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Over the past seven or eight years, Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner’s “Blending Theory” has attracted considerable attention from cognitive linguists. In sections of two previous books (Turner, 1996; Fauconnier, 1997) and in a number of jointly authored articles (e.g., Fauconnier & Turner 1998, 2000; Turner & Fauconnier, 1995), the authors explained the tenets of their theory using examples from a host of disciplines and socio-cultural environments. The International Cognitive Linguistics Conferences in Stockholm (1999) and Santa Barbara (2001) featured theme sessions on blending theory, other scholars started to publish in the field, and *Cognitive Linguistics* devoted a special issue to blending (Coulson & Oakley, 2000). Clearly, the authors deemed the time had come to collect and adapt their material for a “state-of-the-art” book, and they chose a title raising high expectations.

I have followed the blending theory discussions with sustained interest, but hitherto I have had mixed feelings about its import and usefulness. These remain after reading the book. In the following I will try to account for my hopes and disappointments.

The basics of blending theory are fairly straightforward. The underlying idea is that representations – language taking pride of place – reveal that people conceptualise by
constantly integrating information from different domains of knowledge and experience. As such, there is nothing shockingly new about this, as the authors are the first to admit. The idea of combining elements of the old to create something novel inspired the principle of the collage as theorized and practised by André Breton and the Surrealists, as well as the montage theory of Sergej Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and other Russian filmmakers of the 1920s. But what is new is that Fauconnier and Turner show that such collating, montaging, or blending does not reflect activities typically undertaken by artists and other creative minds, but are the bread and butter of everyday thinking. Moreover, they have built an attractively simple model that allows a range of hybrid phenomena in different media and disciplines to be analysed according to the same “rules.”

In the prototypical situation there are two domains, called “input spaces,” that contribute information. Each of these input spaces consists of meaningful elements and relations between these elements. An input space can thus be conceived as a network of meaningful elements plus internal links between these elements (that is, of a conceptual “semantics” and “syntax”) governed by pragmatic rules. Since some of the elements and some of the within-space structural relationships between these elements are similar in both input spaces, a third, more abstract space can be construed, the “generic space.” The generic space reflects what the two input spaces have in common and thus enables them to join forces in the so-called blended space. The blended space comprises what the two input spaces share (as featured in the generic space), enriched by elements and relations that are unique to each of the input spaces. The blended space fuses elements and structure from the input spaces on a conceptual level in a manner that may result in a formal hybrid (as in the name of the famous “language-learning” chimpanzee “Nim Chimpsky”) but need not do so (as in “If I were you …”). The result of the blend is an “emergent structure,” yielding meaning that did not exist as such in either of the input spaces independently. Often, the new meaning is not simply a result
of combining elements from input spaces, but arises from merging or elaborating such elements.

Here is an example from the book (“The Regatta”, pp. 63-64). In 1853, the clipper ship **Northern Light** sailed from San Francisco to Boston in 76 days and eight hours. This still being the fastest time on record 140 years later, a catamaran, **Great American II**, tried to do better by sailing the same trajectory. A newspaper reported a few days before the catamaran reached Boston that it was, at that moment, 4.5 days ahead of **Northern Light**. The word “ahead” points to the model or scheme of a virtual race taking place between the two boats in 1993. Clearly, the two input spaces of the **Great American II** and the **Northern Light** share many elements and within-space structural relations: they are both boats propelled by wind, they try to reach their destination as fast as possible, they are subject to weather conditions, etcetera. It is these shared elements and relations that, by definition, define the generic space governing both input spaces. But the integration of the two contributing input spaces also generates new meaning (emergent structure), notably that of a “race” and the excitement and rivalry that accompany such a contest.

As such, blending theory provides a useful model for describing how astonishingly good the human mind is at integrating heterogeneous information in representations. Turner and Fauconnier deserve credit for showing how such integrations govern a host of phenomena not usually discussed together: metaphors, counterfactuals (“If I were you …”), roles (“Paul is the father of Sally”), puns (“Chunnel” as a blend integrating “tunnel” and “channel”), and mathematic calculations. The subdivision of blends into simplex, mirror, single-scope, and double scope networks helpfully compares various ways in which input spaces can be integrated in the blend. Moreover, in chapter 6 the authors devote a promising section to the role of blending in compressions, specifically in compressions of so-called “vital relations” such as change, identity, time, space, cause-effect, part-whole, analogy, category, and
intentionality, concluding that “there are canonical patterns of compression over these vital relations that we will encounter again and again” (p. 101). In each case, the blending process helps elide large, less relevant chunks of semantic information from the different input spaces in the service of a condensed representation of these “vital relationships” in the blended space.

One of the problems I have with the book is the number of examples discussed. Of course proving the validity of any theory or model requires that it is used to describe and analyse a substantial number of cases, and given the universality claimed for the blending principle the applicability needs to be demonstrated in widely different fields. The many examples (given catchy names like “the Buddhist Monk,” “the Bypass,” “the Debate with Kant”) are mostly taken from real life and real texts, are invariably entertaining and well-presented, and convincingly illustrate the principle. But since the principle is not that complicated and new examples do little to deepen insights into underlying patterns of blending, the number of pages devoted to each example gradually becomes tiresome – even more so for readers who already know them from Fauconnier and Turner’s earlier work. Moreover the tone of exalted enthusiasm that often accompanies finding and discussing yet another example of some sort of “hybrid” in which “conceptual integration” turns out to be the central cognitive operation began to irritate me. By contrast, too little space is devoted to what, surely, is the heart of the matter:

A theory of human cognitive powers must not only account for the richness and variety of human innovation but also show how that innovation is guided. We now turn to these guiding constraints, the constitutive and governing principles of conceptual integration (p. 310).
Chapter 16, in which this task is undertaken, turns out to be an elaboration of the earlier identified compression mechanism in blending processes. More specifically, the principle of “achieving human scale” is shown to be the fundamental goal governing compression. The authors end this chapter with a list of “constitutive and governing principles of conceptual integration” (p. 345) requiring further investigation and research. This chapter is one of the best of the book, but one would have wished for more of that further investigation and research to have been carried out already here.

Another problem is the unsatisfactory manner in which Fauconnier and Turner situate blending theory in relation to existing paradigms. Although the authors cite various scholars who have inspired their work, it is disappointing that they do not dwell more on how their theory grew out of metaphor theory, specifically the “contemporary metaphor theory” fathered by Lakoff & Johnson (1980, 1999). In a metaphor, semantic elements and structural relations from one domain (the source domain) are mapped onto a second domain (the target domain) which then is transformed or (re)structured by this mapping. In metaphor theory terms, that is, a target domain A, metaphorically coupled with a source domain B, yields a transformed domain A-as-B. A metaphor is thus one subcategory of “blends” among many others, but in essence the basic mechanisms of the many-space model was, with different names, already largely familiar from metaphor theory.

One of the alleged assets of blending theory that is repeatedly emphasized by Fauconnier and Turner is that it can explain “emergent structure.” Inasmuch as the blended space generates aspects of meaning that inheres in neither of the input spaces, conceptual integration yields something more than the sum of the component parts, and hence clearly has a creative dimension. That is correct but, again, the notion of novel, emergent features has its roots in metaphor theory – not so much in the book on literary metaphor Turner himself co-authored with George Lakoff, More than Cool Reason (1987), but rather in Max Black’s
“More about metaphor” (1979 [1976]). Black, who acknowledged predecessors such as I.A. Richards (1965 [1936]) and Paul Ricoeur (1977), is one of the founders of the “interaction theory” of metaphor, which as one of its fundamental tenets claims that “a metaphorical statement can sometimes generate new knowledge and insight by changing relationships between the things designated” (Black 1979: 37, emphasis in original). Black’s interaction theory has often been criticized for being vague and imprecise, but its theoretical aptness and applicability were convincingly demonstrated by Indurkhya (Indurkhya, 1991, 1992; Gineste et al., 2000; see also Forceville, 1995). Hence when Fauconnier and Turner claim that “conceptual integration is at the heart of imagination. It connects input spaces, projects selectively to a blended space, and develops emergent structure through composition, completion, and elaboration in the blend,” they are making a point their book amply shows to be a valid one, but when they add that “this fundamental cognitive operation has not previously been studied” (p. 89), they are, at the very least, exaggerating.

So how far has “blending theory” progressed since its birth in the early 1990s? I would say that the current book does not do much more than reiterate at far too great length the fresh ideas in, say, Turner & Fauconnier (1995) and Fauconnier & Turner (2000) combined. The Cognitive Linguistics issue in which the latter paper appears contains several others that stimulate thoughts on blending. So does Grady et al. (1999), which makes pertinent remarks on the similarities and differences between blending theory and cognitive metaphor theory. But the level of theorization in the current book is on the whole still rather thin, and for the theory to develop into more than a useful descriptive tool, a lot more hard thinking is required. To repeat some points I made in Forceville (2001), it needs to be made clearer what counts as an input space. Is “genre” a potential input space? Irony? Hollywood-film style? Is there a limit to the number of input spaces? If so, what determines it? What conditions or factors
govern the decision which are the pertinent input spaces? (The start of an answer to this last question arguably can be found in the “Relevance Principle” mentioned on pp. 333-334.)

One of the more exciting analyses by Fauconnier and Turner themselves is that of an American advertisement urging investments in education, showing child doctors about to perform an operation. That analysis is meant to demonstrate the notion of “telescoping time” of blending theory itself, but I also see opportunities for the theory to develop into a tool that will prove useful for the analysis of pictures and other multimodal representations, in a manner analogous to what I have attempted to do with metaphor theory (Forceville, 1996), a big advantage of blending theory over metaphor theory being that it can cope with more than two input spaces. (An equally big drawback is that it has fewer constraints.) Many difficult questions will have to be addressed, such as how, in the case of non-verbal input spaces, these are to be categorized and named, and what consequence this naming has for the analysis and evaluation of the blend as a whole. Teng & Sun (2002) and Engelhardt (2002) provide challenging starting points for pondering applications to visual representations.

If the blending model is to gain greater scholarly prestige and currency, links with other models and paradigms, absent or only fleetingly referred to in the present book, will have to be specified and explored. One can think here of expanding the connections with Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory, which emphasizes the roles of communicator and addressee in the negotiation of messages – and hence of blends. At present, Fauconnier and Turner approach blends in a predominantly textual manner, but uptake is governed by many pragmatic factors (“relevance is always relevance to an individual,” Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 142ff.). Similarly, the notion of language use being fundamentally a “joint project” between communicator and addressee (Clark, 1996) is a pragmatic factor pertinent to blending theory concerns. It seems to me, furthermore, that links with narratology must be explored. Blends such as “the Bypass” are mini-stories, and a notion like telescoping time is familiar from
narratology’s distinction between “fabula” or “story” (denoting the “real time” duration a sequence of events supposedly has taken to unfold) and “syuzhet” or “discourse” (the condensed or elliptical representation of this duration; see e.g., Bordwell, 1985: chapter 6). The mixing of narrative perspectives (surfacing in Fauconnier and Turner’s example “If I were you …”) is one of the fundamental concepts in narratology, where it often goes by the name of “focalization” (as in “Elizabeth would be damned if she’d go on living like this,” which blends narrator’s and character’s text in so-called “free indirect discourse – see Bal, 1997: 50).

In short, the book does not live up to the high claims its title and somewhat self-congratulatory tone suggest. It provides an applicable descriptive model, (too) many examples, and an intriguing outline of how the many-space model can be deployed to sketch the similarities between cognitive operations hitherto understood as different. The next decade or so will make clear whether blending theory theorists and practitioners can resist the temptation of merely adding to the pile of case studies, and instead work on identifying in more detail pertinent blending procedures and tease out theoretical implications of the blending model.

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REFERENCES


