

How we conceptualize the web today

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When the world wide web came into popular use in the 1990s, people had to develop ways to talk about it and think about it. In 1995, we interviewed novices (individuals who had never used the web) to determine how they would describe their experience using the web. We found that people routinely anchored their conceptual experience in terms of physical experience (Maglio & Matlock, 1999). They routinely described websites in terms of physical locations, and browsing in terms of physical motion, for instance, *I went into this thing called Yahoo*, or *I couldn't get back to where I was*. They also talked about containment, as in *I went into Brian's tattoo something or other*. They also blended experiential domains (see Fauconnier & Turner, 1998), especially internal conceptual actions (e.g., motion, agency, containment) with external physical actions (e.g., clicking on hyperlinks, typing in URLs), as in *I clicked on uh grapes, and it brought me to this place*.

Fifteen years later, people talk about and think about the web differently. Recently, we interviewed people about web use. Just as in 1995, we asked 12 undergraduates to use the web for ten minutes and report what they did. In our preliminary analysis of participant responses, we coded verbs that described web activities, and placed them into four categories: "web," for specific sorts of web applications, such as "check (email)" and "update (facebook status)"; "motion," for physical movement for virtual action, such as "went (to google)"; "information," for information actions, such as "read" or "look up"; and "other," for all other verbs. Across all participants, about half the verbs were in the "other" category (48%). The rest were about evenly split among the three other categories, "web" (19%), "motion" (16%), and "information" (17%).

Many interesting results have emerged in the new data. There are far fewer references to metaphorical containment and less variation in motion language. There are also more "web" actions and more "information" actions. It appears that now people focus on the actions they can perform with software applications and in terms of accessing and reviewing information sources. One participant described her actions this way: *There's something about Netflix ...and something about the company, and then there was an article about a flu shot.* Here information unfolds in time rather than in space. The emphasis is on the information rather than on action. Another participant said: *On Facebook, [I] poked a couple people, and updated my status*, relying on specific structure about the application being used, Facebook, rather than on the underlying web.

Metaphor naturally recruits aspects of our everyday embodied experience and structures our everyday understanding relatively abstract domains (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). But our results show how as a given domain becomes more ubiquitous and more familiar, it acquires more of its own structure and some aspects of prior metaphorical structure are foregrounded or replaced by others. The conceptual structure of the web is now based more on what users can do rather than on where users can go.

References

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