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# From Attention to Meaning

Explorations in Semiotics, Linguistics, and Rhetoric

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# Introduction

## A Collector's Conceit

Our subject begins with a curious experience that happened as I toured the famous Frick Gallery on East 70<sup>th</sup> Street, overlooking Fifth Avenue and Central Park in New York City. As I entered the Living Hall, an oak paneled room at the center of the gallery housing some of Henry Clay Frick's most famous acquisitions, and oriented myself toward the fireplace, I took notice of three paintings: El Greco's portrait of St. Jerome (circa 1590) hanging directly above the fireplace mantle flanked by a portrait of Sir Thomas More (1527) to my left and Thomas Cromwell (1532) to my right, both creations of Hans Holbein, the Younger. The portrait of More (famous for its *trompe l'oeil* effect) presents the subject in a three-quarter view facing to his left, while the portrait of Cromwell presents the subject in a more severe profile facing

Plate 1: Thomas More (1527) and Thomas Cromwell (1532) painted by Hans Holbein the Younger (Copyright: The Frick Collection, New York).

to his right. Gazing out from the center of the room as I listen intently to the commentary about each portrait, I experience the odd feeling that Thomas Cromwell is staring at Thomas More, as if he were plotting against him, the imputation of such iniquitous intent no doubt prompted by the commentator's disclosure that Cromwell was More's arch political enemy and partly responsible for his execution in 1535. Although gazing in Cromwell's general direction, More seems unaware of his arch enemy's presence. It seems as if Cromwell has More right where he wanted him!

This odd feeling was not mine alone, as my companion, standing next to me and listening to the same commentary, agreed that Cromwell was indeed staring at More. Overhearing our conversation, a third patron perforce let out a short laugh at the situation presenting itself to us. We all thought that Frick probably savored the irony of this hang.<sup>1</sup>

As strange as this feeling may seem, it is an absolutely normal occurrence based on the workaday cognitive operations, namely the ability to construct on the fly mental simulations of scenes and states of affairs displaced in time and space and involving disparate experiential domains (in this case from the domains of artistic portraiture, curatorial practices, and political infighting). Understanding why and how such effects happen is the subject of this book.

This curious experience is richly instructive in several ways and data from it will be mined throughout these explorations. It puts in evidence a prime instance of human beings forging dramatic meanings from static images by blending things that do not normally go together; hence, it is a prime example of conceptual blending, the general model of human meaning construction the mechanics of which involve the construction, completion, and elaboration of mental spaces – dynamic scenes and scenarios created as human beings think, talk, and interact.

But most fundamentally, this curious incident is important for what it says about human attention, in my view the *sine qua non* of human meaning construction.

The term attention pops up repeatedly in discussions of meaning, but its presence has been casually mentioned more often than deliberately explored. In response, this book qualifies as a new approach to meaning insofar as it provides “thick descriptions” of meaningful events as a function of attention, imagined in these pages as consisting of an interdependent *signal*

1 The living hall is the only room left unchanged since Frick's death.

*system*, *selection system*, and *interpersonal system*. This book presents this ‘greater’ attention system as a heuristic on which to build theories of meaning in semiotics, linguistics, and rhetoric but does not claim to present a grand unified theory of meaning. Instead this exploration offers a rough sketch of what the sciences of meaning might look like as a consequence of attending to attention.

## Prologue: Attention, Meaning, and Knowledge Representation

As prelude, I wish to situate the attention system and Mental Spaces and Blending Theory within the province of knowledge representation, a concern at the core of cognitive science.

What do cognitive scientists mean by representation?

Markman (1999: 5–10) defines representations as consisting of four components. The first component consists of a *represented world*, or content, that discloses to us what representations are about. This world consists of the range of “somethings” worth attending to, thinking about, or acting upon. This first component refers to a world purportedly external to the representation system itself.<sup>2</sup> The second component consists of a *representing world*, or the domain of forms used to stand for entities in the represented world. This is the domain of signifiers. The third component consists of the *mechanisms* used to connect the representing and represented worlds. These two worlds can be linked isomorphically such that every piece of information in the first world has a corresponding form in the second world, but more often is the case that the two worlds are linked homomorphically such that multiple pieces in the first world share forms from the second world, with the result being a loss of information. The fourth component consists of the *processes* for using representations. The first three components, argues Markman, point to the potential for representations. But representations mean nothing unless processes unfold in using them. For instance, there is no representation of the feuding Cromwell and More until someone “reads off” their relationship from the display.

2 Of course, the represented world can include reflexive content about the status of representations *as* representations; the represented world is also meta-representational.

Markman's model of knowledge representation presents a heuristic for locating the apparatuses of attention and mental spaces within the cognitive science landscape. The greater attention system and its corresponding elements – *alerting, orienting, detecting, sustaining, controlling, sharing, harmonizing*, and *directing* – purport to capture regularities of the processes underling representations, while Mental Spaces and Blending Theory (itself a process model of integrating elements into representations) captures facets of the mechanisms for relating the representing and represented worlds. For instance, on the processing end, the attention system predicts that certain representations function specifically as attention “harmonizers” inveigling others to allocate cognitive resources to the same item in the surround, while other representations function specifically as attention controllers, inducing cognizers to switch attention between two distinct items or to oscillate attention between two features of the same item; likewise, a mental spaces approach predicts that meaning arises from selective projection of elements from a stock of existing representations to compose, complete, and elaborate new representations that create new meanings not apparent in the preexisting stock. Together these apparatuses predict that the representations themselves unfold in the present as dynamic scenes and scenarios that, more often than not, allocate attention to the there-and-then, broadly construed. Patrons can see More and Cromwell staged in the here-and-now but attend to them as political actors of the historical past. Patrons see the arrangement of portraits before them but can turn their attention to the person who so arranged them for our amusement.

The broad sketch that human attention comprises the processes component and mental spaces comprise the mechanism component of knowledge representation is by no means an uncontroversial view of their relationship, if for no other reason than not all cognitive scientists, many of whom work within the mental spaces and blending framework, hold attention and consciousness in very high regard, and thus would envision a different relationship emerging. But the relationship sketched above is, at present, the one that makes the most sense to this researcher.

Another matter needs our attention before these explorations can begin in earnest. Markman's four-fold model is agnostic with respect to the precise nature of these representations. Do representations reside inside the head? Do they reside outside the head? Or, do they reside both inside and outside the head?

While Markman's sympathies lie more with the first option, my sympathies lie more with the third option. Since these are matters of deep philo-

sophical debate with no apparent consensus on the horizon, one is left simply to acknowledge initial biases. My own is to see cognitive science expand the unit of analysis beyond the individual mind to include facets of the environment, an environment teeming with other bodies and minds. Thus, representation and meaning is a function of body, brain, and environment in synchronized harmony with other bodies and brains. Take away any one of these features and meaning fails. The conjecture explored in the next four chapters is that the attention is the preeminent cognitive process that fills life with meaning.

## Synopsis

To prepare you for what comes next, I conclude this introduction with a brief outline of each chapter.

The first chapter, “The Greater Attention System and the Cognitive Sciences,” presents the entire attention system as comprehending three subsystems – the signal system, the selection system, and the interpersonal system – which unfold dynamically during acts of meaning by eight elemental capacities: alerting, orienting, detecting, sustaining, controlling, sharing, harmonizing, and directing. The cognitive psychology and neurophysiology of attention further suggests that the attention system fits within the broader research paradigm of Distributed Adjustable Capacity theories, in which attention is understood as a socially and culturally attuned “zoom lens” that widens and narrows as occasion demands. The Frick Gallery and its contents serve as the underlying occasion to “scale up” experimental evidence in the cognitive psychology and neurophysiology of attention and to see how “ideal observers” allocate attention in a uniquely human habitat. This chapter also provides the occasion to introduce other research interests in cognitive science, such as consciousness, categorization, memory, affect, and culture, of central importance to the ensuing explorations in the meaning sciences.

Chapter two, “Attention and the Study of Signs,” presents an attention semiotic from the perspective of the attention system outlined in the previous chapter. I argue that sign production and comprehension are best understood as attending to one of three types of scenario at any given time – the “what is the case” scenario (*hypostasis*), the “what if X were the case” scenario (*hypothesis*) and the “as if X were the case” scenario (*hypotypotic*).