

14th VESAL

INTERNATIONAL VISIBLE CONFERENCE ON
EDUCATIONAL STUDIES & APPLIED LINGUISTICS

ISBN 979-8-9890269-2-0

October 23rd – 24th, 2024

TISHK INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY
ERBIL, KURDISTAN REGION, IRAQ

Balancing Acts: Harmony & Collaboration in Education

In accordance with the UN 17 SDGs

Edited by: Venera Ulker

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VESAL
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October 23rd-24th, 2024
Erbil, Iraq



Conceptual Blending and Meaning Construction in Kurdish Jokes: A Cognitive-Analytical Study

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DOI: [10.23918/vesal2024v08](https://doi.org/10.23918/vesal2024v08)

Abstract

This study analyzes selected Kurdish jokes using the cognitive linguistic theoretical framework of conceptual blending, which relies on mental spaces as cognitive packets of information used to interpret the world around us and within us. The dynamic nature of language as an interactive and situational phenomenon is addressed by conceptual integration, often referred to as conceptual blending theory. The productivity of newly emerging linguistic structures is explained by this principle. It is claimed that jokes have not been correctly distinguished from other linguistic structures in the sense that Blending Theory has not profiled their humorous character, despite jokes being a paradigmatic discursive form that can be recognized intuitively. The analysis is used to find out whether Kurdish learners could comprehend the jokes in their native language and if the concept of conceptual integration, which is the process of identifying the input spaces that make up a joke's blended space, would be applied to their analysis of jokes. Fourth-year students from the University of Garmian, Department of English Language and Literature, were chosen to examine cognitive processes involved in the comprehension of jokes. They were given four Kurdish jokes, specifically jokes from the Central Kurdish dialect, and attempted to articulate the thoughts that run through their minds when reading them and which discordant elements are responsible for their funny effect. Taking into account the participants' answers, the input spaces (by naming their constituents) and the blended space were defined. Additionally, the participants' answers were evaluated depending on their background knowledge, which is necessary to comprehend the joke. The study's findings support the assertions made by Fauconnier and Turner that conceptual integration is a general cognitive process by which people, including Kurds, produce meaning.

Keywords: Conceptual Blending, productivity, mental space, jokes, Kurdish language.

1. Introduction

The *blending theory*, also known as *conceptual integration theory*, has drawn attention from scholars in a variety of linguistics fields, as Fauconnier & Turner (2002: 18) put it, blending is an intangible, subconscious process that permeates every facet of human existence. Therefore,

it is not surprising that this theory has found its application in the study of different types of humor. In line with this Coulson (2002) claims that although not all blends are humorous, blending appears to be an essential component of humor.

This study focuses on jokes as a form or an essential type of humor, among other areas. It can be argued that there is some uncertainty regarding the applicability of this theory and its effectiveness in accounting for the construction of meaning in the phenomenon being studied. To put it briefly, the problem addressed in this study can be represented by the kind of controversy that may arise regarding the answers to the following questions.

1. Can conceptual blending theory address the meaning-making of jokes?
2. Can Kurdish learners be able to capture the point of jokes?
3. Can they diagnose the conceptual blends that constitute or form the meaning of the jokes?
4. Can they unpack the joke by unveiling its components?

In order to verify the hypothesis that conceptual blending theory is endowed with sufficient mechanisms to allow users to analyze and comprehend jokes and that blending in jokes depends on its constituent parts, *four* Kurdish jokes are randomly chosen and analyzed following Fauconnier & Turner's (2002) model. The study aims to provide answers to the questions raised above.

2. Cognitive Semantics: An Overview

In line with Croft and Cruse (2004), the term Cognitive Linguistics emerged in the 1970s as an approach to studying language and has been more prevalent since the 1980s. It comes in response to growing dissatisfaction with formal approaches to language. In the study of language and the mind and how they interact, as Evans (2007) indicates, cognitive linguistics places significant attention on the role of meaning, conceptual processes, and embodied experience. Cognitive linguistics is an endeavor or approach to the study of language and the mind, rather than a single well-articulated theoretical framework (Evans & Green, 2006). However; some followers of this school of linguistics divide cognitive linguistics into two main branches: *cognitive semantics* and *cognitive grammar* (see, e.g., Evans & Green, 2006). Cognitive semantics studies two important aspects of meaning: conceptual structure and conceptualization. While the latter addresses how meaning is created, the former concentrates on how knowledge is represented in the human conceptual system (Evans, 2007). The second facet of meaning is the focus of the current paper. The fundamental tenet of cognitive semantics is that meaning is conceptual in nature. As a result, research in cognitive semantics focuses on modeling the conceptual structures and processes that underlie linguistic meaning. This is

where cognitive semantics differs from *truth-conditional* semantic systems, which simply take into account the relationship between the world and the word, excluding the value of human perception and conceptualization (Murphy & Koskela, 2010).

3. Blending Theory

Blending, as explained by Crystal (2008), is a theory in cognitive linguistics that was originated by Fauconnier and Turner in the field of cognitive semantics. It aims to make clear how elaborate analogies and intricate metaphors are put together and interpreted. In their well-known book, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (2002), linguists and cognitive scientists Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner render the argument that humans are unique among animals in that they can perform cognitive functions due to the gradual emergence and development of the cognitive capacity to combine two disparate ideas. This cognitive process was dubbed "*blending*," according to them, it kept evolving until it reached the crucial stage of blending between two scopes (2002). This allowed for the creation of human singularities like language, art, science, and religion (ibid.).

According to proponents of the blending theory, conceptual integration, or blending, is a fundamental cognitive function that is essential to our ability to think. For example, the category of *pet fish* (Fodor & Lepore, 1996) is more than just a combination of the *pet* and *fish* categories. Rather, we create a new category of *pet fish* with a unique internal structure by judiciously integrating the elements of the source categories *pet* and *fish*. This is achieved by conceptual blending (Evans & Green, 2006).

3.1 Modules of Conceptual Blending Theory

Fauconnier & Turner (2006) employ illustrations of the network model's basic elements to highlight its key components. According to them, this model exemplifies the dynamic cognitive process that produces meaning, wherein online work is facilitated by conceptual projection. As a result, the elements that follow make up the CB network:

1. **The Input Spaces:** Partial structures are used to express these, incorporating elements and relations from several domains. Fauconnier and Turner (2002) look at the input spaces of a blend as mental spaces, which are small conceptual packets constructed as humans think and speak. Mental spaces are connected to schematic information through frames, which are also referred to as image schemas and in which the elements and relationships are arranged as a package that we already know. Selective projection begins from these input spaces; that is, we do not take or use every structure from the input spaces to the blend; rather, we use only the matched information that is required for local comprehension (Evans & Green, 2006).

2. **Cross-Space Mapping:** The mental spaces are linked by a partial cross-space mapping. There are other types of counterpart connections, such as the link of identity, the connection between frames and roles, and the metaphorical connection (Fauconnier and Turner, 2006).
3. **Generic Mental Space:** The components shared by the input mental spaces make up a generic mental space (Fauconnier, Turner, 2002). Its purpose is to assist in creating connections between the mental areas that are being input, allowing conceptual integration to proceed (Coulson, 2001).
4. **The Blend Space.** This makes up the network's fourth mental space, which has a fresh conceptual framework. A selection of pieces from the input spaces and their projection to the mix produces this new structure. After that, they are dynamically incorporated into the mixture to create a brand-new emergent structure. Therefore, the mix does not project other items from the input spaces. Similar to this, "structure is projected to a new space, the blend, from two input mental spaces. Blended spaces and generic spaces are connected. Blends have additional specialized structures in addition to the generic structure contained in the generic space. Additionally, they may have a structure that the inputs cannot produce (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002).
5. **Emergent Structure:** This is the extra structure in the blend that isn't captured in the input transcriptions directly. Three processes lead to the emergent structure. First, elements are composed of different inputs. The second is completeness, which entails inducing a schema. The unconscious and effortless recruitment of backdrop frames is a component of schema induction. These bring the composition to a completion. Lastly, elaboration is the online operation that creates the blend-specific structure. This procedure is also known as "running the blend." (Green & Evans, 2006).

As Fauconnier & Turner (2002) put it, establishing mental spaces, matching between spaces, projecting to a blend only, identifying shared structures, projecting backwards to inputs, bringing in the new structure for the blend or the inputs, and carrying out different operations within the blend itself are the fundamental steps involved in building an integration network.

4. Jokes: A Form of Humor

Ritchie (2004) describes a joke as a very brief text that may be employed in a variety of contexts and that is primarily recognized by a particular cultural group for its aim of making others laugh. This definition emphasizes the joke itself as the source of humor, suggesting that the key elements of humor are built into the joke, rather than depending on how the audience reacts. On the other hand, Schopenhauer (1883) offers a different view, stating that laughter in jokes

comes from suddenly noticing a mismatch between what we think about something and the actual thing itself, with laughter simply being a reaction to this mismatch. Jokes often start with a setup that can be understood in two different ways, but initially, only the more obvious meaning is noticed by the listener. The punchline at the end of the joke then reveals the other meaning in a surprising way, which can catch the audience off guard (Giora, 1988, 1991).

The comprehension of jokes is increasingly recognized as showing parallels to more conventional creative cognition. Thus, understanding the language of jokes is deeply interwoven with our cognitive and perceptual experiences. According to Turner & Fauconnier (1995), blending in Cognitive Semantics can be found in idioms, ordinary language, mathematical creativity, the development of sociocultural models, humor, advertising, and other linguistic and non-linguistic activities.

5. Adopted Model

The conceptual blending theory of Fauconnier & Turner (2002) is applied in this study to analyze the jokes under study. The rationale for adopting this model is that it has appropriate mechanisms that can account for the meaning construction in Kurdish Jokes. It also helps to show how the jokes blend these inputs to arrive at the meaning intended. The main element of the chosen model is shown in the figure below:

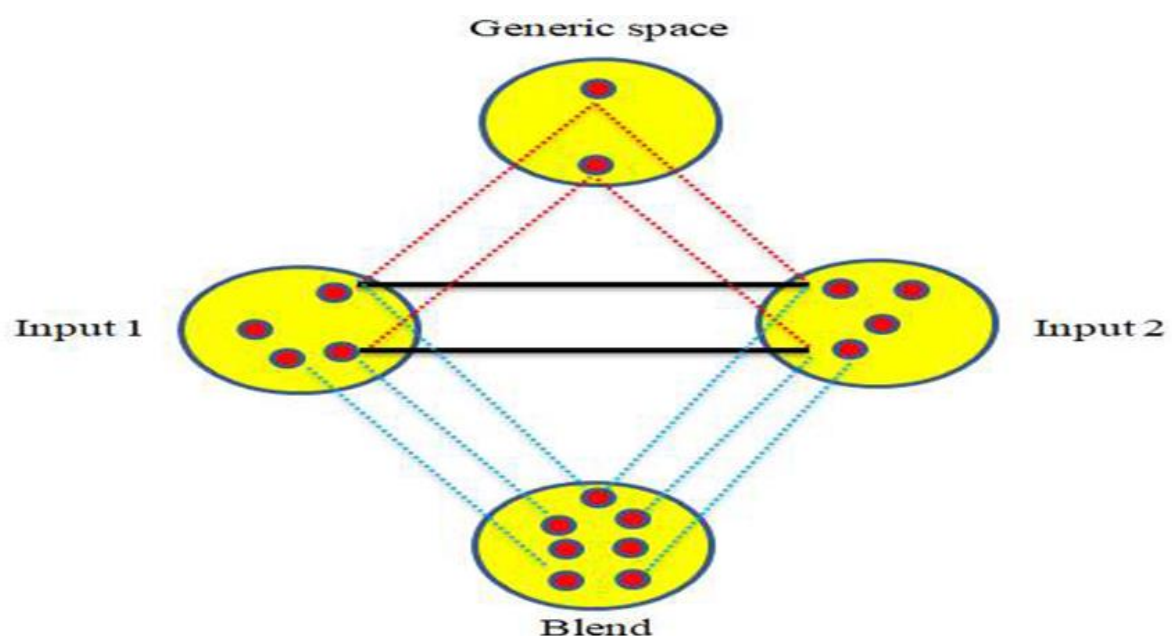


Figure (1) Elements of the Adopted Model

6. Methodology

6.1 Method of Analysis

The goal of the study is to identify signs that indicate the process of unraveling that students are thought to go through when they read and comprehend the jokes. Additionally, the participants are Fourth-year students from the University of Garmian, Department of English Language and Literature. Researchers used Google Documents as an online platform to facilitate the presentation of the Kurdish jokes to the participants. The document included four randomly chosen Kurdish jokes. The participants were instructed to read the selected jokes and determine each joke's meaning. To further clarify this instruction, the participants were asked to describe what was going through their minds as they read the joke and to attempt to examine the mechanisms and components that make a joke funny. After collecting the answers, researchers started to analyze the answers and compare the patterns of the chosen model. After analyzing the responses, researchers found multiple important results and findings.

6.2 The sample and The procedure

The study included 30 students (male and female) from the University of Garmian, College of Education's English Language and Literature Department as samples. This study was conducted in the 2023–2024 academic year. Before giving access to an online Google document, participants were asked the time suitable for them and that they were not obliged to participate since this work might seem out of their ordinary academic college duties. Then, participants were given access to the online Google document via email. The participants had unlimited time to complete their responses. As part of the answering procedure, first, the participants were asked to identify their gender and stage. Then, the guidelines for dissecting the jokes and the jokes themselves were presented.

7. Data Analysis

This study embarks on a journey to explore the intricacies of humor through the lens of data analysis, focusing on four randomly chosen jokes from the Kurdish language, specifically Central Kurdish, given that all participants are native speakers of Central Kurdish. Jokes from Central Kurdish have been selected since it reflect the diversity and richness of Kurdish humor, offering valuable insights into the linguistic and cultural dimensions of humor in this specific linguistic community. Through meticulous data analysis, we seek to uncover patterns, themes, and cognitive processes that underpin the construction and appreciation of humor in central Kurdish discourse.

7.1 Analysis of Joke No.1

یهکهم : ئەزانى! رۆژ نیه 100 کچ بەدوام نەکەم ؟
دووەم : ئادهى چۆن پێم بڵێ با منیش کچان دوام کەم ؟
یهکهم: جانتاکانیان لى بدزە!

This joke is about two people having a conversation, the first person says “ You know! There isn't a day that 100 girls don't follow me?” and the second says “How can you tell me to get girls to follow me too?” The first person answers “ Steal their bags!”.

The blended space in this joke is made up of two *input spaces* that are centered around the word "running after." The first input space involves a context that is typical of the *running* frame. On the other hand, the second input space projects the frame of *stealing*. The second speaker asks the first speaker to help him make girls follow him, and he tells him to steal their bags. As it is obvious that stealing someone's property will make them follow and run after you. When these two input spaces are combined, a blended space is created in which the first speaker asks the second to steal the girl's bags. Thus, it can be said that the joke's humorous effect is derived from the word "running after" polysemy, which enables the reader to connect two disparate input spaces and generate two distinct interpretations. Thus, in this joke, "running after" serves as the link. Moreover, the punchline "steal their bags" serves as the disconnect since it forces the reader to reconsider the first sentence.

Even while the participants' responses to the joke showed that they were able to grasp its meaning, not all of them were able to adequately demonstrate the process of decoding and the participants' recognition of the input spaces. In most cases, the participants who were successful in recognizing the input spaces also identified the connection between them. Some participants, however, just clarified that the joke relies on the word "running after's" dual meaning, indicating that they recognized the connectivity but were not able to indicate the input spaces. On the other hand, in some cases, the participants described the input spaces but did not focus on the link. Finally, a small number of participants highlighted the importance of the disjuncture for the effect of humor in the joke.

7.2 Analysis of Joke No.2

کچ : دایکە زۆر نەترسم پیاو هەم ژنی تری هێنابى له بهیانیوه تەلەفونی بۆ ئەکەم وەلام ناداتەوه
دایک : کچم قسەى خێر بکە ئێشەللا هیچ نیه کى ئەلێ بمر تەقینەوه نەکەوتوه و نەمردوه

This joke is about a girl who talks with her mother about her feelings toward her husband, she says “ Mom, I'm very afraid my husband has married another woman. I've been calling him since morning and he doesn't answer” and the Mom says “ My daughter, speak positively. God willing, it's nothing. Who knows, maybe he has been in an explosion and died?

The blended space in this joke involves two input spaces from the frames of a dialogue between a mother and a daughter involving the context of *jealousy* from the side of the daughter towards her husband and the idea of being dead rather than being a cheater from the side of the mother.

By matching these two input spaces and projecting from them selectively, a blended space is created where a wife is envious of her husband and complains to her mother about her predicament. The line "maybe he is dead in an explosion, speak positively" gives the joke its comic effect since it allows the reader to make a connection between two different input spaces and come up with two different interpretations. So the aforementioned sentence is the joke's connecting link. Additionally, because it compels the reader to reevaluate the opening sentence, the punchline "maybe he is dead in an explosion, speak positively" acts as the disconnection.

Over 50% of the participants were able to identify the input spaces that make up the joke's blend. However, a number of participants identified the connector more than the input spaces. Because "to die than to cheat " can mean two different things, some participants only wrote that the joke is funny. This suggests that they understood the joke's point and were likely aware of the input spaces, but they only paid attention to the connector when explaining why the joke was funny. Additionally, a few participants emphasized the significance of the disjuncture, clarifying that the joke is humorous because the mother would rather prefer her son-in-law die than delude her daughter. Lastly, some of the participants just commented that “this joke is just boring and used very often”, which does not indicate whether the joke is unfolded or not.

7.3 Analysis of Joke No.3

خیزانێک له ناو بهلمه‌مێکدا نه‌بن و به قاچاخ نه‌پهر نه‌وه له تورکیاوه بۆ یۆنان. مندالێکیان له باوکمه‌که نه‌پرسی

"بابه قه‌زاوقه‌مه‌ر و موسیبه‌ت جیاوازیان چیه"

باوکمه‌که‌ش له وه‌لامدا نه‌لی

قه‌زاوقه‌مه‌ر نه‌وه که ئیستا هه‌ر له خۆیه‌وه داکت بکه‌وێته دهریاکه‌وه. موسیبه‌تیش نه‌وه که مه‌له بزانیته و خۆی "

پرزگار بکات

This joke is about a family who are in a boat trying to smuggle from Turkey to Greece. A conversation happens between a son and his father when the son asks his father, “What's the difference between fate and disaster?” and the father answers “It's destined that your mother

input space. When these two input spaces are combined, a blended area is created, and a man uses every match he purchases from the store to see if it works or not. The expression "Well, woman, I tried everything in the shop, they would burn!" is the connector in this joke and it is key for producing the humorous effect. It is worth mentioning that the same expression would be the disjuncture in the joke because it triggers the reinterpretation of the punch-line in the light of his profession.

Nearly half of the participants misinterpreted the joke or failed to get its intended meaning. A few participants claimed not to understand the joke, however, one female participant out of all of them claimed to understand that "the joke centered around the term "lights. "Some of the participants made comments like "the joke is a bit predictable," which in no way indicated that they had thought the joke through. The two input areas that make up the joke's blend were mentioned by the participants who did, for the most part, begin the unfolding process with the connection, the word "light." A couple of them neglected to note the input gaps and instead simply commented on how funny the joke was due to the man's character's ambiguity and idiocy.

8. Findings

This study sought to determine whether participants, who are native speakers of Kurdish, could mentally unfold jokes in their native language. Finding and connecting the input spaces that make up the blended space that underlies the joke in question is referred to as "unfolding" the joke. Even though the participants were not acquainted with the conceptual integration theory or its relationship to jokes, it appeared from their written assessments of jokes that they inadvertently engaged their mental mechanism for unfolding the blend while interpreting jokes. This indicates that even though they are unaware of the theory of blending, they are unconsciously going through the same cognitive processes that are involved in the unfolding steps of jokes.

The study's findings showed that the participants, fourth-year students at Garmian University's Department of English Language and Literature, could recognize to some extent the input spaces that make up the blends in the entire jokes that were given to them in the questionnaire. Still, some jokes were harder for the participants to digest than others. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that certain participants' depictions of their thoughts during the joke reading process indicated the need for a second reading and reevaluation. According to earlier studies, this mental process occurs when we read or hear a joke in order to deduce its other meaning and comprehend it.

The majority of participants described the input spaces that make up the joke's blend and made the required connections between them in order to explain why the joke is funny, even though they were not familiar with the conceptual integration theory. Additionally, they frequently highlighted the disjuncture and/or connector in their responses; very seldom did respondents expressly indicate that they did not understand a particular joke. As a result, the findings demonstrate that Kurdish students who took part in the study are capable of understanding jokes written in Kurdish and, more significantly, that they do so by unconsciously breaking down the jokes' blends.

9. Conclusions

As a conclusion to this work, it has been said that jokes are a unique blend that requires an entirely novel conceptual structure to be interpreted. The dynamic nature of language in general and the Kurdish language in particular as an interactive and situational phenomenon is addressed by conceptual integration. The productivity of newly emerging linguistic structures is explained by this idea and conceptual integration serves as a theoretical model that throws light on creativity in language use. Jokes have not been correctly distinguished from other linguistic structures in that their humorous component has not been highlighted in Blending Theory, despite the fact that jokes are a classic discursive form that can be readily distinguished intuitively.

This study confirms that Kurdish students, particularly those in their fourth year of English studies, are capable of "unfolding" jokes by identifying and connecting the input spaces that create the blended meaning underlying the humor. The findings suggest that even without formal knowledge of conceptual integration theory, these students engage in similar cognitive processes to decode jokes. This aligns with the conceptual integration theory, which posits that jokes represent a unique blend requiring a novel conceptual structure for interpretation. Despite the theory's broader applications to creativity in language, its specific mechanisms for understanding humor have not been thoroughly explored in previous literature. The study's results support the utility of conceptual blending theory in analyzing humor, as it offers insights into how meaning is constructed within jokes. Furthermore, the participant's ability to deconstruct jokes effectively, particularly those requiring more basic knowledge, highlights the role of prior knowledge in understanding humor. The necessity for some participants to revisit jokes for better comprehension underscores the iterative nature of joke interpretation.

Overall, these findings reinforce Fauconnier and Turner's assertion that conceptual integration is a fundamental cognitive process for meaning-making. They also pave the way

for further research into how conceptual integration theory can be applied to humor and other discursive forms, contributing to a deeper understanding of both linguistic creativity and cognitive processes involved in humor.

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