Lexical Blending: Opening a Window on the Nature of the Morpheme

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Lexical blends make up a notable portion of the continual flood of neologisms emerging in English. Speakers produce and interpret lexical blends every day, and the sheer number of coinages has made exhaustive collection virtually impossible. With my students I have constructed a database of neologisms containing several thousand lexical blends. They include proper nouns like *Zootopia* (< *zoo* and *utopia*), blends for newly conventionalized concepts, e.g. *mansplaining* 'patronizing explanations by a man to a woman on subject she knows more of than he' (< *man* and *explainin*g), and *threadjack* 'to sidetrack or take over an internet discussion thread by deliberately introducing a distracting, emotion-laden, but minimally relevant post' (*thread* and *hijack*). There are also a vast number of humorous nonce blends such as *meowt* ([cat] crying to go out, < *meow* and *out).* Blends can no longer be dismissed as marginal to or even outside of the system of English word formation (as claimed in Bauer 1988:39).

Our knowledge of blends in English and other languages has recently been advanced in empirical range, methodology, and theoretical issues (Gries 2004, Lepic 2016, Renner et al. 2012). Building on [author] (2003) and more recent work, and using the database mentioned above, I describe the formal and functional characteristics of English blends using Cognitive Grammar, positing cognitive mechanisms for the integration of formal and semantic information. It is shown how different blend formation types relate to one another and to the processes closest to them, notably compounding and affixation. The constructional aspects of lexical blends are described, e.g. the way a blend can generate a whole family of blends via a gradually crystallizing constructional template. The analysis is brief but points to an account that is empirically well-grounded, consistent with what is known of cognitive and social processes involved in creation, interpretation, and propagation of linguistic units, and also general enough to accommodate the various types of blends naturally and integrally, despite their heterogeneity and distinctive properties.

Following from the analysis, I argue that the sub-morphemic word parts in blends are not qualitatively different from morphemes. In fact, once we see morphemes and non-morphemic elements as ranging along a cline of symbolic units, we find a natural account of the special properties of blends and a basis for integrating them into linguistic theory, along with other non- prototypical meaningful units such as phonaesthemes and the partially integrated loanwords found wherever languages come into contact. I note some significant methodological and theoretical challenges still to solve, and suggest that the study of blends gives insight into the cognitive and social processes involved in the creation, learning, spread, and change of new lexemes.

References
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