



Culture, Language and Idiomaticity

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Abstract. The paper describes how conceptual blending (in other words conceptual integration) operates, and it provides insight into the cultural aspects of language use. It also focuses on four basic forms of this mental operation: simplex, mirror, single-scope and double-scope. All are important cognitive operations, but especially double-scope integration is said to have played a crucial role in the development of human thinking. The study illustrates conceptual integration through examples of idiomatic blends and explains what differences and similarities can be observed between blending and other cognitive operations, such as metaphor and metonymy.

Keywords: conceptual integration, culture, metaphor, metonymy, blending

1. Introduction

The beginning of language use is one of the highly-debated issues in linguistics. Some nativists (Pinker and Bloom) say, based on evidence from neurobiological and linguistic research that, similarly to Darwin's theory of evolution, language aptitude also took a long time to evolve (estimated around 50,000 years). This view is discarded by other nativists (Chomsky and others), claiming that language emerged in dramatic and sudden changes owing to a genetically-coded language module. In their view, language faculty is unlike other human capacities (as argued in Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 172).

Whichever line of reasoning is right, language, in the form it is known today, is the result of extensive changes through mental operations manifested in the form of metaphor, metonymy and conceptual integration, or, in other words, blending.

Conceptual integration is present and active at all levels of cognition, and is the precondition of language use. It is vital for construing even simple ideas and involves the compression of images from two or more different mental spaces into one. It consists of four elements: two input spaces, a generic space highlighting the shared or common elements of the two input spaces, and the blend offering an emergent structure not included in the inputs.

2. Networks of conceptual integration

Conceptual integration is not a unidirectional and one-sided process. It requires complex mental operations to blend input information into an emergent structure and this compression yields a unique result. In terms of language use, out of the many, four basic integration networks are discussed in this paper: simplex, mirror, single-scope and double-scope integration.

Very briefly, **simplex** is a network suitable for the compression of prototypical scenarios such as human relations. For instance, possessive structures, such as “Joan is Mary’s mother”, a prototypical scenario can be expressed in the more general format “X is the Y of Z”. Surprisingly, it is of compositional nature and truth-functional. In addition, it is ideal for compressing roles (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 120).

Mirror-integration is ideal for integrating different spaces in a blend. The major components of various scenarios can be paralleled and compared, while selective projection excludes irrelevant traits of blending. For instance, *integrating* races or events through different spaces and times is a concomitant of a sports reporter’s summary of record-breaking events. We can visualize two or more competitors in the blend as if they were racing side by side and can rank them according to their results. This manifestation of input-integration provides shared generic information between the various scenarios. For instance, an Afro-American athlete set up the world record of long-jump decades ago and his result could not be surpassed by anyone. Through imaginative activity one can run the blend and create a scene involving participants that could not have competed with each other due to time and space constraints. Vital relations such as Time, Space, Identity and so on are *compressed* in mirror-integration and clashes at low level can be observed (for example, the various means or conditions of racing: competing at high-altitude instead of ordinary conditions).

Single-scope integrations have different organizing frames and align metaphors, where the framing or source input activates the focus or target input as it happens in the case of “*stay in the saddle*”, where two mental spaces are

integrated – riding and status. The riding frame, that is the source input involves keeping your balance as a rider, while the focus input includes discrete events such as proving your skills, meeting requirements, competing with others and so on. In the blend, the image of a leader/competitor emerges. Finally, the framing input is projected to the blend, and the events in the focus input are conceptually integrated into a unit with the emergent concept of *position*.

Double-scope integration involves inputs with different organizing frames and an organizing frame for the blend including information from each of those frames and has an emergent structure of its own. The differences in the organizing frames allow for rich clashes challenging the imagination, whereby the blends are highly creative. The idiomatic metaphor “*roll in one’s grave*”, for instance, actually focuses on moral, ethical issues and refers to latent causal links. Unlike the traditional scenario where a dead person is criticized and cannot retort in any way, the idiom projects the image of the dead reacting vividly. In other words, the traits of the living are assumed by the dead.

The physiological functions and emotional responses of a living person in one of the inputs (understanding the charges of someone from the real world and reacting to them), are blended with the unresponsive, lifeless remains of the dead person that cannot give a suitable answer to the criticism, whereby the sequence of events is reversed: the dead person revives, and is yet stranded between the world of the living and the dead. “It” retains capacities of the past (‘rolling’, as a sign of ‘being *shocked*’, which involves physical motion and emotional response) as well as preserves the location of the present self (the grave). Reactions are restrained and limited to physical motion, but verbal reactions are not feasible. In the blend, physical motion emerges with conceptuality: vivid body motion is a concomitant of strong emotional response, *shock*.

As the topologies of the two inputs ([latent] verbal-cause versus shock) clash, an emergent structure suggests that mapping the world of the living onto the world of the dead may lead to emergent concepts.

This mapping of the frame input over the target input offers a rich blend where two worlds are compressed to create a go-between. It is the causal trigger of the present that leads to the emergent structure constituting the integration. The blend is richer than the two input spaces, but we only understand the workings of the blend by decompressing it. This form of deblending makes us understand how rich conceptual integration can derive from seemingly simple inputs and how far-reaching the consequences of the process are.

And that is what it is all about. By blending, deblending, reblending, compressing and decompressing we gain novel approaches to brain-functioning, enriching language and using the potentials of our mind to reproduce intelligibility and clarity. In terms of pragmatic aspects, language does accept images and

utterances about the dead rolling in their graves associated with *shock* caused by discrete activities or events.

As far as cultural aspects are concerned, Fauconnier and Turner (2002: 246) point out that “cultures find it efficient to evolve compressions that can be easily transmitted. On the one hand, cultures want to channel thought so as to block off large ranges of possible double-scope integrations”. For instance, the writers call the traffic light “a material anchor” for a complex compression. This “governing solution” has been introduced to ward off the possibility of vehicles colliding, which emerges from the decompressed form exhibiting a variety of mental spaces where vehicles with different kinds of drivers at different speeds go through the intersection.

In evaluating the role of culture, Kövecses (2006: 85) remarks that culture can be thought of as “a complex network of frames”. He adds that when cultural issues are argued about they can be framed in different ways.

The following examples (quoted from Gyula Dávid, *A Conceptual Idioms Dictionary*, D.U.P. and Gyula Dávid, *A Concise Conceptual Idioms Dictionary*, forthcoming) below offer insight into idiomatic metaphoric blends.

3. Idiomatic metaphors

As blends operate at all levels of cognition from simplex networks to double scope integration, they are manifest in all parts of the language. The examples below illustrate the complexity of conceptual integration and the way lexical items are blended.

Take the idiomatic metaphor ‘*paper tiger*’. It is common knowledge that tigers are fierce, strong animals. Here, a blend is construed that combines the features of paper (weak, offering no resistance when exposed to impact, etc.), while ignoring other irrelevant traits (inanimate, white, flat, foldable, easy to crease, containing cellulose, inflammable, suitable for writing, etc.). At the same time, due to selective projection, irrelevant features of the tiger do not emerge in the blend either (furry, striped, able to purr, living on flesh, hunting, rearing or producing cubs, mating regularly, savage, territorial, etc.). The blend offers a counterfactual scenario, ‘*missing power*’. The two input spaces clash, since in input space 1 the properties of ‘paper’ are diagonal opposites of the properties of a ‘tiger’ of input space 2. The compression yields the metaphorical image of someone or something powerless. The disanalogy between tiger properties and paper properties undoubtedly creates a very challenging image, the mapping of weakness over the well-known strength of a tiger. Whatever or whoever is targeted at in this mapping process, they are ineffective, powerless and helpless in spite of the expectations.

Another idiom, ‘*back from the dead*’, sets up a scenario to blend the potentials of the living with the missing potentials of the dead. This compression of the two

mental spaces (one of the LIVING and the other of the DEAD), in fact, offers a counterfactual situation and its ramifications. Here, one of the input spaces includes a set of features characteristic of the living. Making a journey is part of the daily scenarios we experience, be it either simple commuting or a time-consuming pleasure trip. However, the blend features neither, but an involuntary and fatal trip to one's destination (DEATH).

Another peculiarity of the scenario is that in normal conditions reaching your destination at the end of a journey is a desired goal, whereas here it is not. In fact, the 'passenger' loses vitality and his or her life by the end of the journey. At the same time, the 'return trip', a counterfactual one, projects the image of the dead regaining vitality and reacquiring capacities of the living. Only the return trip is given priority, whereas the previous leg of the journey is a prerequisite of the return trip. The journey to DEATH involves lack of intentionality, reduced activity and consciousness, while the return trip is its opposite, where the agent reaches top form by the time of reaching the destination. The blend is as striking as is suitable for the metaphorical mapping of a scenario where one regains *popularity*, *fame* or achieves *success* after a period of inactiveness or lack of limelight. DEATH is traditionally associated with FAILURE, whereby an imaginary journey back from DEATH is a sign of returning to SUCCESS.

The scenario of the idiomatic metaphor '*score an own goal*', looks a single-scope network, but it is not, as the topologies of the inputs clash on intentionality, causality, identity, participant roles and internal event structure. The blend takes its topology from the "*opposite effect*" input and not from the "score a goal" input. According to a "normal scenario", two opposing teams attempt to score a goal or goals into each other's net. Traditionally, the higher the number of scores, the bigger likelihood a team has to win the match. Time is conventionally pre-determined, as are the number of players, place, colours of outfits, the length of two halftimes, the identity of the referee and linesmen, the number and identity of players to replace the ones on the pitch, and a set of rules to be observed all throughout the match. The events evoked by '*dig your own grave*', another idiom, and '*score an own goal*' both feature scenarios of unintentional, self-inflicted acts which borrow entrenched mappings. The blends themselves may become entrenched too by virtue of recruiting mappings of similar content. The scenario shared by both conceptual integrations is that actions implemented by the "patient" (the one who scores an own goal) instead of the "agent" for the "agent's" advantage are harmful for the "patient". It is a boomerang-effect scenario.

In the blend, the game becomes hypothetical, and the factors listed above are irrelevant through selective projection. What we have is the image of an agent acting against his own interest. The intention of an opposing player is fused with the unaware, unintentional, self-inflicting, harm-causing act of a member of the home team. It is foolish to cause oneself harm just as it is to score a goal into one's

own net. Contrary to the rule-book of a sporting event, this own-goal, which might be equalized by the other team in normal circumstances, seems an all-out one, putting an end to the game. Preceding events as well as time are irrelevant, as is the causal chain of scoring goals into the other team's net leading to their defeat. The conventional scoring-system of three points for a match won, and the potentials of having to win further matches to come out on top of the league are invalid through selective projection.

In this unconventional scenario, the blunder of someone, turning into their own opponent, simplifies the whole complexity of the event and compresses 'patient' and 'agent' into one and the same person (and in fact, they become the same through a mistake). However, the dramatic scenario only unfolds when the blend is decompressed. The integration of events in the blend preserves its links to events in the two input spaces. Running the blend merges two scenarios: scoring an own goal leads to losing a match just like causing unintentional harm to yourself leads to your doom or *failure*. The fusion leads to a dramatic change: just one wrong act in a sporting event evokes irrevocable failure and harm. The identity of "causer" changes (the 'causer' and 'patient' are identical), and the event-structure and complexity of a match is merged into one "singularity". A global insight into our deeds is gained through compressing two input spaces in a creative way: the sporting event serves as a launch-pad for unfolding cause and effect.

Another idiomatic metaphor, '*Eat humble pie*' offers a compact frame for us to understand the workings of an idiomatic metaphor within a single-scope network. The framing input, or "source" provides an organizing frame to the blend. The other input, that is the focus input, is the target in the network.

Two events are integrated in the blend: eating and '*admission of a fault*'. The latter is imagined as part of the eating process, which normally consists of discrete events of selecting food, biting, chewing, pre-digesting, digesting and so on. These components of the source input constituting the whole act of eating, however, are considered irrelevant in the blend and are omitted through selective projection. In the blend, 'admission of fault' is seen as 'eating' being 'humbled' by eating or rather by admitting your own faults.

Similarly, the idiomatic metaphor '*swallow your pride*' integrates two input spaces: 'eating' as source, and '*acceptance*'. In the former input space, not the whole eating process is highlighted, but a part of it, "enforced swallowing" of food one does not feel like eating. Selection of food, chewing, digesting and several other components of eating are not important due to selective projection, so several discrete events involved in the process of eating are irrelevant. In the blend, *acceptance* is viewed as "enforced swallowing of food".

4. Metaphor and blending

As is remarked by Evans and Green (2006: 401-2) some seemingly metaphorical examples cannot be explained by applying the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. For instance, in *'That surgeon is a butcher'*, the negative aspects of a butcher's job cannot be derived from the source domain, and the question is how this "negative assessment of incompetence arises from conceptualizing one highly-skilled profession in terms of another".

As was pointed out above, blending is pervasive in language and so is metaphor. Then what major distinctions can be observed between them?

1/ Metaphors rely on mappings from the source domain to the target domain (Kövecses 1990, 2000, 2002). As opposed to this, conceptual integration operates through input spaces, a generic space and the blend with an emergent structure. Blends can be debleneded, which is necessary for seeing the information in the input spaces and for understanding how the emergent structure is enriched. Metaphor employs domains whereas a blend at least four spaces. Metaphors can be either one-scope or double-scope blends, as presented by *'score an own goal'*, but not all metaphors are blends. Joseph Grady's (1997) primary ones are not, as they are based on concepts rather than different domains.

2/ In contrast with the unidirectionality of metaphorical mapping, blending involves compression/decompression, blending/deblending and the richness of the emergent blend can be seen when it is projected back to the input spaces.

3/ In blending, an emergent structure appears in the blend, which is richer than the information in the inputs. *Composition* of the information in the inputs makes it possible to run the blends.

As Coulson (2001: 201) points it out, "conceptual integration networks represent only those cognitive models that are particularly relevant to the mapping supported by the utterance. What's projected in metaphor is not static information in long-term memory, but dynamically constructed entities in working memory".

Let us see now another mental operation, metonymy, compared to blending.

5. Blending and metonymy

In the *'roll in one's grave'* blend, the grave has the topology of being linked to death. In terms of metonymic relationship it expresses 'place for event' or, in terms of topology, 'a place for burial'. The role of the metonymy in the blend is important, as it establishes connections with the Death space. It actually represents a prototypical metonymic link with death by denoting the place where one is traditionally buried.

Untypically, however, many are not buried into graves, when killed in a plane-crash over the sea or being swept off Mount Everest by a gale-force wind.

And yet, symbolically, it is the grave that establishes a link between the world of the living and that of the dead. It is culture that prescribes the acceptable scenario for the mourning relatives and friends: the dead are to be put into coffins and graves. In other cultures, for example Hinduism, it is the ashes of the dead that link the past and the present.

Death has other metonymic connections as well, such as the *skull* or the *skeleton*, which establish the ‘body part for event’ metonymy. However, in the scenario described above they are not present. As we can see, several metonymic relationships can be prioritized in language. The *skeleton*, as the metonymic expression of the Death input, has important topology by shocking and reminding us of the deceased. Thus, the *skull*, the *skeleton* as reminders of death, and the *grave* as final resting-place of the deceased are associated with Death through a metonymic relationship.

Another idiomatic metaphor, *stay in the saddle*, analysed above, also presents a metonymic connection by being ‘equipment for position’. Although other metonymies could also be linked to riding a horse, topologically a ‘saddle’ is salient in referring to power games. Obviously, the integration of the input spaces only provides an opportunity for one acceptable metonymy.

6. Conclusion

At the end of the blending process, and the manifestation of the emergent structure, deblending is necessary to facilitate understanding the workings of blending and develop our skills of creating further blends. It allows for seeing the two (or in the case of megablends more) input spaces, which contribute to an emergent structure. Thus, blending adds to the information available, enriches it, and, in this respect, differs from other mental operations.

Conceptual integration (blending) is an important means of seeing the world, using imaginative power for both a child and an adult. The former is still in the experimental stage understanding a whole array of blends, whereas the latter keeps carrying out blending, deblending, compressing and decompressing more consciously.

Culture, and its essential element, language, draw from conceptual integration, which appears both in seemingly simple compounds such as ‘safe beach’, ‘safe knife’ and so on, and in more complex idiomatic expressions, too (*roll in one’s grave*, *score an own goal*, etc.). Blending enriches the world of other cognitive operations available (e.g. metaphor, metonymy) and contributes to human development on the whole.

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