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Cause and Effect Theories of Attention: The Role of Conceptual Metaphors

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Abstract

In everyday discourse, as well as in science, concepts of attention are defined by metaphors. In scientific theories these metaphors determine what attention is and what count as adequate explanations of the phenomena. We analyze these metaphors in the context of three types of attention theories: (1) 'Cause' theories, in which attention is presumed to modulate information-processing (e.g., Attention as a Spotlight; Attention as a Limited Resource), (2) 'effect' theories, in which attention is considered to be the by-product of information-processing (e.g., the Competition metaphor), and (3) hybrid theories that combine 'cause' and 'effect' aspects (e.g., Biased-Competition models). Our analysis reveals the crucial role of metaphors in cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and the efforts of scientists to find a resolution to the classic problem of 'cause' versus 'effect' interpretations.

“Everyone knows what attention is” (William James, 1890/1950)

“No one knows what attention is, and ... there may even not be an ‘it’ there to be known about (although of course there might be)” (Pashler, 1998, p. 1)

The history of attention research is not just an ongoing debate about how to explain the phenomena of attention. It is equally a debate about what attention is. It is widely recognized in contemporary philosophy of science (Hanson, 1958; Kuhn, 1962; Hesse, 1966) that our scientific theories determine what we regard as data, how we individuate phenomena, and what the criteria for an adequate explanation should be. The phenomena are not just “given” in some theory-independent fashion. Rather, our theories and concepts partly determine what we will take the relevant phenomena to be, and they thus determine what a good theory must account for.

This fact is quite evident in the field of attention research, where even a cursory survey reveals that there is no general agreement about what a theory of attention ought to explain. Different theories have different views of what counts as attention. Some theories, for example, assume that there is a specific mechanism of attention, and they then ask how it works. Is it a cognitive system made of interacting subcomponents discretely localized in the brain? Or is attention a pool of resources we allocate to effortful tasks? Other theories are skeptical that there is such “thing” as attention. They view attention instead as an epiphenomenon of the workings of multiple independent cognitive systems. Thus, while some theories conceptualize attention as a real “cause” of various cognitive events, others think of it as a mere “effect” of multiple cognitive operations.

In this essay we argue that there is no way to identify attention independent of some theory of attention, and we argue that theories of attention are structured largely by conceptual

metaphors. These metaphors provide the logic for our thinking and reasoning about the nature, structure, and processes of attention, and we cannot do without some set of metaphors, either in commonsense or in scientific models of the mind.

A conceptual metaphor is a mapping of entities, structures, and relations from one conceptual domain (the ‘source’) onto a different domain (the ‘target’) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987;). The entities and structures mapped from the source domain give rise to a parallel conceptual structure in the target domain. The cross-domain mapping actually constitutes a new conceptual structure in the target domain, rather than merely highlighting pre-existing similarities between the source and target domains. For example, as we will see below, when we understand attention as a metaphorical spotlight that shines on various mental objects (i.e., representations), we utilize the entities and relations within the source domain of physical spotlights and the objects they illuminate, in order to establish the nature of the mental operations that occur when we are attending to some stimulus or mental representation. Although the metaphors do not “create” the phenomena of attention, in the sense of causing processes to exist that did not exist before, they do constitute our conceptual understanding of phenomena associated with attention, and the metaphors give us the means for making sense of those phenomena.

Our strategy in this essay is to show precisely how such metaphors define concepts of attention and guide scientific research. We will do this by contrasting the very different metaphorical concepts of attention that underlie what are known in the scientific literature as “cause” versus “effect” theories.

1. Cause vs. Effect Theories of Attention

In cognitive psychology, attention typically is used to refer to a selective process by which attended information is processed more efficiently than non-attended information. This capacity to assign priority to one sensory stimulus over other equally salient stimuli is central to virtually all concepts of attention. But this raises a key question that has plagued all theories—What, precisely, is it that assigns this priority? What does the selecting of one stimulus over another?

In reaction to early behaviorist attempts to eliminate all “internal” systems, many cognitive psychologists since the 1950’s have put the locus of the stimulus selection back into the subject’s “mind.” In place of stimulus-driven interpretations of behavior, selection was understood as an internal mechanism of attention. Where behaviorism and Gestalt psychology emphasized the properties of the external world as the site of stimulus control, cognitive psychologists argued that it was not possible to predict behavior merely on the basis of knowledge of the stimulus alone. This view is illustrated in Kahneman’s (1973) definition of attention as “a useful label for internal mechanisms that determine the significance of a stimulus.” From this perspective, “the mind is continually assigning priority to some sensory information over others, and this selection process makes a profound difference for both conscious experience and behavior” (Pashler, 1998, p. 2) (italics added).

Most theories within this cognitive psychology tradition thus assume that attention ‘causes’ changes over perception and other cognitive operations. According to cognitive theorists such as Broadbent (1958) and Kahneman (1973), selective attention to one stimulus over others frees people to orient their energies in certain directions, even in the face of stimuli that are more salient than the selected ones.

Causal theories can be contrasted with “effect” theories, which deny the existence of any central causal mechanism of attention. Whereas causal theories claim that attention ‘modulates’ perception, effect theories conceptualize attention as an effect—a by-product—of the normal operation of various sensory and cognitive systems (James, 1890; Johnston & Dark, 1986). For example, representations that rise to a certain level of activation are given temporary priority in the functioning of the organism, but there is thought to be no entity or substance bringing about this processing priority, and there is no central system that monitors the competition for processing.

In the sections that follow, we examine the metaphorical bases of prototypical “cause” versus “effect” theories of attention, each with its own definite logic and corresponding knowledge structures.

2. ‘Cause’ Theories of Attention

2.a The Spotlight Metaphor

One of the best examples of “causal” theories is the attentional Spotlight metaphor, in which an internal attentional system modulates the processing of information carried out by sensory and cognitive systems. Scientists have argued that “attention may be compared to a beam of light in which the central brilliant part represents the focus surrounded by a less intense fringe. Only the items located in the focus of attention are distinctly perceived whereas we are less aware of the objects located in the fringe of attention” (Hernández-Peón, cited in Watchel, 1967, p. 418).

The Spotlight metaphor consists of the following conceptual mapping:

The Attention Spotlight Metaphor

Source Domain (Spotlight)

Target Domain (Attention)

Spotlight mechanism	----->	Orienting System (mechanism of attention)
Light	----->	Attention
Agent who controls the spotlight	----->	Executive System
Agent who sees	----->	Awareness System
Potential field of vision	----->	Representational Space
Area illuminated by the spotlight	----->	Attended representations

The source-to-target mapping allows researchers to use their knowledge of the source domain (visual perception and devices of illumination) to construct a parallel knowledge of the target domain (attention). Such spotlight-based inferences have guided many years of attention research in cognitive psychology (Cave & Bichot, 1999; Fernandez-Duque & Johnson, 1999). In recent years, the internal structure and logic of the Spotlight metaphor have also influenced research in cognitive neuroscience. Consider the following examples, in which neuroscientists explored the “physiological correlates of the ‘spotlight’ of visual attention” (Brefczynski & DeYoe, 1999), by measuring the neuronal and hemodynamic response in areas of the visual cortex:

1. Several areas of the visual cortex have retinotopic maps of regions of the external world, so that objects close or adjacent to each other in the world activate brain areas close or adjacent to each other in the visual cortex. If attention ‘sheds light’ over sensory areas, then cueing attention to more central areas of the visual field should activate brain regions that map central locations, whereas cueing attention to a peripheral part of the visual field should increase blood flow in areas that map such a peripheral part of the visual field. Research testing these metaphorical entailments has provided empirical support for such inferences (Brefczynski & DeYoe, 1999).

2. Since a spotlight moves in analog fashion, the target domain inference is that attention moves in an analog fashion. Therefore, the electrophysiological enhancement associated with the processing of attended stimuli should also move in an analog fashion, a prediction that has been tested and confirmed in the laboratory (Woodman & Luck, 1999).
3. Furthermore, the delay between the onset of a cue and the enhancement of the electrophysiological response at the cued location has been taken to be a measure of how long it takes the attentional spotlight to move to the cued location (Müller, Teder-Sälejärvi, & Hillyard, 1998). This prediction is based on models that conceptualize attention as a serial high-speed scanning mechanism (i.e., a spotlight) that moves from one location to another.
4. Another entailment of the Spotlight metaphor is that the controlling agent is spatially distinct from the spotlight and from the field upon which light is shed. In the target domain, this entails that the executive system is physically separate from the orienting system and from the sensory areas where attention is expressed. The concept of the executive system as defined by the Spotlight metaphor led researchers to discover a network of cortical areas that participate in attentional control, moving attention from one location to another. Whether a stimulus is displayed at the attended location has no impact on the activation of these controlling areas. In other words, the perceptual systems that benefit from the attentional modulation appear to be separate from the neural system that controls the attentional spotlight and from the spotlight itself (Corbetta, Kincade, Ollinger, McAvoy, & Shulman, 2000; Hopfinger, Buonocore, & Mangun, 2000; Martinez, Anllo-Vento, Sereno, Frank et al., 1999).

As these examples reveal, the Spotlight metaphor has a highly articulated internal structure for the source domain (spotlight) that shapes, in very determinate ways, how scientists conceptualize the target domain (attention).

The Spotlight metaphor is thus a prime exemplar of causal conceptions of attention. The attentional “spotlight” is conceived as actually causing effects in cognitive processing.

2.b The Limited Resource Metaphor

An equally important causal model is one built on a metaphor of attention as a Limited Resource that can be allocated by a general-purpose central processor in a graded fashion for the performance of different tasks. Resource models are most eloquently described in Kahneman’s influential book Attention and Effort (1973) and have been further developed by several researchers such as Norman and Bobrow (1975), Navon and Gopher (1979), and Hasher and Zacks (1977) (for precursors of these ideas, see Knowles, 1963; Moray 1967). According to limited resource models such as Kahneman’s (1973), dual task interference can be understood in terms of graded sharing of a single pool of limited mental resources (or capacity). This is a ‘causal’ theory of attention, because the attentional resource has a modulatory effect upon information processing.

Limited resource models have been, and continue to be, used to explain many psychological phenomena, such as dual task interference (Christie & Klein, 1996), automaticity (Norman & Bobrow, 1975; Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977), priming (Posner & Tudela, 1997), and mental rotation (Carpenter, Just, Keller, Eddy, & Thulborn, 1999). They underlie theories of cognitive development (Case, 1985; Craik & Byrd, 1982; Harnishfeger, 1995), neuropsychological deficits (Schwartz, Buxbaum, Montgomery, Fitzpatrick-DeSalme, et al.,

1999), brain activity (Posner & Tudela, 1997), awareness (Baars, 1997; Dennet & Kinsbourne, 1992; Farah 1994; Posner, 1994), and emotion (Posner & Rothbart, 1986).

The conceptual mapping of the Limited Resource metaphor is as follows:

The Attention as a Limited Resource Metaphor

<u>Source Domain (Resources)</u>		<u>Target Domain (Attention)</u>
Valuable resource	----->	Attention (Capacity/Arousal)
Quantity of resource	----->	Amount of available attention
Allocation of resource	----->	Allocation of attention to tasks
Budget	----->	Task strategy for allocating attention
Controller of the resource	----->	Executive system

The concept of a limited resource plays a crucial role in scientific research only because psychologists hold certain metaphor-based assumptions about how the mind works – assumptions about the existence of information processing, about a cognitive machinery that needs a source of energy for its proper functioning, about energy that can be manipulated and allocated, about the existence of a separate executive system that allocates the resource, and so forth.

It is important to emphasize that attention is not literally a substance (like water, soil, or gasoline) that can be quantified and parceled out. Neither is there a homunculus whose job it is to monitor this putative “scarce” and “valuable” resource. In other words, researchers derive implications for testing within attention experiments by using the knowledge of the source domain to construct a corresponding understanding of the target domain of attention. To get an

idea of how this works, consider some of our shared basic knowledge of the source domain of allocation of limited, valuable commodities. In the source domain there is

- (a) a limited commodity (e.g., some substance or object, or its surrogate, money), that is
- (b) controlled by someone who allocates it where he deems it most necessary, and
- (c) does so in a flexible way, applying resources to different goals in graded fashion.
- (d) The amount of resource needed varies for each task or product, and
- (e) affects its quality.

When basic source domain knowledge of this sort is then applied, via the cross-domain mapping, to our conceptualization of the target domain, we get a series of corresponding knowledge claims (or entailments) about attention. Therefore, for each piece of shared knowledge about the source domain (a through e above), there is a corresponding piece of knowledge about aspects of the target domain (a'-e' below). Thus, in the target domain:

(a') "attention has been used to refer to . . . all aspects of cognition having to do with limited resources or capacity" [italics added] (Shiffrin, 1988, p. 739)

(b') Such attentional resources are controlled by an executive system, or general-purpose central processor, at the very top of the decision-making tree, in charge of distributing the attentional resources: "[Attention] means a laborious process, whereby processing resources are voluntarily allocated to a particular task, or activity at the expense of other tasks and activities" [italics added] (Umiltà, 1988, p. 175).

(c') "The allocation of attention is a matter of degree. . . . Attention is . . . controllable. It can be allocated to facilitate the processing of selected perceptual units or the execution of selected units of performance" [italics added] (Kahneman 1973, p. 201).

(d') "The amount of attention or effort exerted at any time depends primarily on the demands of current activities" [italics added] (Kahneman 1973, p. 201).

(e') Finally, "allocating more attention to a given task enhances performance" (Pashler, 1998, p. 3).

The Limited Resource metaphor has provided a rich description of attention, and the knowledge it entails has influenced theory and guided research. For example, the models predict that, as the system becomes overloaded, performance is expected to degrade steadily (Norman & Bobrow, 1975). When a task requires more resources than those available, decreased performance should be expected: "Once the capacity limit is exceeded, selection of the information to be processed will be required" (Lavie, 1995, p. 452). Task interference would be expected to be non-specific, because all cognitive processes tap into the same unitary resource. Even if the tasks do not share any mechanisms of perception or response, interference will occur whenever the system's capacity is overloaded.

One of the chief advantages of the Limited Resource metaphor is that it allows us to model the graded allocation of attention to different tasks. In contrast, the Spotlight metaphor has difficulty explaining such phenomena, since a spotlight does not allow the person who controls it to split the beam, or to reduce its intensity in a way that would save the attentional light so that it could be used to illuminate another location. While the Spotlight metaphor entails that the intensity of the light is invariant, the Limited Resource metaphor allows a reduction of intensity at the attended location when a secondary task is added.

The Limited Resource metaphor has motivated many studies with results that eventually raised serious challenges to models that assume a unitary resource (i.e., a single pool of attentional resources). For example, 'effortful' tasks sometimes do not interfere with each other (perfect-time sharing) (Navon, 1984), so that in some cases increasing the difficulty of one task is not followed by a cost in the performance of the secondary effortful task (difficulty insensitivity). Moreover, sometimes changes in the modality of one of the tasks effect performance of the other

task, even in the absence of difficulty changes (structural alteration effect) (Wickens, 1984). These challenges from empirical studies have led to a revision of the original single capacity (or single “pool”) models, in favor of a multiple resource model (Navon & Gopher, 1979; Pashler 1998; Wickens, 1984). These models propose that interference between two tasks occurs only when the same reservoir of limited resources is accessed, but not otherwise.

Causal versions of the Limited Resource metaphor have also been criticized for attributing agency to the central conscious control mechanism. In the words of Pashler (1998), “whether or not attention is allocated to a stimulus is usually thought to depend on a voluntary act of will; in the metaphysics of folk psychology, this ultimately depends on the choice made by the self” (p.2). Without an account of how the executive system works to decide the attentional resource allocation, the Limited Resource metaphor leads to a regress of homunculus-like control mechanisms.

3. ‘Effect’ Theories of Attention: Competition Metaphors

To avoid recurring homunculus problems that plague most causal models, many researchers, spurred by recent developments in cognitive neuroscience, have adopted “effect” theories that explain attention phenomena as by-products of information processing among multiple systems. It might be said that effect theories attempt to explain attention away, since they deny the existence of any causal force or mechanism lying behind the alleged phenomena of attention: “Attention is not a high-speed mental spotlight that scans each item in the visual field. Rather, attention is an emergent property of slow, competitive interactions that work in parallel across the visual field” (Desimone & Duncan, 1995, p. 217). In such models there is no executive system required; instead, perceptual objects are seen as vying for limited processing resources, which is to say, they compete for activation in areas of perceptual processing: “Objects in the

visual field compete for processing in several cortical areas” (Rees, Frackowiak, & Frith, 1997, p. 835). If effect theories could successfully account for the full range of phenomena typically associated with attention, they would eliminate the need for a central executive and thus avoid homunculus problems.

The principal effect theories are based on what we will call “competition” models defined by the following metaphorical mapping:

The Competition Metaphor

<u>Source Domain (Resources)</u>	----->	<u>Target Domain (Attention)</u>
Competing Individuals	----->	Stimuli/Mental Representations
Valuable Resource	----->	Mental Resources / Neuronal Receptive Fields
Goal: securing limited resources necessary for survival	----->	Goal: securing resources for mental processing and aware perception
Competition for resources	----->	Competition for neuronal activation
Survival of individual	----->	Activation above a specified threshold

The Competition metaphor is very different from any metaphor of the causal sort discussed earlier. Although the mapping does involve the idea of competition for scarce resources, the nature of the “resources” is markedly different from the concept articulated in the Limited Resource metaphor, where attention is a causally efficacious substance-like reality that modulates cognitive processes. By contrast, according to the Competition metaphor, what we call “attention” is an emergent property or epiphenomenon of the fact that when various stimulus representations “compete” for processing “resources,” one of them will “win.” It is this

“winning” that we validate when we say that we are attending to that particular stimulus or representation, but there is no “attention” that is being “won.”

Effect theories employing this particular metaphor-based logic have prompted scientists to ask a very different set of research questions than those generated by causal theory metaphors. For example, the Competition metaphor naturally leads scientists to ask:

1. What is it that "competes"? Effect theories that use the Competition metaphor have answered this question in various ways. One can say that stimuli are what compete for processing resources. But since stimuli are stimuli only relative to the perceptual and motor capacities of organisms, it might be more accurate to say that it is stimulus representations that are actually in competition (Làdavas, Pretronio, & Umiltà, 1990). However, such representations exist for the organism in neuronal patterns of activation, which suggests that the proper subject of competition would be neuronal units (Cohen, Romero, Servan-Schreiber, & Farah, 1994). And finally, by extension, one can speak of entire hemispheres competing, insofar as those hemispheres are collections of systems of neuronal units (Kinsbourne, 1977).
2. What is being competed for? Most theories assume that what is competed for is neuronal activation, namely, a representation in a neuronal cluster. Thus, to say that a person is attending to X is to say that the neuronal unit(s) involved in representing X are activated to a level “above” other competing units.
3. What "decides" who wins the competition? This is, of course, the big question for any Competition theory, since the principal motive of such effect theories is to avoid the need to posit and explain the workings of an executive system. But if there is no control mechanism to determine which competing unit “wins,” then what sense can one possibly make of winning a competition? Within this framework, the answer must be that “nobody” decides

who wins; rather, winning is merely a consequence of rising above a threshold, which typically involves mutual inhibitory connections.

4. What is the result of "winning"? The answer would seem to be "awareness." In this metaphor, "being attended to" is simply the name we give to whatever "wins" the competition for processing. Stimuli that are not strong enough are eliminated, while strong stimuli succeed in gathering enough processing resources to become conscious (Dennet & Kinsbourne, 1992). In this view, the competitive process gives rise to awareness, which is stable but also evolving (i.e., a stream of consciousness), and attention and awareness are not supramodal systems, but rather emergent processes of brain activity. Awareness is not a natural kind, but a collection of successful inputs. An example of this reasoning comes from the literature on binocular rivalry. When different images are presented to the two eyes, perception alternates such that each image is visible for a few seconds at a time. This "binocular rivalry" phenomenon is usually understood as a competition between neuronal responses, so that at a given time one representation is dominant and the other is suppressed. Current views of binocular rivalry argue that "the neural representation of the two stimuli compete for visual awareness" (italics added) (Logothetis, Leopold, & Sheinberg, 1996, p. 621). Binocular rivalry is a process in which "each region of the retinal image in one eye seems to fight with the corresponding region in the other eye" (Wolfe, 1996, p. 588).

The entailments generated by the Competition metaphor give rise to specific predictions and theoretical explanations that are in sharp contrast to those of other metaphors. For example, patients with right parietal lesions and hemispatial neglect respond very slowly when a target appears in an uncued location. Spotlight models explain this finding as a deficit in disengaging attention and 'moving' it to the new location. In contrast, competition models argue for

competitive weights that favor stimuli represented in the undamaged areas over stimuli represented in the lesioned areas. According to this view, lesions to the parietal cortex lead to a deficit in the processing of spatial information (which can be re-described as an attention problem), but the parietal cortex is not a specialized attentional system. Along the same lines, connectionist models of attention posit that ‘units’ compete for resources (Cohen et al., 1994). These models assume the existence of ‘perception’ units that detect the spatial location of the stimulus and send their output to a second layer of units. Units in the second layer are grouped in two assemblies, one for each visual field, projecting inhibitory connections toward the other assembly. These inhibitory connections put units of one side in competition with units of the other side. Unilateral ‘lesions’ lead to a ‘disengagement’ deficit, while bilateral lesions do not, because the inter-hemispheric balance is left intact. This pattern of predictions contrasts sharply with the prediction, made by the Spotlight metaphor, that bilateral lesions to the attentional network should produce a disengagement deficit, at least as severe as unilateral lesions.

Some theorists have further argued that rival hemispheres have opposing orienting vectors which compete with each other (Kinsbourne, 1977). Lesions to one hemisphere lead to an imbalance in the opposite hemisphere. Thus, presenting a ‘competing stimulus’ to the unaffected side exaggerates the bias, leading to an ‘extinction’ of the stimulus represented by the impaired side. Due to the lack of competition from the lesioned hemisphere, perception in the unaffected side is better than normal (Làdavas et al., 1990; Seyal, Ro & Rafal, 1995).

These examples illustrate the fact that ‘effect’ theories raise a set of questions about the nature and mechanisms of attention that are strikingly different from the questions raised by causal theories. If attention is the by-product of a competition for limited information processing resources, scientists should emphasize the description of stimuli and their processing, rather than focusing on the properties of a central manager that effects change.

3.1 Critiques of 'Effect' Theories and the Emergence of the Biased Competition Model

The move to stay away from top-down influences is welcomed by researchers eager to avoid the homunculus problems associated with causal theories of attention. However, the radical conclusion that attention is something we can do without raises serious challenges to any effect theory. The chief problem is to explain how, in the absence of causal top-down control, an organism could free itself from the control of the most salient stimuli? How can a system in which attention is merely a by-product of bottom-up processing in independent, interacting units assign priority to less salient stimuli, which humans seem quite capable of doing? In response to this type of criticism, there has arisen a variation on the Competition metaphor known as the Biased Competition Model which, while emphasizing bottom-up competition, also acknowledges the existence of top-down biases.

The Biased Competition model proposes that inputs compete for neuronal receptive fields, which are a limited resource: "Receptive fields can be viewed as a critical visual processing resource, for which objects in the visual field must compete" (Desimone & Duncan, 1995, p. 197). When the target is highly discriminable, it has no problem securing its receptive fields. In contrast, when the target is surrounded by distractors that are similar to it, there is more competition and the neuronal response to the target is reduced. Other factors, such as novelty and general significance, also influence which stimuli become most salient. Novel stimuli have "a larger neural signal in the visual cortex, giving them a competitive advantage in gaining control over attentional and orienting systems" (Desimone & Duncan, 1995, p. 202). Stimuli that fail to secure representation within a sufficient number of receptive fields fail to exist at the conscious

level. In this sense, the Biased Competition model is an ‘effect’ model that regards attention as a by-product of information processing.

However, the model is closer to ‘cause’ theories insofar as it allows bottom-up processes to be modulated by top-down factors such as ‘attentional templates’ or working memory representations. By holding active the feature or spatial location of the object of interest, an individual can bias competition in favor of one stimulus over another. Holding a target in mind is thought to activate target-sensitive neurons and to secure those neuronal receptive fields for when the target is finally presented. In other words, “Multiple objects within a cell’s receptive field compete for control over the cell’s response, and attentional inputs favor relevant objects. In this view, ‘top-down’ attentional influences can overrule ‘bottom-up’ stimulus-driven competition among stimuli in ventral [lobe] areas” (DeWeerd, Peralta, Desimone & Ungerleider, 1999, p. 753).

By incorporating ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ aspects of attentional theories, and by grounding attention in biological constructs, the Biased Competition model accounts for a multitude of findings (Behrmann & Haimson, 1999; O’Craven, Downing, & Kanwisher, 1999; Rees et al., 1997; Treue & Martinez, 1999)¹. For example, when a good stimulus (i.e., one for which a neuron is very responsive) is presented in close proximity to a poor stimulus (i.e., one for which a neuron is unresponsive), the presence of the poor stimulus leads to a reduction in the neuronal response. According to the Biased Competition model, when the good and bad stimuli appear together they activate neurons that compete with each other, and attending to a stimulus biases this competition in the direction of the attended item (Reynolds, Chelazzi, & Desimone, 1999). If attention is directed to the ‘poor’ stimulus, the response is further suppressed, but if attention is directed to the ‘good’ stimulus the response is enhanced. Consistent with this view, preparatory attention increases the neuronal firing of cells that respond preferentially to the stimulus, and

fMRI studies reveal activation of brain areas that code for the expected features (Chawla, Rees, & Friston, 1999; Kastner, DeWeerd, Desimone, & Ungerleider, 1998).

Proponents of the Biased Competition model claim that the theory is safe from the homunculus problem, arguing that attentional processes are an emergent property of the stimulus information processing carried out by multiple cognitive systems (Desimone & Duncan, 1995). Attention is not localized in a single part of the brain, and neither are the top-down modulatory mechanisms. Instead, the concept of the central executive is replaced by domain-specific feedback loops that bias the information processing of upcoming stimuli.

However, the partition of top-down effects into domain-specific feedback loops raises the question of how those loops are bound again into a coherent unit, in a way that doesn't merely reinstate some form of homunculus. The question of who or what decides the allocation of top-down modulations remains unsolved, even if the homunculus is replaced by a multitude of homunculi. This problem was already evident to Broadbent (1958) and the other cognitive psychologists who, in their reaction to behaviorism, brought 'mental' processes to the forefront of psychology research. The problem is that explaining attention away by linking it to other cognitive systems only explains attention as a by-product (attention as an effect), but still does not account for attention as a top-down modulation (attention as a cause). In other words, 'attention as a cause' cannot be reduced to 'attention as an effect,' because the top-down modulation, by definition, should be somewhat independent from the bottom-up factors. Otherwise, behavior would be entirely stimulus-driven.

Once the Limited Resource metaphor and the Competition metaphor have been spelled out, the tension between 'attention as a cause' and 'attention as an effect' becomes evident. Causal theories of attention, such as Kahneman's, emphasize the existence of an internal agent who is in charge of distributing attentional resources. In contrast, effect theories emphasize the

existence of competing stimuli that aim to secure a place in representational space. The Biased Competition model combines both, explicitly acknowledging the competition among stimuli, but also implicitly assuming the existence of multiple homunculi. The homunculus problem remains.

4. The Metaphorical Structure of Scientific Reasoning

We have been pursuing the hypothesis that conceptual metaphors, along with the cognitive models they support, lie at the heart of scientific reasoning. We illustrated the pervasiveness of such constitutive metaphors in the field of attention research, focusing specifically on versions of the Spotlight, the Limited Resource, and the Competition metaphors. The core of our argument is that scientists' ability to conceptualize, reason about, and study experimentally the phenomena of attention depends on the structure and logic of some specific set of metaphors. We showed how inferences made about the source domains (e.g., spotlights or limited resources) constrain the possible inferences made about attention.

Because the ontologies and inference patterns are different for each metaphor, it is fair to ask whether there is any unified, comprehensive concept of attention, or rather whether attention is a vague label that scientists from different orientations use to refer to distinct, disparate domains of cognitive activity.

On the one hand, our analysis provides evidence that the scientific concepts of attention are irreducibly metaphoric and that there are multiple metaphors, each with its own structure and set of inferences. As we have seen, in cases where the ontologies (i.e., the entities and properties specified by the distinct source domains) of different metaphors are inconsistent, each metaphor defines attention differently.

On the other hand, the different metaphors do not simply specify radically different concepts, as though they were each defining a completely different set of unrelated phenomena. Rather, the metaphors do seem to gravitate around a recurring and relatively stable set of phenomena that researchers tend to think of as unified in some as yet unknown way. Indeed, it is possible to list features that cognitive psychologists have again and again attributed to “attention,” such as that (1) attention involves some form of stimulus selection, (2) attention enhances processes in the area that one is attending to, and (3) attention facilitates access to awareness (see Fernandez-Duque & Johnson, 1999, for a more complete list of typical features attributed to attention). One might think of these shared features as forming a literal notion of attention that any attention theory has to account for. But notice that such a literal notion is far too sparse in structure to guide research by itself, even though it constrains the space of adequate source domains. It is the different metaphors that actually shape the research programs. However, brought together by overlapping research paradigms and a history of shared questions, scientists have tended to see themselves as all studying “attention.”

So, do the phenomena of attention exist independent of the metaphors? The answer generated by our analysis is both ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ Yes, there are indeed observable behaviors that occur regardless of scientists’ conceptualization of them. However, the answer is ‘no,’ once we acknowledge the constitutive role of metaphor in defining what counts as attention and how attentional phenomena are individuated and described. Thus, there are no theory-independent, metaphor-independent, phenomena of attention as such. This can be seen clearly in the way the Spotlight metaphor establishes a new set of structural relations that become part of the target domain. In the source domain -- the domain of vision -- there is a spotlight that gives off light that permits someone to see something. The first thing to notice is that none of these entities or acts exist independently in the target domain. Although there are metaphorical counterparts in

the target domain for each of these aspects, there are no literal similarities between the entities in the source domain and those in the target. There is not, literally, light in the target domain. There is not, literally, a person who sees in the target domain. Instead, scientists use their knowledge of the source domain entities and operations to develop a parallel knowledge structure for the target domain (attention). The metaphor does not create new physical entities connected with the phenomena of attention, but it does tell researchers what the phenomena are, thereby creating entities in their understanding and conceptualization of attention. The reasoning scientists do about the workings of attention is shaped by their knowledge of the source domain structure. As we have seen, given the cross-domain mapping, we expect to find certain things in the target domain that follow from what we know about the corresponding entities in the source domain. Within the Spotlight metaphor, we understand, conceptualize, and reason about attention via what we know about the way light illuminates objects in visual fields.

A typical skeptical response to such strong constitutive claims is that scientists are aware of the limitations of their metaphors, and so they do not, and need not, take their metaphors seriously as being constitutive of their knowledge. According to this view, researchers explicitly acknowledge that the use of a metaphor does not entail that the object of study and its counterpart share all their features. LaBerge (1995) reminds us that “one problem . . . [of the spotlight metaphor] . . . is that properties of the device may be inappropriately included in the model, along with features that do usefully describe how attention operates...” (p. 38).

Obviously, no researcher believes that attention is literally a spotlight. However, as we have just argued, scientists cannot conduct their research independent of such metaphors. Scientists choose research topics, identify phenomena that need to be explained, frame their research hypotheses, understand the phenomena, and interpret their findings under the guidance of the Spotlight metaphor, the Limited Resource metaphor, the Biased Competition metaphor, or

some other conceptual metaphor. The logic of our understanding of attention is the logic of such metaphors.

The crucial point is this: It is not as though scientists simply know what attention is, independent of their metaphorical understanding of it. There may be some structure in the target domain prior to the metaphorical conceptualization of it and there are observed behaviors to be explained. However, we don't have any idea about how to circumscribe and to think about those phenomena -- how to carve them up and reason about them -- without guidance from some metaphor mapping or other.

This point is overlooked by those who see no essential role for metaphor in scientific reasoning. They suppose that, without metaphors, we know exactly what the phenomena are that we want to study, how to individuate the relevant entities, and what needs to be explained about these entities. But this is simply not the case. Try, for example, to think in any serious way, beyond the most thin and elementary notion, about attention without the Spotlight metaphor, the Limited Resource metaphor, or some other set of metaphors. It can't be done, at least not in any way that really furthers our knowledge of the subject. Any literal concept you might try to frame about attention will be too under-specified to generate the actual understanding and reasoning people do about attention. So, while metaphors don't bring 'attention' into existence, they are constitutive of our very concept of attention and of what we can know about it. This is the sense in which they are constitutive, indispensable, and irreducible.

Metaphors do not act in isolation—they are not the whole story of scientific understanding. Instead, they are immersed within an ecology of scientific and social practices. Technical advances, cultural influences, and empirical data all work together to constrain how the metaphors are used. For example, empirical data have influenced the evolution of scientific metaphors, in some cases confirming, and in others challenging the predictions entailed by the

metaphor. Mathematical and computational simulations, in their quest for internal consistency, have imposed their own constraints on how metaphors are interpreted. Science is influenced by many forces other than metaphor, and scientific theories are not an exact reiteration of their underlying metaphors.

Sometimes the existence of other forces is mistakenly taken as evidence against the constitutive role of metaphors in science. Critics argue that while metaphors are important for the process of discovery, mature theories will use only mathematics and formal logic, thereby transcending metaphor. Someone who thinks of psychology as an immature science might argue that, should psychology finally come of age, all of this metaphorical thinking would be replaced with rigorous neuro-computational and mathematical models. On this view, the use of metaphor in science is thought to be merely an intermediate stage on the way to literal scientific truth about the mind. But this is false for several reasons. First, such a literalist view ignores the fact that conceptual metaphors and other structures of imagination are characteristic of abstract conceptualization and reasoning in general (Gibbs, 1996). Over the past two decades there has emerged in the cognitive sciences a substantial body of research showing the central and indispensable role of conceptual metaphor in many aspects of abstract conceptualization and reasoning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). So it should be no surprise that the structures of conceptualization and reasoning in the sciences will use the same cognitive mechanisms that are used in ordinary, everyday thinking. And those cognitive mechanisms include metaphors that structure our abstract concepts. Second, the idea that mature computational and mathematical theories of mind will not involve metaphor is mistaken, because mathematics is itself a massive interlocking system of metaphors (Lakoff & Núñez, 2000). And finally, even if it were the case (which it isn't) that mathematics consisted only of arbitrary symbols manipulated according to strictly algorithmic operations, any mathematics would be meaningless unless it could be

interpreted via mathematical ideas. Mathematical models would need to be interpreted as applying to models of mind. And it is here that metaphor would once again be relevant, as is evident in any actual model of the mind that uses mathematics.

The question of whether a scientific theory is structured by metaphors and other imaginative devices is an empirical question. It cannot be settled adequately by arguing from a priori philosophical assumptions about meaning, concepts, or rationality. It requires looking to see whether the concepts themselves, along with the inferences they support, are explainable via conceptual metaphor. In this paper we have given examples of one kind of analysis that is relevant to such an inquiry. Metaphor in scientific reasoning is a fact. It is the very means by which scientists pursue their hypotheses and make sense of things. It defines the relevant phenomena. It generates inferences and directions for research. It forms one important basis for scientific knowledge.

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' Although biological grounding has most frequently been explored by proponents of the competition models, it has also been successfully applied to Limited Resource models, where it has been proposed that “just as physical energy systems require resources, so do neural energy systems. It is the consumption of different types of resources that may be indexed by various metabolically based neuroimaging methods, including fMRI. Specifically, greater task demand translates into greater resource demand” (Carpenter et al., 1999, p. 18).