

Conceptual blending in advertising [☆]

Annamma Joy ^a, John F. Sherry Jr. ^{b,*}, Jonathan Deschenes ^{a,c}

^a *John Molson School of Business, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3G 1M8*

^b *Mendoza College of Business, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA*

^c *HEC, Montreal, Canada*

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Abstract

Conceptual blending occurs at the moment of perception and creates new meanings out of existing ways of thinking. Analysis of data collected in phenomenological interviews reveals the blending processes consumers use to “make sense” of advertisements. We recognize subtle similarities and differences between metaphor and blending, and examine their occurrence in three types of blending networks in ads.

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Fauconnier and Turner (2002) describe conceptual blending as a dynamic process that occurs at the moment of perception to create new meanings from existing ways of thinking. Blending is a common cognitive activity, closely related to analogy and metaphor (Fauconnier, 2001); it occurs in verbal and visual domains such as advertising, as well as in metaphoric and non-metaphoric contexts such as everyday language. In this paper we use the theory of conceptual blending to illustrate how consumers construct meanings from three ads that represent three types of blending networks.

Consumer researchers have paid scant attention to blending theory (BT). Joy and Sherry (2003) provided a partial description of this cognitive mechanism in their analysis of aesthetic experiences in museums. McQuarrie and Mick (1996, 1999) and Scott (1994) focused primarily on the function of metaphor and analogy but not on blending. These authors argue that visual images and verbal messages constitute culturally embedded forms or signs that combine in a specific manner to communicate meanings about brands. This research highlights the interconnectedness of semantic memory that allows con-

sumers to connect to a vast array of different experiences that have a recurring structure and to emphasize the fluid ways in which they connect different semantic concepts through the use of metaphor (Cornelissen, 2006).

In this paper, we explore how consumers harness conceptual blending to construct meanings. Although conceptual metaphor theory (MT) provides a wealth of information about the way people think, blending theory (BT) goes further accounting for the processes by which consumers create temporary and dynamic mental spaces and construct meanings within them. BT helps identify those images and words that have an immediate impact on consumers and inspire them to act. Although the terms “metaphor” and “blending” refer to different aspects of conceptualization, we argue that they are complementary.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) describe metaphor as a dynamic act of meaning construction involving movement from a source to a target domain. While MT generally deals with “stable knowledge structures represented in long-term memory,” BT describes “the dynamic evolution” of an individual’s unique representation. Weick (1989) favors the view of the unexpected and creative nature of metaphorical language (BT) rather than the usual ways of thinking about metaphors (MT), even though such patterns may exist within an organization. The assumption of directionality from source to target is problematic; metaphor comprehension involves more than a set of directional mappings. There is often an active combination and blending of information from target and source concepts.

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Joyjamyanna@yahoo.com (A. Joy), jsherry@nd.edu (J.F. Sherry).

For example, when someone says “I am in the dark on this issue,” the MT domains are vision (source) and knowledge (target). The mapping that occurs is based on one’s general knowledge of links and alignments between these two entrenched domains; “in the dark” prompts one to imagine darkness as a lack of awareness or lack of knowledge. In BT, the focus is not on the domains themselves but on the temporary mental spaces that they generate. In the “in the dark” example, Input Space 1 (taken from the domain of vision) allows us to develop a scenario of an individual (X) who is standing in the dark. Input Space 2 draws on the domain of knowledge in which an individual or group withholds information from the speaker (X1). The Generic Space contains the person who has been deprived of a particular stimulus. The Blended Space contains the situation where another individual or group is keeping the speaker in the dark. In the blend, X and X1 are one and the same; being in the dark refers to ignorance. Both input spaces contribute to the blend via the use of a generic space which creates a dynamic scenario (Grady et al., 1999) (see Fig. 1).

While we are concerned with the construction, completion and elaboration of meaning in BT, our focus is on the choices made by subjects during phenomenological interviews. It seems to us that Fauconnier and Turner (2002) recognize this issue only tangentially. Blending theory goes beyond typical understanding of cognitive processes using analogy and metaphor. How schemata change and are modified requires a more complex understanding of processes than that of the source-to-target domain mapping that is central to analogy and metaphor.

Construction of multiple temporary spaces to run simulations and create thought, using metaphors that encompass more than two concepts and the reversal of directionality, is central to our theory of the meaning-making process.

1. Metaphor

The ability to map structural elements from one domain onto another is a prerequisite of metaphor. A standard definition of metaphor is “a figure of speech by which a word or phrase is transferred in application from one object to another.” Traditional metaphor theory attempts to explain the mapping of attributes in terms of similarity or difference. The conceptual metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1999) demonstrates that metaphor is not just a figure of speech but a thoroughly embodied activity, generated by thought and imagination. Their insight makes possible a more abstract level of meaning because it unites two disparate domains and at the same time recognizes the asymmetry between them.

For example, the metaphor “Juliet is the sun” refers in general to Juliet’s happy disposition and warm nature, but more specifically to the fact that she is the center of Romeo’s universe. However, “her smile lights up the room,” moves away from conventional metaphor and makes an association between happiness and brightness — an entrenched conceptual association arising from correlations in experience. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) call such associations primary metaphors. Metaphors can be both verbal and non-verbal.

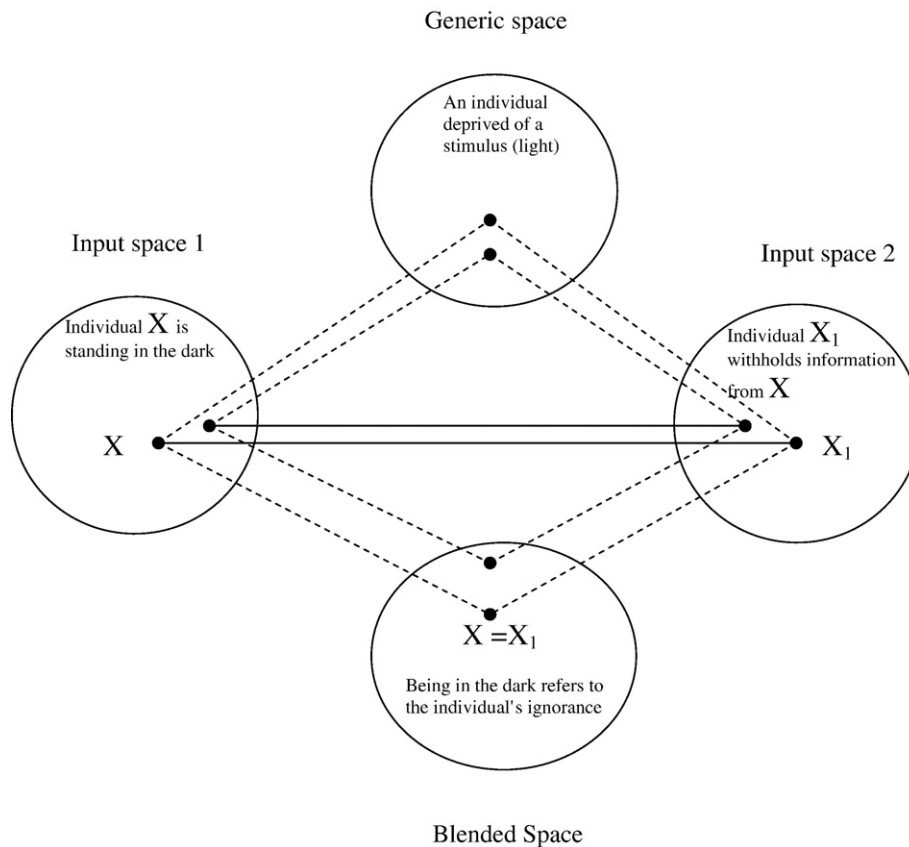


Fig. 1. “I am in the dark on this issue”.

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