

50TH ANNIVERSARY ARTICLE

The Past, Present, and Future of Relation Perception

Alon Hafri¹ and Liuba Papeo^{2, 3}¹ Department of Linguistics and Cognitive Science, University of Delaware² Institute of Cognitive Sciences “Marc Jeannerod”—UMR 5229, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Bron, France³ Institute of Cognitive Sciences “Marc Jeannerod”, Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1

What kind of information does perception represent, and in what format? How does perception interface with higher-level cognitive systems for thinking, reasoning, and language? Questions like these motivated Green and Hummel in their seminal 2006 article in *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance (JEP:HPP)*, “Familiar Interacting Object Pairs Are Perceptually Grouped.” At first glance, the subject matter of Green and Hummel’s article appears quite simple and mundane: actions like pouring coffee, cutting bread, or unlocking a door. Yet hidden at the core of such everyday routines are specific functional relationships between objects, such as a carafe and a mug, a knife and a loaf, or a key and a lock. Green and Hummel’s article was a turning point in a long but sparse tradition of research that had considered such relations from a vision-science perspective (e.g., Scholl & Tremoulet, 2000; Ullman, 1984), as it steered many researchers—ourselves included—to explore questions in the burgeoning field now known as “relation perception.” This field advances the idea that, beyond objects, features, and locations, the visual system spontaneously or automatically extracts and represents relations—properties that specify interactions or connections between objects, rather than each object’s individual characteristics. In this perspective article, we outline new aspects of human visual perception that have been the focus of this field and the major outstanding questions that remain.

While relations had long been emphasized in work on language and cognition (e.g., Landau & Jackendoff, 1993; Miller & Johnson-Laird, 1976; Talmy, 1985; *inter alia*), Green and Hummel recognized that the

visual system might play a crucial role in inferring relational information from scenes (Green & Hummel, 2003). Indeed, the connection between perception and cognition is what initially drew us to their work. While studying issues related to the representation of events in language (Trueswell et al., 2012) and semantics (Papeo et al., 2012, 2015), we independently stumbled upon Green and Hummel’s research, which led us to suspect that cognitive event representations might have precursors in visual processing.

In Green and Hummel’s (2006) article, four experiments showed that functional relations between objects—the spatial arrangement of two familiar objects relative to one another—affected object identification. In a word picture verification task, adult participants saw an object label (e.g., “glass”), followed by a central line drawing of one object for 50 ms, a 50-ms blank, and then another object to the left or right for 50 ms. Participants had to report whether the second object matched the label. The key manipulation was the spatial positioning of the objects: they were either arranged to suggest a common goal/function (e.g., a pitcher tilted toward a glass) or not (e.g., a pitcher tilted away). Results showed that object identification was more accurate when the objects were in a functional configuration. Follow-up experiments indicated that this effect was exquisitely sensitive to timing (disappearing at a stimulus-onset asynchrony of 250 ms), and was independent of attentional cueing (arising regardless of object order) and subjective expectations (remaining even when the label followed the objects). Green and Hummel’s work suggested that as soon as observers saw the objects, they also saw the relations between them, provoking the intriguing idea that the representation of higher-level relations—the foundation of human thinking and reasoning—is rooted in perception.¹

Green and Hummel’s seminal article has inspired a wealth of empirical literature, much of which has appeared in *JEP:HPP* (e.g., Nah & Geng, 2022; O’Donnell et al., 2018; Papeo & Abassi, 2019; Riddoch et al., 2011; Roberts & Humphreys, 2010; S. Xu et al., 2015; Yoon et al., 2010), and has been highlighted in several review articles on this topic (Hafri & Firestone, 2021; Kaiser et al., 2019; Oliva & Torralba, 2007; Papeo, 2020; Peelen et al., 2024). Using the tools of vision science, researchers in this field have begun to unveil the precise ways that the visual system represents relations. For example, while

Isabel Gauthier served as action editor.

Liuba Papeo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3056-8679>

This research was funded in whole, or in part, by the European Commission (EC) (Grant THEMPO-758473). For the purpose of open access, the authors have applied a CC BY public copyright license to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

Liuba Papeo was supported by a European Research Council Grant (Project THEMPO-758473).

Liuba Papeo served as lead for conceptualization, funding acquisition, project administration, resources, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing. Alon Hafri served as lead for conceptualization, funding acquisition, project administration, resources, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Liuba Papeo, Institute of Cognitive Sciences “Marc Jeannerod”—UMR 5229, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 67 Boulevard Pinel, Bron 69675, France. Email: liuba.papeo@isc.cnrs.fr

¹ It is worth highlighting that the control manipulation (facing objects away from one another) was key for demonstrating that the experimental effects were due to relational processing per se and not to confounding factors (e.g., the presence of particular objects or the body postures in a social interaction).

early work assigned the encoding of relations (e.g., inside) to effortful visual routines operating “on demand” (when required by the task; e.g., Jolicoeur et al., 1991; McCormick & Jolicoeur, 1992; Ullman, 1984), the recent wave of work shows the automaticity and immediacy characteristic of typical perceptual processes (for color, shape, texture, etc.), at least for certain types of relations (Hafri & Firestone, 2021). Perhaps due to this automaticity and immediacy, certain relational representations afford distinct processing advantages to perceptual processes: familiar configurations of everyday objects (e.g., lamp above table) enhance detection of targets in cluttered scenes (Kaiser et al., 2014), increase memory capacity for objects (Gronau & Shachar, 2015; Kaiser et al., 2015; O'Donnell et al., 2018), and diminish the effects of visual extinction in patients (Riddoch et al., 2011). Similarly, in the social domain, two face-to-face people (seemingly interacting) are more likely to be detected under visual noise than the same individuals facing away from each other (Papeo et al., 2017, 2019; Vestner et al., 2019). These advantages extend broadly across visual processing, from early preattentive stages (Fu et al., 2024; Papeo et al., 2017; Z. Xu et al., 2023) to visual memory (Ding et al., 2017; Paparella & Papeo, 2022; Vestner et al., 2019). Relational representations also appear to be domain-specific, recruiting distinct visual brain areas for encoding relations between animate entities and inanimate objects (Abassi & Papeo, 2022, 2024; Wurm et al., 2017).

Other findings suggest that visual relational information is structured (distinguishing between, e.g., woman pushes man and man pushes woman; Hafri et al., 2018; Papeo et al., 2024; Vettori et al., 2024), categorical (showing greater sensitivity to differences across than within category, e.g., containing vs. touching; Ji & Scholl, 2024; Lovett & Franconeri, 2017), and relatively abstract (applying to different instances of the same relation; Hafri et al., 2024; Papeo et al., 2024). This implies that many perceptual representations of relations are not purely imagistic but share characteristics with a “language-of-thought” (Hafri, 2024; Hafri, Green, & Firestone, 2023; Papeo et al., 2024; Quilty-Dunn et al., 2023), perhaps facilitating the transition from perceptual to cognitive systems (Cavanagh, 2021; Quilty-Dunn, 2020; for empirical evidence see, De Freitas & Alvarez, 2018; De Freitas & Hafri, 2024; Hafri, Gleitman, et al., 2023)—an insight presaged by Green and Hummel (2003) themselves.

A main challenge for this research field is to isolate perception from the rest of cognition. Traditionally it has been assumed that perception primarily represents lower-level content such as motion, color, or texture (Tye, 1997); however, the possibility that perception also represents higher-level relational content implies that the sophistication of a representation's content alone is insufficient for determining whether a representation “counts” as perceptual. Thus, work in relation perception has gone hand in hand with the development of original paradigms (Hafri et al., 2018; Papeo et al., 2017, 2019; Z. Xu et al., 2023) and the delineation of empirical signatures (Hafri & Firestone, 2021; Scholl & Gao, 2013) to isolate perceptual processes from cognitive ones. To the degree that this work has succeeded in placing relational representations in the purview of visual perception, it suggests a reevaluation of the sophistication, computational goals, and representational format of perception. This new work will also have to clarify which levels of visual processing are involved; that is, whether relation representations emerge in mid-level vision (in the form of object files and structures; Pylyshyn, 2007), in high-level vision (where contents such as object and relational categories are specified), or across distinct levels for different aspects of relations.

Stepping back, Green and Hummel's article foreshadowed nearly 20 years of advances in perception research that has made progress in answering some of the questions that motivated their original article. This growing body of work has demonstrated that visual processing furnishes relational representations that are structured, abstract, and uniquely suited to interface with higher level systems of language and thought. In doing so, this research has set the stage for addressing key unanswered questions. For example, are there “primitive” relational categories (e.g., next-to, cause, or socially interact)? If so, how do more complex relational representations develop (e.g., those taking place between more than two entities; Fratino et al., 2022; Yin et al., 2022), and under what conditions are these perceived? Could it be that only some relations, such as those highlighted above, are extracted immediately, automatically, and effortlessly, whereas relation perception in general tends to be slower, deliberate, and effortful (e.g., green is to the left of red; Franconeri et al., 2012; Logan, 1995; Roth & Franconeri, 2012; Ullman, 1984; Yuan et al., 2016)? Or perhaps some relations, even if spontaneous, depend on time-intensive visual routines to extract (e.g., tracing a maze; Wong & Scholl, 2024)? Does acquiring words for relational categories fundamentally alter perceptual representations, or are they relatively insulated from higher-level knowledge and beliefs (Firestone & Scholl, 2016)? Which aspects are shared with our phylogenetic relatives, and which are uniquely human (Goupil et al., 2024; Zanon et al., 2024)? How does the brain accommodate the abstract and structured format of these representations? We believe that relation perception will remain a central topic in *JEP:HPP* for the next 50 years, and we are excited to continue playing a role in this field.

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Received September 6, 2024

Revision received January 13, 2025

Accepted January 13, 2025 ■