Conceptual Blending as a Source of Creativity in Constructions

Mark Turner
Institute Professor and Professor of Cognitive Science, Case Western Reserve University
turner@case.edu

Human beings are confronted by a fundamental problem: conceptual systems are vast and rich and open-ended, while linguistic systems, impressive though they be, are relatively quite thin. How can a linguistic system be used to convey the products of conceptual systems, and how can these products find expression in language, given the stark mismatch in their respective infinities? If forms of language had to represent complete meanings, language could communicate very little. The evolutionary solution to this problem is to have systems of forms prompt for the construction of meanings that go far beyond anything like the form itself. Accordingly, despite these limits on linguistic structure, language can be put to use in any situation. We refer to the availability of language to be deployed in all situations as its "equipotentiality." For any situation, real or imaginary, there is always a way to use language to express thoughts about that situation. The key to linguistic equipotentiality is blending (Fauconnier & Turner 1996, 2002; Turner 2014). Because of blending, most expression of new ideas does not require any new forms. Standard repurposing of forms through blending includes the following: (1) Through selective projection, expressions applied to an input can be projected unchanged to apply to counterparts in the blend, even when those counterparts are conceptually new. (2) Combinations of forms from the inputs may be appropriate for picking out structure in the blend even though those combinations are inappropriate for the inputs. In consequence, grammatical but meaningless phrases can become grammatical and meaningful for the blend. (3) Forms that do not typically blend may nonetheless be blended, creatively, under selective projection. Cognitively modern human beings are specialized for advanced blending, in which inputs that should never be confused, having fundamental conflicts in such basic elements as causal, intentional, participant, temporal, and spatial structure, and so on, are blended. Rarely, new grammar or lexical items do arise under pressure from conceptual blending.

Works Cited

Fauconnier, Gilles and Mark Turner. 1996. "Blending as a Central Process of Grammar." Adele Goldberg, ed. *Conceptual Structure, Discourse, and Language.* Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information (CSLI).

Fauconnier, Gilles and Mark Turner. 2002. *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. New York: Basic Books.

Goldberg, Adele. 1994. *Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Israel, Michael. 1996. "The *Way* Constructions Grow." Adele Goldberg, ed. *Conceptual Structure, Discourse and Language*. Stanford: CSLI, 217–230.

Perek, Florent. 2018. "Recent Change in the Productivity and Schematicity of the *Way*-Construction: A Distributional Semantic Analysis." *Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Theory* 14.1, 65–97.

Turner, Mark. 2014. *The Origin of Ideas: Blending, Creativity, and the Human Spark.* New York: Oxford University Press.