

LINGUISTICS AND VIETNAMESE LINGUISTICS

METAPHOR INTERPRETATION FROM CONCEPTUAL BLENDING THEORY - A MODEL FOR VIETNAMESE LITERARY COMPREHENSION**HUYNH NGOC MAI KHA***

ABSTRACT: Cognitive linguistics explores language through the lens of human experience and perception of the world. This article investigates metaphor interpretation from a cognitive linguistics standpoint, focusing particularly on conceptual blending theory and its effectiveness in explaining cognitive linguistic phenomena. Building on the conceptual blending theory developed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (2002), the author examines how this theory operates using specific examples from Vietnamese literature. The process involves three stages: composition, completion, and elaboration. These stages are supported by concepts such as generic space, four mental domains, the blending process, and the resulting emergent structure.

KEY WORDS: conceptual blending theory; cognitive linguistics; mental spaces; blending process; conceptual metaphor.

RECEIVED: September, 26th, 2024.

EDITED: November, 18th, 2024

1. Introduction

Cognitive linguistics began to take shape in the 1970s and gained significant recognition in the 1980s. As it evolved, this field incorporated various theories and prominent scholars, including research on metaphor by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), mental space theory by Fauconnier (1985), and Langacker's cognitive grammar (1987). Among the theories in cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor theory and conceptual blending theory have introduced innovative approaches to understanding how meaning is constructed. Conceptual blending theory, also known as conceptual integration theory, was developed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002) and builds on Lakoff's work on conceptual metaphor, representing a further evolution of metaphor research.

Conceptual metaphor theory introduces an alternative framework for understanding metaphor in contemporary theory, offering new insights into how we perceive the world. Lakoff and Johnson differentiate between conceptual metaphors and linguistic metaphors, noting that linguistic metaphors are simply surface expressions of deeper conceptual metaphors. In contrast, conceptual metaphors serve to generate linguistic metaphors and can be categorized into three types: structural metaphors, orientational metaphors, and ontological metaphors. Their work particularly emphasizes the exploration of conventional metaphors.

While conceptual metaphor theory addresses the stable structures of conceptualization formed through mappings between two domains and reflects a long-standing tradition of communication within language communities, conceptual blending theory emphasizes the real-time decoding of creative instances by individuals in everyday situations. Therefore, M. Lynne Murphy and Anu Koskela (2010) stated that blending theory is rooted in Mental Space Theory and influenced by Conceptual Metaphor Theory. However, the focus on meaning construction is what sets Blending Theory (BT) apart from Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT).

Recognizing the role of Blending Theory in enhancing meaning comprehension, both in language broadly and in literature specifically, this article explores how BT operates through various literary examples from Vietnamese literature.

2. Theoretical background**2.1. Conceptual blending theory**

Cognitive linguists made significant breakthroughs in the study of metaphor, particularly through the book *Metaphors We Live By*, which introduces Conceptual Metaphor Theory. A central concept

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of this theory is "mapping," which refers to the transfer of features from a source domain to a target domain. This mapping is ubiquitous, unidirectional, systemic, invariable, and rooted in physical and socio-cultural experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner develop a new analytical framework, which they call Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT) or "conceptual integration." In this framework, metaphorical mapping occurs through what they refer to as mental spaces. These mental spaces are temporary representations that speakers create when they think about experiences, whether real or imagined, providing a foundation for the dynamic process of meaning construction.

Conceptual Blending Theory (Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, 2002) posits that meaning construction involves the selective integration or blending of conceptual elements, using the framework of conceptual integration networks to explain this process. For example, in the sentence "In the end, VHS delivered a knock-out punch to Betamax" a basic network comprising four mental spaces is recognized as factor for meaning comprehension. Two input spaces include one related to boxing and another concerning the competition between rival video formats in the 1970s and 1980s. A generic space captures the common features between these two inputs. Elements from the input spaces are selectively mapped to one another and projected into a blended space, resulting in an integrated conceptualization where the video formats are portrayed as participants in a boxing match, ultimately with VHS emerging as the winner.

Proponents of Blending Theory argue that its four-space model can account for phenomena that the two-domain model of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) does not adequately address. Take, for example, the metaphor "This surgeon is a butcher," which serves as a harsh critique of an incompetent practitioner. At first glance, this metaphor appears to be explainable through a direct projection from the source domain of butchery to the target domain of surgery, using fixed counterpart mappings: "butcher" maps to "surgeon," "animal" (cow) maps to "human being," "commodity" maps to "patient," and "cleaver" maps to "scalpel." However, this analysis fails to capture a critical aspect of the statement's meaning: the surgeon's incompetence. While a butcher may be viewed as less prestigious than a surgeon, he is generally considered skilled and can even be highly respected. The implication of incompetence is not derived from the source domain; it originates from the absence in the projection of some elements from this domain to another. As a consequence, the absent element contributes to the forming new meaning for an incompetent surgeon as a butcher. In this regard, CMT does not adequately address the interaction with various factors, such as context and an individual's real-time mapping, when constructing meaning.

2.2. Conceptual blending theory and conceptual metaphor

Both theories provide valuable insights into the role of metaphor in cognition and language use, proposing detailed hypotheses about how we understand metaphors. These insights contribute to a more comprehensive theory of metaphor. However, there are several distinctive features in these theories, as outlined below: CMT examines recurring patterns in figurative language within a system of conceptual elements, whereas BT emphasizes the details of specific instances. Furthermore, CMT addresses stable knowledge structures stored in long-term memory, whereas BT seeks to model the dynamic nature of speakers' real-time representations. While metaphor theorists aim to identify general patterns across a wide range of metaphoric expressions, blending theorists typically focus on individual cases. This distinction between established associations in long-term memory and the on-the-fly processes that engage them is crucial. Thus, metaphor theory tends to explore questions about which concepts are conventionally linked, how these associations emerge, and the structure of cross-domain mappings, while blending theory focuses on the nuances of immediate cognitive processes.

2.3. Model of Blending Process

In Conceptual Blending Theory, blending comprises three main processes: composition, completion, and elaboration. Composition is the most straightforward process, involving the projection of content from each input into the blended space. For example, elements like butcher and

surgeon, and qualities of these two elements are integrated during this phase. Completion refers to the process of forming patterns within the blend. When individuals mentally connect aspects of a surgeon's work - such as the scope of their tasks, the tools they use, their customers, and their purpose - they can evoke the image of a butcher to describe a bad surgeon. Both share common features in terms of their working environment and instruments, despite having different objectives. A surgeon aims to save patients, while a butcher cuts flesh for sale, not for healing. This completion process often results in the emergence of new content within the blend. Elaboration involves simulating the mental performance of events within the blend. Through the earlier processes, imagined scenarios unfold, incorporating various elements. As a result, this emergent structure can lead to interpretations, such as depicting a bad surgeon as a butcher.

3. Research methodology

The blending is crucial for meaning to be interpreted to the fullest with the interaction among mental spaces and context as it is manifested in all parts of the language at all levels from the simplex to more complicated scope intergration. The methodology adopted for this research includes the combination of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) and Fauconnier's Blending Theory (Fauconnier, 2008). The employed CMT contributes to the understanding one domain of experience in terms of another. Accordingly, the domain of experience that we use to understand another domain is usually more physical, more directly encountered, and better understood than the domain we aim to comprehend, which tends to be more abstract, less directly experienced, and less familiar (Kövecses, 2015). Whereas, serving as another methodological framework, Blending Theory construe meaning by intergrating elements belong to two input spaces to obtaining the meaning structure. In order to conduct method of CMT and BT, several techniques have been applied including analysis for breaking down and analysing concepts underlying the idioms under study; context-situational method for interpretation of the contexts of idioms under study.

4. Discussion and findings

Example 1:

"Bác Hồ, cha của chúng con/ Hồn của muôn hồn..."

Ôi người cha đôi mắt mẹ hiền sao!...

Người là Cha, là Bác, là Anh/ Quả tim lớn lọc trăm dòng máu nhỏ..."

(Sáng tháng Năm - Tố Hữu)

(Uncle Ho, our father/ The soul of countless souls...

Oh, the father with the gentle eyes of a mother!...

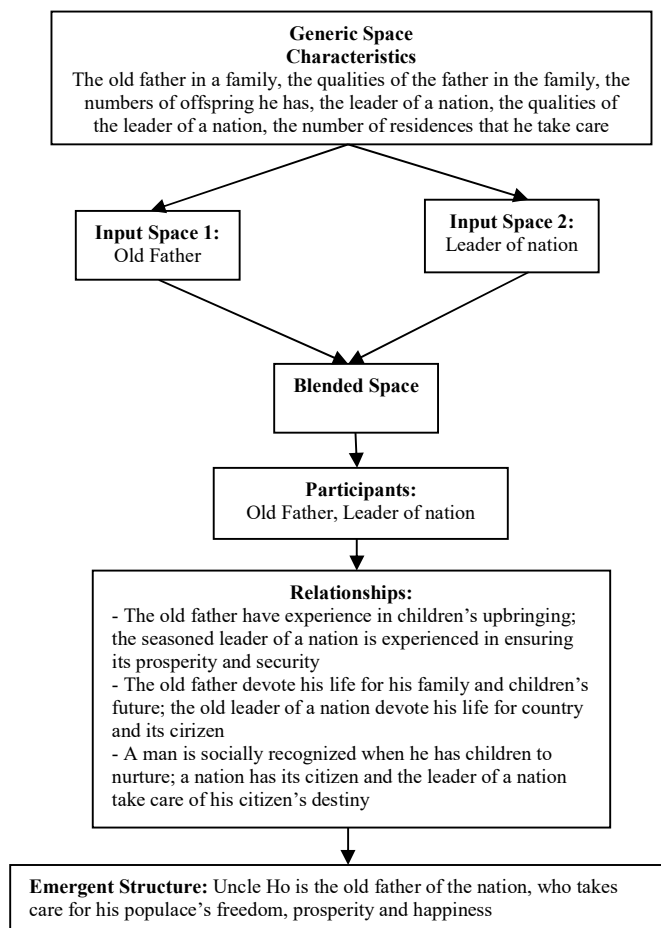
You are a Father, an Uncle, a Brother /A great heart filtering a hundred small streams of blood.)

In these metaphorical verses, a partial mapping of counterparts is created between the first input space and the second. The similarities between the two input spaces contribute to a generic space, consisting of shared characteristics from both spaces.

The metaphor present in the aforementioned verses is understood to involve a blending of two domains: the father and the leader of the nation. In the framework of blending theory, these two domains are perceived as input spaces for the conceptualization, where Input Space 1 provides the foundational framework for the blending process, while Input Space 2 represents the intended goal of that blend. For blending to occur, it is essential to establish a mapping that interacts between the two spaces, linking the components within them. The image of the father is often associated with his children, thereby creating a mapping that resonates with the image of a leader caring for the populace. However, not all components of meaning associated with the father are necessarily mapped onto the concept of a leader of the people. The qualities of a father, such as caring for and nurturing his children's future, exhibit similarities that are mapped onto the concept of a national leader who devote all his thought in the security, health, and prosperity of the populace and the nation. In blending theory, the generic space serves as the arena for shared characteristics of the two input

spaces, facilitating the blending process based on the similarities between these spaces, which are expressed within the generic space.

The structure derived from two input mental spaces is mapped onto the blend space. Blending integrates elements and relationships from both inputs. The elderly father possesses experience in raising children, while the seasoned leader of a nation is skilled in ensuring its prosperity and security. The devoted father dedicates his life to his family and the future of his children, just as the committed leader invests his life in the well-being of the country and its citizens. A man gains social recognition through his role in nurturing children; similarly, a nation is defined by its citizens, and the leader is responsible for caring for their collective destiny.



Flow chart 1. Blending working mechanism "Uncle Ho is the old father of the nation"

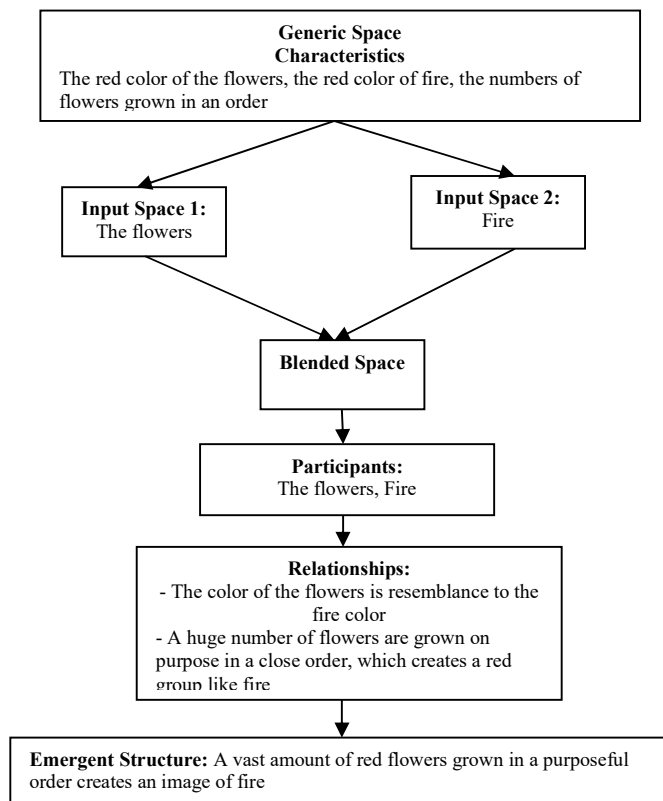
Example 2:

"Về thăm nhà Bác làng sen / Có hàng **râm bụt** thấp **lên lửa hồng**" (Nguyễn Đức Mậu)

(Visiting Uncle's house in Sen Village / There are hibiscus bushes igniting with red flames.)

According to conceptual blending theory, blending encompasses three fundamental processes: 'composition,' 'completion,' and 'elaboration.' Composition is the most straightforward of these processes, involving the projection of content from each input into the blended space, as seen with the concepts of flower and fire. Completion refers to the filling out of a pattern within the blend; for instance, when individuals mentally visualize a row of flowers blooming in red, they may also introduce the idea of a burning fire due to the similarities in color and arrangement. This completion

process often generates new content within the blend. Elaboration involves the mental simulation of events within the blend, allowing imagined scenarios to develop alongside various elements. Consequently, the emergent structure leads to the interpretation that the flowers are fully in bloom.

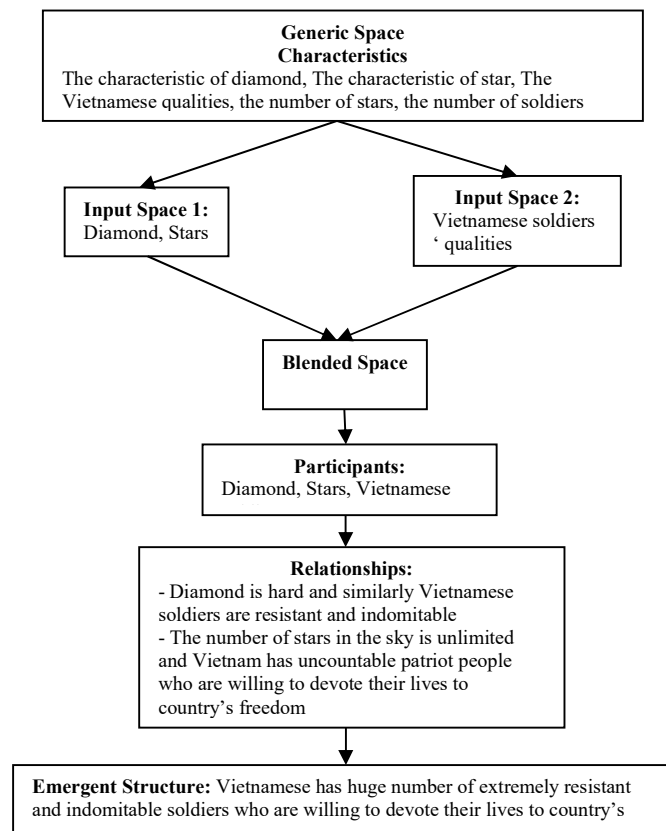


Flow chart 2. Blending working mechanism “The hibiscus hedge blooms profusely in the sunlight”

Example 3:

"Nghe dào dạt mười bốn triệu Miền Nam đang tỉnh thức
 Không! Ba mươi triệu **kim cương** của thiên hà Tổ Quốc
 Không! Hàng nghìn triệu **ngôi sao** sáng anh em đang chiếm lĩnh bầu trời
 Hứa một mùa gặt lớn ngày mai." (Chế Lan Viên)
 (Hearing the waves of fourteen million Southern people awakening
 No! Thirty million diamonds of the homeland
 No! Billions of shining stars claiming the sky
 Promise a great harvest tomorrow.)

Similar to examples 1 and 2, example 3 conveys a metaphorical meaning derived from blending the qualities of brave and courageous soldiers with the attributes of diamonds and stars, characterized by resilience, brilliance, and abundance. This results in the interpretation that the revolution will succeed due to the noble hearts, courage, and shining character of countless patriotic soldiers in Vietnam. The generalized space encompassing the traits of diamonds, stars, and soldiers serves as the foundation for the blending process, occurring within the blend of the two input spaces: one representing stars and diamonds, and the other representing soldiers and their qualities.



Flow chart 3. Blending working mechanism "The resilient, brave, and pure-hearted soldiers"

Cognitive metaphor and conceptual blending theory are two highly regarded frameworks in linguistics for understanding meaning in texts, discourse, and communication processes. However, cognitive metaphor is often established as a one-way mapping from the source domain to the target domain, based on similarities between the components of the two concepts. This mapping facilitates the borrowing of terms from the source domain for use in the target domain, enriching human expression within a community that shares cultural, historical, economic, political, and social traits. In contrast, blending occurs more rapidly within an individual's language during the process of communication. Furthermore, blending is characterized by interaction rather than a unidirectional relationship between the input spaces, and it typically requires contextual support to enable accurate comprehension of meaning.

5. Conclusion

Conventional metaphoric relationships may be the starting points for the process of creating complex conceptual blends. And identifying a metaphoric relationship holding between source and target elements is sometimes only the starting point for analyzing a blend. The broad applicability of conceptual blending theory is partly rooted in mental space theory, which views metaphor as a specific instance of indirect reference. As our examples demonstrate, both metaphoric and non-metaphoric conceptualizations depend on selectively projecting elements from two or more input spaces into a blended space. This involves establishing cross-space mappings, structuring the blended space through processes such as composition, completion, and elaboration, and then projecting structure from the blended space back to the inputs. By considering all types of mappings as formally

equivalent at a certain level, we can recognize that the transfer of structure in metaphor is fundamentally akin to the transfer of structure in non-metaphoric situations.

However, Blending processes can be systematized and stored when their results prove beneficial on multiple occasions. Conceptual metaphor theory can explain and accommodate new figurative linguistic expressions as long as they align with the broader metaphorical framework of the human mind. As CMT and BT share both common and distinctive features in the mechanism of understanding metaphorical meaning, we propose that these frameworks are primarily complementary because they address different aspects of metaphoric conceptualization. The conventional conceptual pairings and one-way mappings explored in CMT serve as inputs and constraints for the dynamic conceptual networks proposed in BT.

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Góc nhìn Ấn dụ từ lý thuyết pha trộn - phân tích trường hợp trong văn học Việt Nam

Tóm tắt: Ngôn ngữ học tri nhận khám phá ngôn ngữ qua lăng kính của trải nghiệm và cảm nhận của con người về thế giới. Bài viết này nghiên cứu cách hiểu ẩn dụ từ góc độ ngôn ngữ học tri nhận, đặc biệt tập trung vào lý thuyết kết hợp ý niệm và hiệu quả của nó trong việc giải thích các hiện tượng ngôn ngữ học tri nhận. Dựa trên lý thuyết kết hợp ý niệm do Gilles Fauconnier và Mark Turner phát triển (2002), tác giả khám phá nguyên lý hoạt động của lý thuyết này thông qua các ví dụ cụ thể từ văn học Việt Nam. Quá trình này bao gồm ba giai đoạn: kết hợp, hoàn thiện và phát triển. Các giai đoạn này được hỗ trợ bởi các ý niệm như không gian chung, bốn miền tâm trí, quá trình kết hợp và cấu trúc đạt được sau kết hợp.

Từ khóa: lý thuyết kết hợp khái niệm; ngôn ngữ học tri nhận; không gian tinh thần; tiến trình kết hợp ý niệm; ẩn dụ ý niệm.