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Who was born with a silver foot in his mouth? Modified idiomatic expressions in political cartoons

The paper addresses the applicability of conceptual integration theory in the study of political cartoons, actually the role of modified idiomatic expressions in the process of cartoon appreciation. In the political cartoons that were analyzed, modified idiomatic expressions are the crucial components producing humorous effects. In our conceptual integration networks we have input spaces that describe bizarre scenarios in comparison to those that are compatible with the world of politics. It is the combination of those scenarios that creates incongruity within the blended space. The incongruity produces humorous effects. Apart from the fact that conceptual blending can explain the creation of humor and its meaning, it can also reveal why humor is an effective means of criticizing political reality.

Key words: conceptual integration theory; modified idiomatic expressions; humor; incongruity.

1. Introduction

Humor and political cartoons represent a powerful weapon that can be put to use for the criticism of reality. Pictorial language and richness of its form are impressive, since different levels of symbolism can be expressed in cartoons. Cartoons may accuse, encourage a debate, or make the reader think about the topic described in the cartoon from a different angle. Although cartoons take very little space in written media, they contain a powerful and complex message from their authors,



which the reader can decode with thorough knowledge of economic and political circumstances. Cartoons can actually be more expressive than newspaper articles, since the specific language of a cartoon affects the reader. We can say that what makes cartoons superior to newspaper articles is the succinctness of both verbal and non-verbal language. Furthermore, pictorial language is often exploited in cartoons, as a basis for allusions to certain issues that are implicitly, rather than explicitly, addressed in cartoons.

In this paper, applying conceptual integration theory, we analyze several political cartoons which in a humorous way represent issues from American politics. The construction of the meaning of political cartoons involves the construction of a blended space which results in an incongruity that is characteristic of humorous blends (Coulson 2002). In these cartoons, cartoonists verbally and visually exploit phraseological units, which seem to be crucial components for the construction of meaning of these cartoons.

2. Conceptual integration theory

The theoretical framework for this study is blending theory or conceptual integration theory. Conceptual integration theory, introduced by Fauconnier and Turner in 1993, has found its application in accounting for a wide range of phenomena of human thought and action. Conceptual blending is a powerful process which provides “global insight, human-scale understanding and, the new meaning” (Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 92). Fauconnier and Turner built blending theory on the foundations of Fauconnier’s mental space theory.¹ The central idea behind blending as a basic cognitive operation is that it operates over a conceptual integration network, which comprises mental spaces and relations holding between them. “Building an integration network involves setting up mental spaces, matching across spaces, projecting selectively to a blend, locating shared structures, projecting backward to inputs, recruiting new structure to the inputs or the blend, and running various operations in the blend itself” (Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 44).

A conceptual integration network is composed of at least two input spaces, a generic space, and a blended space, although a single network can be composed of several inputs as well as blended spaces. The generic space captures the shared elements of both inputs and these elements from the generic space are in turn mapped onto the counterpart elements in the input spaces. The structure from the

¹ Fauconnier (2007: 351) defines mental spaces as “very partial assemblies constructed as we think and talk for purposes of local understanding and action.”



input spaces is projected into the blend, a new mental space. “Blends contain generic structure captured in the generic space but also contain more specific structure, and they can contain structure that is impossible for the inputs, [...]” (Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 47). However, not all elements from the inputs are projected into the blend, which means that projections from the input spaces to the blend are partial. The emergent structure in the blended space is not copied from either input. Rather, the new structure within the blend is generated in three ways, namely through the processes of composition, completion, and elaboration, all of which operate unconsciously.

Blends and mental spaces can be represented in the form of a diagram (Fig. 1), in which circles represent mental spaces, points in the circles represent elements and lines stand for connections between elements in different spaces. Lines in the diagram represent neutral co-activations and bindings.

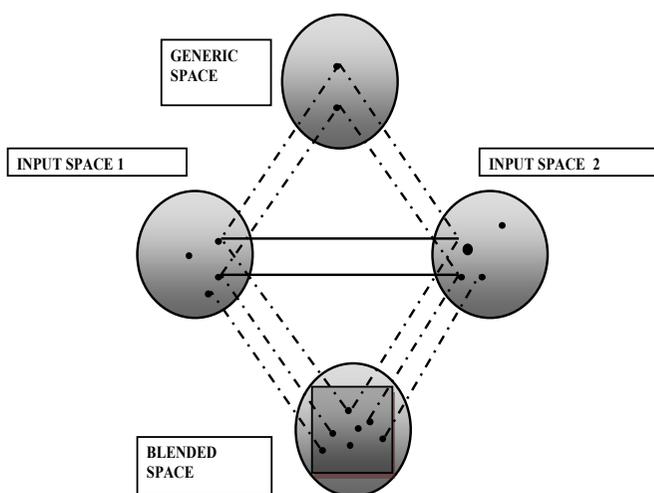


Figure 1. The basic diagram presenting a conceptual integration network (Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 46).

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Behind the possibilities for conceptual blending, there is an entire system of interacting principles. In order to explain one of the products of this system, it is necessary to tackle the entire system. This system rests on conceptual compression, which has an effect on a set of relations strongly influenced by shared social experience and fundamental human neurobiology. These relations are also referred to as vital relations.² In addition to vital relations, Fauconnier and Turner (1998, 2002) propose a set of optimality principles that further clarify the relations within the conceptual integration network.³ They claim that under these principles, blends function most efficiently, but also point out that satisfying one of these principles does not automatically involve satisfying the other ones. Coulson and Oakley (2000: 186) suggest that these principles limit the spectrum of possible blending analyses and make conceptual integration theory less arbitrary: “Blending can be detected in everyday language, idioms, creative thought in mathematics, evolution of socio-cultural models, jokes, advertising, and other aspects of linguistic and nonlinguistic behavior” (Turner and Fauconnier 1995: 186). In that sense, conceptual integration theory has emerged as a powerful theory that can account for a wide variety of linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena. Therefore, it is not surprising that conceptual integration theory has found its application in the study of political cartoons.⁴

Coulson (2002) claims that “[t]hough not all blends are humorous, blending does seem to be an inherent feature of humor”. The key element for the creation of humor is the incongruity that arises in the blended space. Marín-Arrese (2003) explains it in the following way:

² Fauconnier and Turner (2002) distinguish the following vital relations: Change, Identity, Time, Space, Cause – Effect, Part – Whole, Representation, Role, Analogy, Disanalogy: Property, Similarity, Category, Intentionality and Uniqueness.

³ These principles include: Topology Principle, the Pattern Completion Principle, Integration, the Maximization of Vital Relations Principle, the Intensification of Vital Relations Principle, the Web Principle, the Unpacking Principle, the Relevance Principle, the Compression Principle, and Metonymic Tightening (Fauconnier and Turner 2002).

⁴ Conceptual integration theory has been successfully applied to humor in several papers written in recent years. Bergen (2004), Coulson (2002), Marín-Arrese (2003), and Delibegović Džanić and Omazić (2011) apply conceptual integration theory to the analysis of political cartoons. Furthermore, applying this theory, Lundmark (2003) studies puns in advertising, Kyratzis (2003) discusses humor in discourse among friends, while Coulson (2005) examines humor in discourse from talk radio. Berberović and Delibegović Džanić (2009) discuss the creation of humor in late-night political jokes poking fun at statements of politicians and political pundits and Delibegović Džanić and Berberović (2010) analyze late-night political jokes which contain modified idiomatic expressions that serve either as the punch line or as a basis on which the joke is built.



The creation and interpretation of the joke involves the construction of a blend where the integration of structure and elements from the two input spaces yield an incongruity or a cognitive clash. The problem solving or resolution of the incongruity is realized by projecting backward to these input spaces (Fauconnier 1998; Coulson 2002; Marín-Arrese 2003).

3. Conceptual blending in political cartoons: case studies

Political cartoons are not intended to simply entertain the viewer, appreciating a cartoon represents a jigsaw that a viewer must solve. As Coulson (2002) puts it:

... the challenge, it seems, is to activate the appropriate information in response to the imagery and the verbal cues, and to integrate it with abstract narrative structure. Unpacking the blend and structuring the input spaces allows the viewer to solve the puzzle, and the cartoonist to make his point.

The viewer must have certain background knowledge to understand the cartoon and to form the conceptual integration network created in the cartoon. Coulson (2002) argues that “knowledge of entrenched metaphoric and metonymic mappings is routinely exploited in the comprehension of political cartoons”. The process of the appreciation of the cartoon recruits blending processes of completion and elaboration, when information in the long term memory is matched to the structure in the blend.

Verbal expression and pictorial language represent the core of political cartoons and at the same time distinguish political cartoons from other forms of criticisms of political reality. In order to understand the message of the cartoon, the viewers very often must activate their knowledge of phraseological units and fixed expressions, which are very often exploited in political cartoons, both verbally and visually.⁵

In order to illustrate the applicability of conceptual integration theory in humor, we shall see how the principles designed within conceptual integration theory account for humor creation. In political cartoons, analyzed in this paper, modified idiomatic expressions are creatively represented both visually and verbally, creating imaginary scenarios of political affairs.

⁵ Naciscione (2010a, 2010b), Kuiper (2009), Norrick (2007), Forceville (2008).

3.1. Case study 1



Figure 2. Cartoon by David Fitzsimmons.

In our first example input space one involves the idiom *to be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth* which is used to describe a person born into wealth. Input space two contains the idiomatic expression *to put one's foot in one's mouth*. The idiom is used to describe a person who said something inappropriate, embarrassing, stupid, or wrong. Considering that Mitt Romney is gaffe-prone, this idiom is often used in connection with his blunders as a common punch line topic. The third input space embraces Mitt Romney's presidential campaign. The blend inherits the frame structure from input spaces one and two, as well as salient projections from the third input. In the blend Mitt Romney is having both a silver spoon and his left foot in his mouth, while the elephant which metonymically stands for the Republican Party comments on the scene and points out that Romney was born with a silver spoon and a silver foot in his mouth, as Mitt Romney in his speeches showed particularly insensitive towards the poor and the unemployed.

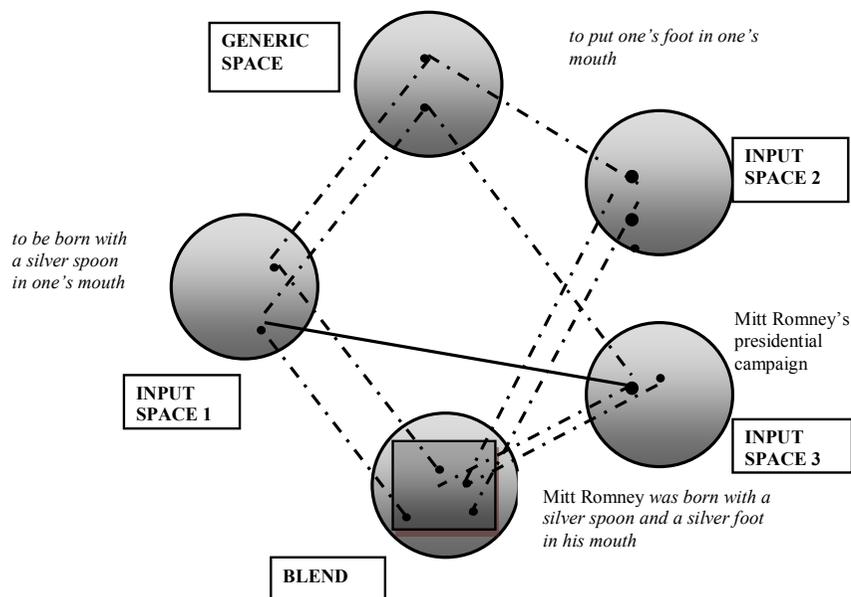


Figure 3. The conceptual integration network for Mitt Romney being born with a silver spoon and silver foot in his mouth.

In the blend the two idioms from input spaces one and two are combined into one, and the second idiom is further modified as the verb phrase *put* is replaced with the verb phrase *to be born* and the possessive pronoun is replaced with the adjective *silver*, which intensifies the meaning of the modification and highlights the fact that Mitt Romney only cares about his social class, the rich.

3.2. Case study 2

In the second cartoon input space one involves the idiomatic expression *the opera ain't over till the fat lady sings*, which means that the outcome cannot be known until the final results are announced and one should not make premature judgments or give up too soon. In input space two we have Rudy Giuliani's presidential campaign for the 2008 elections. Input space one provides the frame structure for the blend.



Figure 3. Cartoon by John Darkow.

In the blend Giuliani is dressed like an opera character, actually a fat lady whose appearance marks the near end of the play. However, he is actually wearing the clothes worn in Ancient Rome, which is an allusion to Giuliani's Italian origins and the Republican tradition of Ancient Rome. It is also important to point out that in 1997 at the annual political roast, Rudy Giuliani appeared dressed like a woman wearing a wig and make-up. Many political analysts believe that that might have ruined his macho image and influenced his political career. The cartoon alludes to Giuliani's unsuccessful presidential campaign and his withdrawal. Many analysts described Giuliani's campaign as unusual as he first focused on multiprimary big states and not on small states in which the primaries are first held. It was soon proved that his strategy was not a very good one, since he lost primaries in many states. After achieving such poor results, he and the members of his team decided to put all their efforts into the Florida primary. Nevertheless, he finished in third place and lost almost any chance to recover in the Super Tuesday primaries, which eventually resulted in his withdrawal from the race. It seems that Giuliani not only applied the wrong strategy, but also gave up before exploring all of the possibilities for a comeback. In doing that, he sang the fat lady part for his campaign and made it officially over.

3.3. Case study 3



Figure 4. Cartoon by R. J. Matson.

In our third cartoon input space one involves the idiomatic expression *one bad apple spoils the whole bunch*, while in input space two we have Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. The blend contains a modification of the idiom from input space one, as it embraces the expression *one bad bundle does not spoil the whole bunch*. This is an instance of substitution, since instead of the noun *apple* a noun *bundle* is used, which is an informal expression for a large amount of money. The original idiom is further modified, as we have negation of the positive expression. Input space one provides the frame structure for the blend. The blend also receives projections from input space two, as this input space contains information about fundraising for Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. One of the fundraisers, Norman Hsu was involved in financial fraud, and Hillary's team is worried that it might reflect badly on their campaign. In the blend, Hsu is represented as a worm which intends to ruin Hillary's apples. In this example the cartoonist played with the word *worm*. Apart from being used to name a thin creature, the word *worm* can also be used to describe a person who has a weak character and does not behave



well towards other people. This clever exploitation of the polysemous word *worm* results in a humorous blend. In the blend Hillary is throwing out apples that are full of Hsu's worms and in that way tries to repair the damage and cut all ties to her former fundraiser. She is either refusing to believe that the rest of her funding is tainted or attempting to convince the public that there are no other irregularities in her funding. However, it seems that all her efforts will be fruitless, as the pictorial representation shows that all apples are rotten and that is not possible to repair the damage.

4. Discussion

From our three case studies we may tentatively suggest that the key element in the creation of humor in conceptual blending is the incongruity produced in the blended space, which prompts us to go back to the inputs in order to resolve incongruity. As Marín-Arrese (2003) claims, “[t]he problem solving or resolution of the incongruity is realised by projecting backward to these input spaces ...” In the imaginary scenario in the blend, Mitt Romney is depicted as being born with a silver spoon and a silver foot in his mouth. In the second cartoon Giuliani is dressed like an opera character, actually a fat lady whose appearance marks the near end of the play. In the third cartoon Hillary is throwing out apples that are full of Hsu's worms and in that way tries to repair the damage and cut all ties to her former fundraiser.

All of these incongruities prompt the viewer to unpack the blend by looking for the inputs (cf. Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 333). Therefore, in order to understand the meaning of these cartoons, the viewer must unpack the blend and reconstruct the input spaces following the cues represented verbally and visually in the cartoons. Hence, in the completion stage of blending, the viewers must solve the interpretative puzzle based on the cues provided in the cartoon, which activate appropriate portions of knowledge.

In that sense, in the first cartoon, a cue which prompts the viewer to activate knowledge regarding Mitt Romney's presidential campaign are visually represented. However, as the organizing frames which structure the blend are projected from input spaces one and two, the interpretation of the meaning of the cartoon to a great extent relies on the activation of the idioms *to be born with a silver spoon in one's mouth* and *to put one's foot in one's mouth*. In this cartoon, the visual representation of the literal meaning of the idioms prompts the viewer to retrieve this idiom from the long-term memory. In addition, the verbal cue presented in the car-



toon, *Good grief, Mitt, you were born with a silver spoon and a silver foot in your mouth*, reinforces this interpretation. In the second cartoon, the caption *The fat lady is singing! That can't be a good sign for Rudy!*, contains cues for the activation of the knowledge about the literal and figurative meaning of the idiom *the opera ain't over till the fat lady sings* and Giuliani's presidential campaign. Therefore, in this example a component of the idiom, that is, *a lady who is singing*, is visually represented, while the text balloon contains the complete idiom with its figurative meaning. A part of the idiom *fat lady* is also inscribed on Giuliani's shield in order to reinforce its meaning. In the third example the caption contains modification of the idiom *one bad bundle does not spoil the whole bunch*, while the retrieval of the original idiom is triggered by the caricature of Hillary Clinton throwing out apples that are full of Hsu's worms.

Therefore, it can be said that idioms creatively manipulated verbally and visually in these examples play an important role in the creation of meaning of these cartoons. Furthermore, the incongruity and humor created in the blend also successfully criticize the absurdities of the real world. In that sense, Coulson (2002) finds that the emergent structure in the blend can promote the construals in the input spaces. Therefore, apart from resolving the incongruity created in the blend, backward projections from the blended space to input spaces reinforce construals in input spaces in accordance with the new structure created in the blend.

In that sense, in the first cartoon, backward projections highlight the fact that Mitt Romney might not be the best Republican presidential candidate as he is gaffe-prone and could ruin the reputation of the party, since he only cares about his social class. In the second example, the blend projects back to the input spaces highlighting the fact that Rudy Giuliani gave up before exploring all of the possibilities for a comeback. In the third cartoon, backward projections highlight the fact that all Hillary's efforts to repair the damage and cut all ties to her former fundraiser seem fruitless. Therefore, one can argue that the emergent structure in the blend not only helps us conceptualize a certain scenario but it also reinforces a certain construal in the input spaces. In that sense, Coulson (2002) concludes that "[c]onceptual integration processes allow us to construct bizarre, disposable concepts which in turn promote particular construals of their input domains."

5. Conclusion

The analysis conducted shows that blending theory successfully explains the creation of humor and provides the answer to the question why humor is used as a criticism of reality. It has been shown that in order to understand the meaning of po-



litical cartoons, the viewer must unpack the blend and reconstruct the input spaces following the cues represented verbally and visually in the cartoons. Actually, in the completion stage of blending, the viewers must solve the interpretative puzzle based on the cues provided in the cartoon, which activate appropriate portions of knowledge. The analysis also indicates that the idioms artistically adapted in these examples seem to be crucial components in contributing to the creation of a visual narrative with humorous effects.

Although this paper presents preliminary research of humor in light of conceptual integration theory, it has shown that conceptual integration theory can be successfully applied to this realm and can also provide some valuable insights. To a certain extent, conceptual integration theory can explain why political cartoons help shape public opinions.

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TKO JE ROĐEN SA SREBRENIM STOPALOM U USTIMA? MODIFICIRANI IDIOMATSKI IZRAZI U POLITIČKIM KARIKATURAMA

U radu se ispituje primjenljivost teorije konceptualne integracije u analizi političkih karikatura, odnosno uloga modificiranih idiomatskih izraza u procesu razumijevanja karikatura. U političkim karikaturama koje smo analizirali u radu modificirani idiomatski izrazi igraju važnu ulogu u stvaranju humora. U konceptualnointegracijskim mrežama imamo ulazne prostore koji opisuju bizarne scenarije u uspoređenju s onima uskladivim sa svijetom poli-



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tike. Kombinacija tih scenarija stvara nesklad u blendu, koji je ključan za stvaranje humorističnog značenja. Pored činjenice da konceptualna integracija može objasniti nastanak humora i stvaranje njegova značenja, također može otkriti zašto se humor koristi u kritiziranju političke stvarnosti.

Ključne riječi: teorija konceptualne integracije; modificirani idiomatski izrazi; humor; nesklad.