



Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

Volume 26 | Issue 1

Article 12

4-7-2000

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Paxman, David (2000) "One Poem and Cognitive Linguistics," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol26/iss1/12>

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One Poem and Cognitive Linguistics

David Paxman

Mark Turner has stated that the mind is literary: it uses what we categorize as literary devices to think through most ordinary problems (1996, 7). Among these devices are the projection of one story onto another, with "story" here being interpreted as even minimal scripts such as motion through space. Approaching literature through such common cognitive processes does pose some problems, however. Some of these problems arise from language which, according to cognitive linguistics, reflects cognition. In the words of Ungerer and Schmid, cognitive linguistics is "an approach to language that is based on our experience of the world and the way we perceive and conceptualize it" (1996, x). Problems arise because language makes possible certain types of play, deceit, and representation not bound by ordinary constraints. What we have in literature may be cognitive special effects, or constructs that use cognitive processes and concepts but do so in unusual ways. Therefore literature may be susceptible to cognitive analysis but may not show us much about how cognition is constituted.

I apply here only a small slice of the available strands in cognitive linguistics, but it is a very important slice, having to do with the blending of concepts in figurative thinking. Ronald Langacker (1987–1991) assures us that figurative language is no peripheral matter. Although many linguists ignore this topic, "it would be hard to find anything more pervasive and fundamental in

language, even (I maintain) in the domain of grammatical structure; if figurative language were eliminated from our data base, little if any data would remain" (1:1). Langacker also insists that we not force a distinction between rule-governed creativity, of the type that leads to novel expressions, and creativity in a more general sense exhibited in figurative language and original thinking.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) offer one model of metaphorical mapping and blending. This model includes two cognitive domains, called source and target, that are blended or mapped onto each other. In the metaphor, "the taste of the self is very sweet," the source domain of eating food is mapped onto the target domain of one's experience of the self. Such mapping allows us to conceptualize a less concrete, less structured idea such as the self in terms of a more concrete, physical, and structured concept such as tasting food. Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier have recently proposed a more elaborate model which loses some of the parsimony of the two-domain model but gains in being able to account for more of the structure and effects of blending. This model includes

- two input spaces: source and target
- a generic space: a skeletal structure that applies to both input spaces
- a blended space: a rich space integrating, in partial fashion, specific structure from both input spaces and often including structure not projected to it

from either. Note that the blend is not compositional (1995, 182–183)

An example will clarify how useful these four spaces are. Here is a thinking problem: “A Buddhist monk begins at dawn to walk up a mountain. He stops and varies his pace as he pleases, and reaches the mountaintop at sunset. There he meditates overnight. At dawn, he begins to walk back down, again moving as he pleases. He reaches the foot of the mountain at sunset. Prove that there is a place on the path that he occupies at the same hour of the day on the two separate journeys” (Turner 1996, 72). By imagining a scenario in which two monks set out on the same day, one heading up and the other down, we can prove that, regardless of their pace, they will meet. The point at which the two monks meet is the place that the one monk occupied at the same hour of the day on two separate journeys.

This many-space model offers advantages (Turner and Fauconnier 1995, 185–87). Chiefly, it shows that the blended space has its own logic not always available from either of the two input spaces. In the monk’s journey problem above, the image available in the blended space, that of two monks traveling toward each other from opposite ends of the trail, yields a point at which they cross, a point not available in either input space. The generic space clarifies the structure in terms of which the logic of the blend works. The model also clarifies that the target influences meaning, so it, too, is considered an “input” along with source domain.

Let us apply this model to a poem and see how it helps to reveal some of the cognitive strategies of the poem, especially those that involve the blending of domains through analogy and metaphor.

I have selected this poem almost at random from a recent monthly.

These Days by Peter Davison

Days when it’s easy, the water
seems wonderfully clear, not a
chance of drowning. Objects
appear so close that you need only
reach down for them into coolness
until the word offers up:
as though you could shape thought with
your thumb. Around you the air
blossoms with names for itself.

The noise of the waves tearing
the shore apart blooms like
French horns, and the taste
of the self is very sweet. These days
it’s easy to forget how
stubborn silence can be, how
rapidly glibness drains the mind of every
nutrient, what fanatic reinforcements
the armies of emptiness can bring forward.

These days every choice is clear, every
location opens at a touch to
yield its necessary
drop of honey, every word glows
with exactly the wanted
intensity of
tilt. (Davison 2000)

The many-space model helps to clarify how the meaning of specific lines is produced by the blending of domains. One of the first things to discover is that there may be more than one target and source in what appears as a single blend. Blends are nutshelled inside other blends, so to speak. I have numbered these to keep them distinct, with the lower numbered target being most immediate to the blend and the higher being the more remote. After some examples I note what is gained by blending input spaces in the manner observed.

Example 1: “Objects / appear so close
that you need only / reach down for

them into coolness / until the word offers up."

target 2=days of a certain type
 target 1=finding words
 source 1=reaching for objects in clear water
 source 2=a desired thing offers up; what is wanted comes to one
 generic space=an action (reaching) under favorable conditions (clear, cool water) triggers a desired event. Or: inanimate things behave with volition in keeping with one's desire. Note that even this structure is a blend having its own input spaces: inanimate objects are seen as responsive to our intentions.
 blended space=reaching for a word is like reaching for an object; at some point the word will come to the hand
 gain=the pleasant (cool) tactile sensation of reaching through a clear medium for something you can see is seen as a cause that triggers in words an inclination to volunteer themselves to the mind

Example 2: "as though you could shape thought with your thumb"

target 3=thinking, writing
 target 2=good days
 target 1=wanting the right words
 source=molding an unspecified material (clay, for example) with thumb
 generic=causing shape, influencing form
 blend=words shaping thoughts (or thoughts being shaped into words?) just as one wishes

Example 3: "around you the air / blossoms with names for itself"

target 2=thinking or writing successfully
 target 1=recognizing words for air; naming in general
 source=plants producing flowers

generic space=yielding, as in flowers producing blossoms on their own
 blend=air yields right names for itself
 gain=insubstantial medium substantially yields the right insubstantial representations

We can use the many-space model to interpret the poem as a whole. Overall, the poem has this kind of blended space:

target 2=successful cognition (or, if cognition is metonym, writing)
 target 1=experience of a type of days (what are good days like?)
 source 2=goodness
 source 1=various concrete types of reaching and abstract types such as naming
 generic=fulfilled motion or sensory experience
 blend=days as various types of pristine sensory experience and motor movement.

Note that good days are not seen simply as pristine sensory experience, but that this model maps onto thinking and writing.

gain=depict the act of clear and successful thinking without having to demonstrate it with clear thought; conceptualize proper naming without having to name. Instead these mental activities are conceived through analogs in concrete sensory experience.

Blended spaces provide, I think, a clearer, more complete model for teaching metaphor than most literary discussions of metaphor, perhaps because the model recognizes that metaphor is not simply aesthetic ornament but a fundamental strategy of thought.

Yet the model does not provide a complete tool set for literary analysis. Even with the many-space model and the compositional nature of language accounted for, the poem has something to say about cognition that is not derived from any of these tools of analysis. In

general, the poem implies that good days are those when cognition works naturally and effortlessly to yield precisely what one needs: "every choice is clear," and every location gives "its necessary drop of honey." This thought pushes us away from the mechanisms of cognition to its purposes and direction, something that cognitive science has more difficulty explaining.

Oddly, what the poem says about cognition is achieved by violating the limits in which cognitive processes are usually most reliable and productive. Literature breaches ordinary cognition. For example, take the closing lines, "every word glows /with exactly the wanted /intensity of /tilt." This passage does what we now see other image clusters in the poem do: it blends from domains so different that the blended space can be entertained only as a fiction. Air blossoms, waves sound like French horns. The gaps between the what is possible in the everyday world and what happens in the line stir the mind: waves only remotely sound like a brass instrument, but the mind can savor, in a fleeting way, the overlap of wave and French horn. The concluding line, for final effect, stretches the pattern of disrupted ordinary cognition even further: we have domains of words, glowing light, and spatial orientation in "tilt," with overtones of angular readiness. In some ways, it is an impossible blend. Impossible, yet indicative of the poetic nature of cognition itself. For those who remember pin-ball games, the word "tilt" recruits an added domain of corrupting recreation.

Reuven Tsur holds the opinion that literature works by making ordinary cognition break down; it then exploits that breakdown for other effects (1992, 3–4). Ellen Spolsky comes from a different angle: literature is just one of many attempts to create coherence out of cognitive processes that are already full of gaps and ruptures. In her account, the modular mind can't fully translate infor-

mation in one domain or module (say, smell or motion along a path) to every other domain or module, so cognition is characterized by incompleteness. Cognition is a patchwork of redundant systems working to provide complete information. The system is clunky, but it works better for shooting an arrow than building coherent understanding. Literature strives for coherence, but as in the word that glows with intense tilt, poetry reminds us is that many domains don't map very well, and none of them map completely. If they did, we would not need to achieve knowledge by mapping. There would be uniformity and integration instead. Cognitive linguistics gives us understanding of the mechanisms of meaning. Poems expose these mechanisms, and in so doing, show us the ruptures and breakdowns. As Spolsky says, "the mind itself can hurt you into poetry" (1993, 2, 5–6).

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