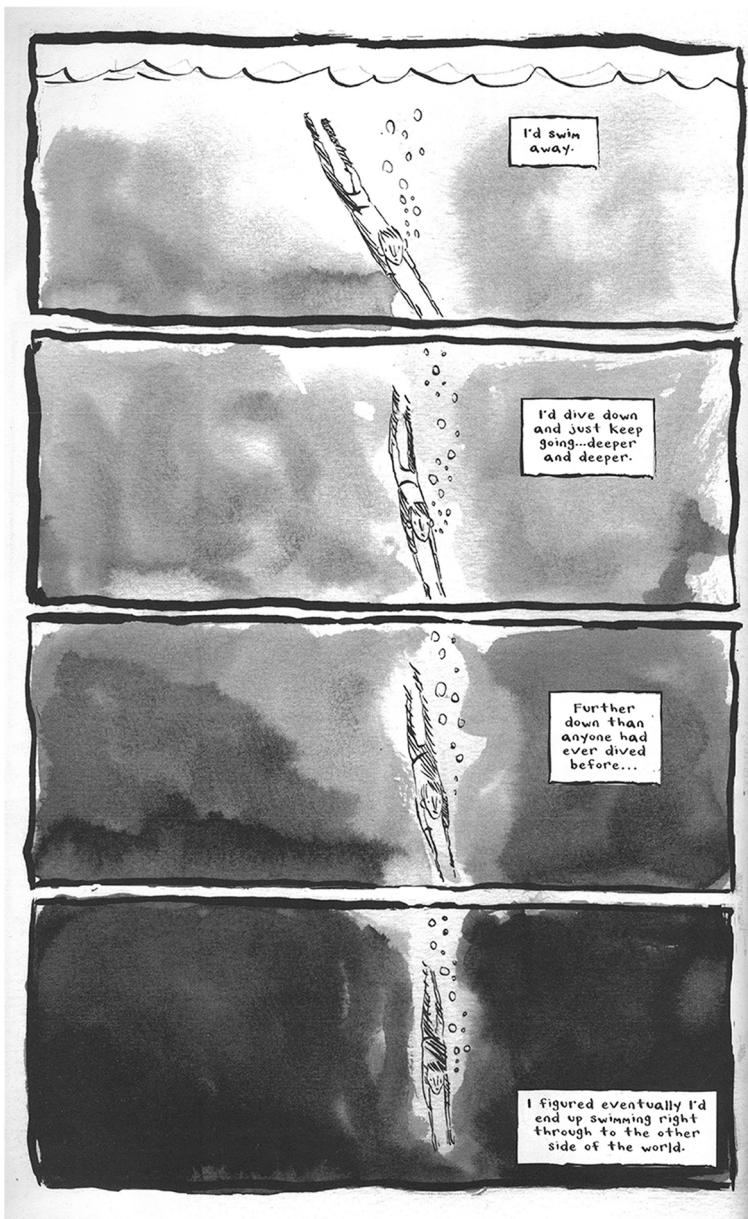
⁸ Fauconnier and Turner include mappings based on identity, figuration, role, event structure, and space as vital relations (2002: 93–102). Comics scholars might refer to these connections as a product of "closure" (McCloud 1994) or "iconic solidarity" (Groensteen 2007). Blending offers a systematic, nuanced, and cognitively plausible presentation of these processes.

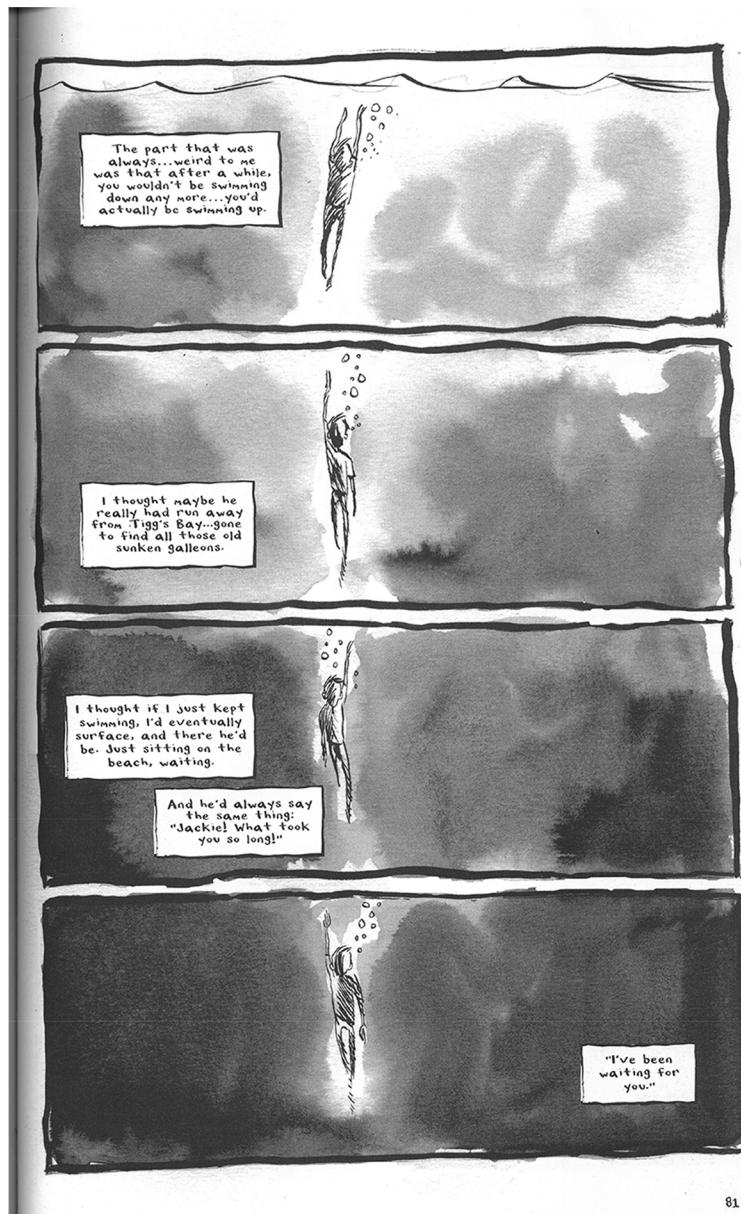
Baetens notes that pictorial style can act as a “graphic enunciation” through which “the reader has the ability to redo, to remake, or at least to re-experience the enunciative work [... which is] based upon gestures and mechanisms which every reader has known and practiced as a child” (2007: 150). In other words, pictorial cues that foreground their constructedness prompt mental simulation of the artistic actions that brought them into being (see also Borkent 2014). Such simulations of graphesis add to the comics’ meaning, including the aggressive quality of the redactions. This hostile action suggests that the conflict in Jeremy’s thoughts directly muddies his perceptions, but also, that the hand-drawn quality of the redactions makes his mental state an active creator of his surroundings. In the second panel, his mental illness is painting his world into being, unlike in the previous panel’s objective epistemic viewpoint. The sense of confused thinking and seeing adds a character-specific epistemic stance to his viewpoint blend that contrasts with the story-world of other characters. Unsurprisingly, he soon races agitatedly out of the house to the bafflement of other characters. The multimodal externalization of viewpoint helps foster a robust representation of mental illness, which potentially develops empathy in readers for those who struggle with such challenges (see Kukkonen 2013; Mar and Oatley 2008) because it helps visualize the viewpointed experience of an inaccessible domain.

4 Uneasy layouts

Jeff Lemire’s graphic novel *The Underwater Welder* (2012) presents the struggle of the protagonist, Jack, to overcome the childhood loss of his father upon his own impending fatherhood. This example (Figure 3) has adult Jack narrate a childhood dream of swimming through the world to find his missing father waiting for him on the other side. It shows how character viewpoints can be re-presented and adjusted through temporal viewpoint shifts, and how both can be further construed through medial manipulations. This example includes a brief narrative arc across two pages; however, I remain focused on character viewpoints and their multimodal representation, in particular the alignment of modalities with viewpoints and the manipulation of narratorial conventions through layout.

The pictographic imagery depicts Jack’s actions in his childhood dream, which aligns the child viewpoint with the image and the swimming domain. The text boxes offer his adult retelling of his childhood fantasy, thereby aligning language with the authoritative narrator role and adult viewpoint. While the





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Figure 3: Selection from Jeff Lemire's *The Underwater Welder* (2012: 80–81).⁹

9 For clarity, the complete narration follows, with slashes indicating breaks between panels (ellipses are included in the original). *First page*: “I’d swim away./I’d dive down and just keep

narration nuances interpretations of the dream, the child's viewpoint is anchored by the images, which seem to continually reaffirm it as a dominant presence. The narration also reconstrues the images as the narrator's reimagining of the childhood dream, a fictional experience drawn up and re-presented. Even while the adult words enhance our understanding of the child-focused images, as I show, these temporally and modally distinct character viewpoints subtly chafe against each other through the strategic layout of panels and text boxes across facing pages. The composite effect of these cues reveals the role that the medium plays in viewpoint construction and construal.

The images, at first glance, seem to straightforwardly present a child swimming deep down and then back to the surface of the ocean, which is simulated accordingly. The two facing pages illustrate this swimming arc, with the layout establishing a clearly recognizable motion path at a glance. This gestalt recognition itself results from a blend of multiple bodies into one character based on vital relations of shared figuration, action, and event structure. The images suggest little about the character viewpoint and are restricted to an inferred sense of intentionality behind the act of swimming, which is drawn from domain knowledge. Blending the images together gives a sense of significant depth (suggested by the darker water at the bottom) and time spent swimming (across multiple panels, all under water), as the character moves across the pages. The distanced perspective abrogates the possibility of attributing other cues, like facial expressions or gestures, to the childhood character viewpoint. Importantly, readers likely take in the gist of this swimming arc early on because of the symmetry of the images on facing pages. The limited and repetitive pictographic cues, therefore, offer few viewpoint details, but affirm the imagined action and its location in the ocean.

Text boxes overlay these images to narrate in past tense, through Jack's adult voice, his childhood fantasy of swimming through the world to find his missing father waiting for him. The mental space of Jack as an adult, including his adult viewpoint, is blended with the narrator role in the story space. His adult viewpoint takes on a superior position that embeds his childhood viewpoint within his more knowledgeable and authoritative adult perspective, as we

going ... deeper and deeper./ Further down than anyone had ever dived before ... /I figured eventually I'd end up swimming right through to the other side of the world" (80). *Second page:* "The part that was always ... weird to me was that after a while, you wouldn't be swimming down any more ... you'd actually be swimming up./I thought maybe he really had run away from Tigg's Bay ... gone to find all those old sunken galleons./I thought if I just kept swimming, I'd eventually surface, and there he'd be. Just sitting on the beach, waiting. And he'd always say the same thing: 'Jackie! What took you so long!'/I've been waiting for you" (81).

might expect of someone recounting their history. Furthermore, as visual narration, the images and layout might be said to reflect the adult viewpoint: the entire double-page offers a self-reflective space for Jack on his past. The distanced perspective of the images, even, might metaphorically reflect the mental and temporal distance of the adult viewpoint from the childhood dream. This distinction offers another instantiation of the SPLIT-SELF metaphor (here equating to an expression like “I’m not the person I used to be”). The represented child viewpoint is one of an imagined experiencer within the dream, whereas the adult viewpoint as narrator is subtly distanced, which the language hints at by using past tense and which the iconography reflects in his materialization only as overlaid text boxes. These separations establish two distinct character viewpoints for the same person split across time and aligns them with different narrative roles (past character and present character-narrator, respectively).

The multimodal interactions of verbal narration with sequential images have several layers in this example. On the first page, readers follow Jack’s narration, in typical English reading order, left to right, top to bottom. The text boxes align conceptually and perceptually with the images, while nuancing the child viewpoint by emphasizing his intention to swim “away,” “right through to the other side of the world” (80), by the end of the page. This final phrase aligns with the bottom, *the other side*, of the page, as well as with the transition to the other side of the book and to the surface on the other side of the world. The words highlights a medial appropriation that integrates the page space into the story-world and narratorial space, making the whole double-page spread into a uniform container, like the ocean in which the character swims, while highlighting the story content and aiding the transition to a new page.

The transition to the second page, however, comes with an added cross-modal challenge. Now the reading path counters the initial swimming blend, since we read the adult narration downward while the child swims upward. This counter-directional shift is naturalized to an extent by Jack’s narration in the first panel, in which he admits that “the part that was always ... weird to me was that after a while, you wouldn’t be swimming down any more ... you’d actually be swimming up” (2012: 81, ellipses in original). With this admission of weirdness, the narrator shifts focus away from the dive itself to expand on his childhood viewpoint by elaborating on his fantasized reunion with his father. (This shift in content works to deemphasize the images, which have already become slightly less salient through repetition and familiarity as well.) The narration emphasizes the child’s belief that his father “really had run away” and that his dive would reconnect them on the other surface where his father is reported as saying, “I’ve been waiting for you.” The hopefulness of the child viewpoint ends in the inevitable reunion with the imagined viewpoint of his father, a presence

that continues to haunt the adult viewpoint. The verbal modality seems to offer a straightforward, largely unobtrusive yet insightful adult narrator viewpoint that provides details about the child's intentions and dreams. Yet, significant tensions emerge between Jack's childhood and adult viewpoints that arise through the asynchronicity of image and text and the tension between reading path and pictorial representations of swimming.

The adult narration dominates these pages, as readers work to parse the language while the repetition of nearly synonymous images diminishes their impact. Furthermore, the content of the text boxes blends into a coherent unit of understanding about his childhood dream all presented through one modality. At the same time, the dominant narration on the second page chafes against the directionality of the images, building up a subtle and purposeful cross-modal dissonance that culminates in the final panel. While the character viewpoint of the child is still simulated as swimming upward with hope toward the light, the adult narrating viewpoint is constructed while moving ever downward into the darkness. The second page focuses on the father, in particular to emphasize in the final panel his voice saying "I've been waiting for you" (2012: 81). This affirmation of presence is located in a pictorially and schematically significant location, in the darkest corner of the depths of the ocean, which contravenes the childhood fantasy.

The disjunction between the image and the strategically placed text unsettles the composite child viewpoint. At the same time, the adult viewpoint presents the childhood dream without directly refuting it, beyond explicitly recognizing the swim becoming "weird". Rather, the layout and simulation of modalities operate at cross-purposes on the second page to blend into an emergent suggestion of less optimistic realities within the adult viewpoint, divorced from childhood fantasies. The emotional and epistemic viewpoints of childhood become eroded and reinterpreted by the adult narrator's viewpoint through simulation and blending. Like in the example from Elaine Will above, this is another instance of the SPLIT SELF conceptual metaphor underscoring epistemic and emotional viewpoint construction, but here it focuses on historical representation. While the actual circumstances of the father's disappearance are not yet clear, a sense of foreboding or unease emerges by the conclusion of this page by locating the father's voice in, what domain knowledge dictates to be, the dark and inhospitable depths of the ocean. In this example, the differentiated and asynchronous modalities are strategically employed across the material spaces of the page to establish two distinct viewpoint blends that chafe against each other. These blends unite in the shared identity of present-day, narrating Jack to produce a multimodal sense of tension and unease surrounding possible interpretations of the father's disappearance.

5 Conclusions

I have analyzed three examples from comics that show how the mediated qualities of multimodal communication construe viewpoints by manipulating varying degrees of asynchronicity between images and language and by strategically employing conventionalized and attentional qualities of the indexical, schematic, iconic and material features of the medium. These examples illustrate the multimodal construction of complex character viewpoints, even while the dominance of each modality varies in how it contributes to the construction of meaning. For instance, the Lee and Kirby and Lemire panels show how images can drive action and viewpoint allocation, while the linguistic elements can either align with or chafe against the represented actions. On the other hand, Will's representation of mental confusion is a more direct blend of modalities through connections between the graphetic qualities of visible language and pictographic cues to represent how mental distress colours experience. In all cases, the perception of modalities informs conceptualization.

Generally in comics the asynchronicity between imagic and linguistic cues can range from being almost imperceptible – as in a panel that has an action combined with a sound effect – to being extremely noticeable – as in a long conversation developed across a single image. Similarly, repetitions of cues in any modality across a string of panels can de-emphasize their content while foregrounding others. While some repetition and similarity are necessary to connect panels by supporting vital relation mappings, too much or too little can have other attentional and conceptual impacts. Comics harness the range of mediated, graphical qualities of modalities (including the *visibility* of the modality of language when written) to construe composite viewpoints with physical, temporal, emotional, and ideological elements. Grounding analyses of viewpoint in the dynamic, embodied processes of simulation and blending shows specifically how pictorial, linguistic, indexical, and schematic modalities interact to build meaning. Importantly, viewpoint is a crucial cognitive bias that facilitates cross-modal synthesis by largely ignoring lower-level asynchronicities and tensions in favour of global comprehension. This approach to viewpoint in comics can also be more widely applied to other features of the comics medium and to other multimodal cultural works.

My analysis supports several broader conclusions and connections. First, all media serve as distinct discourse contexts that present communicative constraints on modalities and conventions (including how they are motivated, developed, expressed, as well as perceived and interpreted). The constraints of a given medium inform communication all the way down, from generic to modal choices. Furthermore, the materiality of mediation informs meaning, such as

through the visibility of language and the conspicuousness of page layouts. This focus on distinct modal and material contributions and limitations, which N. Katherine Hayles (2004) calls a *medium-specific* approach, better incorporates perceived medial cues into analyses of conceptualization, thereby aligning with blending research into extended and situated cognition (Hutchins 2005). A cognitive linguistic analysis of mediated communication must engage this specific medial structuring when analyzing specific discourse types.

Second, analyzing multimodal discourses like comics by engaging embodied domains and metaphors, mental simulation, and mental space blending illustrates how these cognitive patterns and processes extend across modalities, while also being constrained by them (for metaphor see Forceville and Urios-Aparisi 2009). Further work on specific forms of multimodality and mediation can add to the wider project of multimodal discourse analysis (Hart 2016), including to related or overlapping studies of stylistics (Stockwell 2009), genre and rhetoric (Bateman 2008), and social semiotics (Kress and Theo 1996). Likewise, there are significant opportunities to combine empirical and qualitative studies of multimodal analysis surrounding reception and comprehension, like I did by bringing together research on attentional guidance in information graphics layouts (Holsanova et al. 2009) with similar qualities in comics. The analytical tools of cognitive linguistics can usefully expand to and incorporate a range of multimodal phenomena and their associated interdisciplinary research because of the established dynamic and embodied basis of meaning. Of course, these analytical tools should not be enacted as predetermined theoretical edicts, but as testing grounds for multimodal theories of cognition and mediation. As Christopher Hart (2016) notes, the multimodal expansion of cognitive linguistics offers an opportunity to test the generality of different claims, while also making it applicable to a wider range of real-world concerns, a world which is increasingly communicating through multimodal media.

Third, these real world concerns offer interdisciplinary opportunities that can help refine and extend more culturally nuanced analyses of meaning construction as well. For instance, embodied domains include extensive swaths of cultural information. Research in literary, media, and cultural studies has long focused on how cultural artifacts reflect and inform society, including surrounding issues of gender, politics, emotion, and other forms of engagement and evaluation. Such research on social, political, and personal qualities of textual experience can widen what is considered in domain network analyses and can highlight questions of how cultural values inform meaning construction, such as by sanctioning particular viewpoints in a given domain. Furthermore, such scholarship can help cognitive researchers locate cultural, social, and personal areas of congruity and divergence in interpretations. Literary and cultural studies will naturally also benefit from this interdisciplinary interaction through a

better understanding of the cognitive foundations of comprehension and interpretation.¹⁰ Overall, these connections reinforce the need to specify the contexts that inform meaning, including their discursive, social, cultural, medial, and material qualities. This interdisciplinary expansion offers opportunities for disciplinary refinement and collaboration that can develop a more robust account of multimodal comprehension.

Multimodality is a crucial new (and necessarily interdisciplinary) frontier for cognitive linguistics. Studying mediated communication develops existing multimodal research by identifying further differences in sign systems, their media, and their motivations from and implications for embodied and intersubjective experiences. This paper presents an opening attempt at bridging cognitive, literary, and medial interests. I hope to have shown that the dynamic, embodied perspective of cognitive linguistics becomes more robust in a multimodal and mediated environment and helps explain why multimodal works like comics are, and will continue to be, such effective and evocative forms of communication.

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¹⁰ This area is already developing under the terms cognitive poetics, cognitive stylistics, and cognitive literary studies (see Dancygier 2012; Hiraga 2005; Stockwell 2009). Studies of cognition and multimodality are also developing surrounding theatrical performance (Cook 2010), news reporting (Steen and Turner 2013), computer interfaces (Chow and Harrell 2013), and other topics. These require ongoing attention to the development of a cognitively plausible and comprehensive paradigm.

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