

Conceptual blending

The goal of this video is to introduce the concept of conceptual blending or conceptual integration.

Conceptual blending or conceptual integration is an approach developed by the cognitive linguists Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner in their book *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (2002). It deals with dynamic meaning creation and comprehension in different realms of written, spoken, and multimodal communication and action. Blending theory is related to *Mental Space Theory*. The main assumption is that when thinking, talking, and interacting we use utterances in which we build conceptual domains or **mental spaces**. Meaning emerges in the interaction of elements, roles, values, and relations that inhabit these mental spaces. Mental spaces are either ontological domains (for instance, reality or dream) or representations of the “world” of an entity or concept (for instance, a person or location). Our minds seemingly effortlessly build up meaning through the construction, connection, and integration of these mental spaces. For instance, the statement *John is probably in love with Mary* implies two mental spaces: the base space with the roles of “John” and “Mary” and a hypothetical mental space (the possibility space), in which John is in love with Mary.

Conceptual blending is a special case of mental space configurations, and it is claimed to be responsible for the complexity of our thinking and our creativity. Blending is a dynamic process. It is typically graphically represented by conceptual integration networks that make the process look somewhat static. The network prototypically includes four spaces: two input spaces, the emergent blend, and a generic space that provides a common structure: information that is abstract enough for both, or all, inputs. We establish connections between the input spaces based on matched elements pertaining to identity and role, or on metaphorical links. We selectively project some elements from the input spaces into the blended space. The unique feature of the blend is its emergent properties: new elements in the emergent blend cannot be found in the inputs. What emerges in the blended space is something new, more than what we put in.

An everyday example of concrete blending of two ingredients to get a third, new one is when we blend a mango and yoghurt to get a smoothie. The mango and yoghurt occupy our input spaces. Their features are the elements in these spaces. For input space 1, the features are: fruit, fleshy drupe, orangish-yellow, sweet, pulpy, juicy; for eating. For input 2, the features are: dairy, white; slightly sour; creamy; for eating. In our network, we establish connections

between the input spaces: we connect texture, color, taste, and purpose. The smoothie, the result in the blended space, is definitely new: its color is new, its taste is new, and its texture is new.

Processes crucial for the new, emergent structure in the blended space are *composition*, *completion*, and *elaboration*. *Composition* is based on the selective projection of elements from the input spaces onto the new established mental space, the blend. Counterparts from the inputs are mapped onto the blend either as separate items or as a fusion.

Completion implies recruitment of well-entrenched background knowledge, and using scenarios and frames from background experience. Completion is a metonymic process because elements projected from the input spaces into the blended space serve as vehicles for the recruitment of much broader knowledge from the cognitive domain that they were part of. Some elements that were not originally in the inputs can become part of the blend.

Elaboration develops the blend further by imaginative mental simulation performed in accordance with the principles that emerged during the composition and completion. Creating new inferences or introducing new concepts to the blend lead to its further elaboration (see Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 49). The elaboration of the blend may be performed indefinitely. *Composition*, *completion*, and *elaboration* lead to the creation of an emergent structure in the integration network. That structure produces entities and situations that are not present in the input spaces, but are unique to the blend and provides the blend with new inferences that are otherwise not available.

A smoothie is a very concrete blend with a clear visual dimension. What we do in other blends does not have to be so visual, but the process described is in principle what we do when we create blends of different kinds, such as *brunch*, which is a conceptual and phonological blend. The lexical blending illustrated by *brunch* is a creative and productive strategy of coining new words.

Conceptual blends have been examined in language for specific purposes, ranging from marketing to humor and journalism. Blending theory is a developing and thriving strand of cognitive linguistics and cognitive poetics. It has been successfully applied to the analysis of poetic discourse and micro-textual elements, such as metaphor. From the perspective of conceptual integration, a variety of issues in narratology have been fruitfully studied, such as time and space, genre, counterfactual narration, and literary character (see Schneider and Hartner 2012).

Literary characters in stories often inhabit a few mental spaces (see, e.g., Semino 2006), and these mental spaces may clash—for instance, an “actual” space with a character,

his family, and a broader community, and an alternative space created by the character's inclination to fantasize or consider alternatives. In the actual space, the character may not be accepted, and in the space created by his counterfactual thinking he may be fully integrated and accepted. The character may live in the blend of the two spaces, whereby the blend absorbs the differences between the inputs. The contrast between the inputs is compressed in the blend, and this space may become the most robust and "realistic" one.

Conceptual blending is according to Fauconnier (1994) a basic mental operation that leads to new meaning and plays a fundamental role in the construction of meaning in everyday life, and in the arts and sciences. It successfully explains the dynamic meaning construction in many real-life and highly creative examples alike, be them metaphorical or non-metaphorical.

References

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