Using Blending Theory
To Understand and to Teach Internet Memes

Abstract

In this paper, I am focusing on the Blending Theory in Cognitive Linguistics. For the first part, I conducted a brief literature review of the recent studies in the field of the Blending Theory, including the topics of figurative proverbs, semantic change, and morphological blend. Then, I presented an in-depth analysis of a Disney meme to examine how the blending works on Internet memes and how Internet memes achieve the goal of being humorous. In the third part, I presented a detailed lesson plan including the teaching context, goals, objectives, and most importantly, the activities and pedagogical implications inspired by the Blending Theory.

Literature Review

Andersson, D. (2013) presented an analytical model for figurative proverbs based on Conceptual Blending. He argues that three aspects of knowledge are necessary for people to perceive the meaning of figurative proverbs, which are culture, cognition, and context. However, the cognitive aspects have always been overlooked in previous studies on proverbs. In this study, he aimed to examine proverb meaning from a cognitive perspective, especially focused on how much Blending Theory can contribute to the discussion of proverbs. The model he designed combines the Blending Theory with the concept of “Base Meaning” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1973), which refers to a conventional idea that is shared by a population.

Andersson presented several crucial constructs for his model. He first introduced the proverb model that was created by Lakoff and Turner (1989), in which the meaning of proverb includes a generic level schema, a specific-level schema that is the proverb, and a metaphorical understanding of the situation that the proverb occurs in. Then, he explained and analyzed the contribution of Base Meaning: a proverb can be described with brief paraphrase and therefore convey meaning. The perception of the Base Meaning differs from time to time and people to people. Finally, he presented the major constructs and principles of the Blending Theory.

The model he designed contains three spaces. The first space is the base meaning space, which is a blended spaces derived from two input spaces: the input space 1 of source knowledge and the input space 2 of knowledge of human affairs. The second space is situational meaning space, which is also a blended space. In this space, the previous blended “base meaning” space becomes input space 1, while its input space 2 is the reference situation of the proverb. The third space is the performance space, where the proverb is viewed as an action that causes results. Andersson then proved the validity by applying this model to several proverbs, including the general proverbs and the proverbs used in context. This study is a demonstration of applying Blending Theory in explaining cultural and linguistic events. Plus, it has high pedagogical values in teaching L2 learners to understand proverbs within context.

Grygiel, M. (2004) looked at the semantic change from the perspective of Blending Theory. He states that the historical semantic change of meaning is actually directly related to or even a by-product of peoples’ Conceptual Blending process. He
examined the process of conceptual blending and meaning construction in the changes of meaning of the semantic domain BOY.

For centuries, linguists from different fields have studied the semantic change, however, the general principle has yet been found for this issue. The author believes that cognitive linguistics has the ability to provide an answer for this matter, which provides the paper with exigency. The common cognitive researches and analysis on the semantic change are basically based on prototype semantic, conceptual metaphor theory, or the network model. However, the author argues that conceptual blending is as adequate as any other cognitive tools for understanding and analyzing semantic changes.

Grygiel’s analysis of the domain BOY was mainly guided the following questions: What lexical items there are to express the meaning BOY? Along with the development of time, how did certain expressions stand for certain concepts? And, how were certain expressions associated with other concepts?” With the questions in mind, he first introduced the historical synonyms of BOY, including the expression from Old English to Modern English, which provided a clear idea of the semantic change of BOY. He stated that the “old” lexical items that were related to BOY did not just disappear to nowhere; instead, they went through a process of semantic change. For example, “servant” changed into “soldier” or “slave”, which all related to BOY in certain period of time.

The author examined the semantic change: BIRTH-CHILD-SON-BOY for the first part of case analysis. He argues that the change from BIRTH to other lexical items actually represent the cause-effect conceptual blending. The first mental space contains a mother giving birth, while the second mental space contains a newborn. This conceptual blend, in the author’s view, is a conventionalized blend that is already entrenched in peoples’ mind.

Then, he examined the ANIMAL-BOY semantic change, in which the some of the characteristics of certain animal blended with the characteristics of human being. In this way, the images of certain animal were transfer into humans’ experience. Meanwhile, the expression applied in the input space of animal transformed and are used in the blended space of HUMAN BEINGS. Also, the semantic change BOY-SERVANT was analyzed. The two input space, BOY and SERVANT, shared a generic spaced containing their function, social expectation and low hierarchical statues. The author believed that this particular conceptual blending existed for a long time before SERVANT became conventionalized as a replacement of BOY. Finally, the semantic change PARS PRO TOTO was used to explain their part-whole and property vital relations and to demonstrate that links between two input spaces could be compressed to become relations in the blend.

In the end, Grygiel implied that conceptual metaphor is the optimal way to study semantic change, comparing to other common approaches in cognitive linguistics. Prototypes semantics, in his opinion, overlooks the synchronic polysemy, pragmatic ambiguity, and the historical change of meaning. Conceptual metaphor theory only focus on two domains of “input”, while conceptual blending theory allows as many input spaces as needed. Also, in conceptual blending, the emergent structure can include elements that were not in either of the input spaces. In conclusion, conceptual blending theory is an adequate tool to study semantic change that should not be neglected.

Gries, S.T. (2004) provided the earliest empirical evidence of the essential role of the similarity plays in the process of intentional morphological blending in English.
As we know, a great amount of words are formed by morphological blending which typically involves two sources of words, for example “brunch” and “alcoholiday”. In this study, Gries examined the degree of the similarity between the two source words and between the source words and the blend. She conducted several quantitative analysis based on the tests of 988 blends in her corpus of morphological blends.

In her finding, she called the process and rules of morphological blending the “blend coiner”. She found out that the general rule for blending to happen it to have two words that to some extend denote the same or similar semantic meaning/concept required for the intended effect. Meanwhile, the two source words should be similar to each other in the length of the words, as well as the phonological aspects and the stress of the words. An essential principle of morphological blending is the recognizability of the blended word, which reflects the human desire to maximize the similarity between the sources and the blend. She proved that a successful blend includes source words with high similarity are blended in the fashion that increase the overlap between them and at the same time preserve their length and stress patterns. She also argued that the similarity on source words’ stress patterns is more crucial than the preservation of their length and phonemes.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis, I am examining how Internet memes work in order to achieve the humorous effects. I choose Internet memes as my subject of analysis because “it is a virally transmitted cultural symbol or social idea (Gil, n.d.)”, which means it reflects and include the cultural model of this society. Plus, most of the Internet memes are humor centred and includes idiomatic use of language, which contributes to second language teaching.

I am going to analyze a Disney meme (figure.1) in which a girl is holding a strand of hair and looked worried while a man is sitting right next to her. The text on the meme says, “But you didn’t have to cut me off”. In my opinion, understanding the humorous effect of this meme involves the blending of three mental spaces: the cutting hair space, the stop contacting space, and the lyrical space.

The first input space, the cutting hair space, focuses on the more literal meaning of the text. Since the comprehension of the meaning “cut if off” requires both attention to the picture and the text, I believe there exist two subordinate input spaces that blended into the input space one. For those two subordinate mental spaces, I will call them input space 1.1 and input space 1.2. The first one is the picture space and the second one is the text space.

In the picture space, the patient is a girl. But, if the audience has the encyclopedic knowledge, he/she will recognize that the girl is actually named Rapunzel, who is a well-known character among Disney princesses. The action in the picture is “holding a strand of hair”. Similarly, if the audience has the encyclopedic knowledge of this princess character, he/she can therefore draw a logical conclusion that the strand of hair belongs to Rapunzel, because her character is known for her extremely long hair in the animation movie “tangled”. However, if the audience does not own this piece of background information, he/she may at least have the speculation that the hair belongs to the girl who is holding it, because the color of the strand of hair in her hand matches with the color of her hair. According most peoples’ encyclopedic knowledge of common sense, the same color of strands of hair may belong to the same person. The fact that the girl holding the strand of hair and looked worried is another evidence. Besides, because of rules of continuity, that the strand of
hair is placed in adjacent to the girl in the picture, viewers can easily form connection between the two entities. In this input space, another crucial encyclopedic knowledge involved is the common sense that hair can be detached from head by different means. Apart from the main theme I described above, the picture space also includes a bystander, which is the man who is sitting next to her.

In the text space (input space 1.2), the message is rather simple. The agent is “you”, the addressee, while the patient is “I (me)”, the addressee. The action is “cut off” or “cut somebody off”. Here, the encyclopedic knowledge needed is that being cut is one of the means to detach hair from head. The two subordinate mental spaces share a generic space, in which somebody has cut a person off something. The generic space includes two people: the first person (or a part of this person) has somehow been cut off while the second person is responsible for the action “cut off”. In the picture space, the first person is Rapunzel and the second person, although not been clearly identified, has to exist, because someone had cut the hair off her head. In the text space, “I (me)” is the first person and “you” is the second one. Another element in the generic space is the action of “cutting”. Similarly, in the text space the action is obviously stated whereas in the picture space the action has to be implied based on encyclopedic knowledge.

Having the generic space in common, the text space and the picture space have been compressed into a blended space, which in this case is the input space one: cutting hair space. In this space, the agent is the man, who is the bystander in the picture space. The action is “to cut something/ to cut something off”, the object is a strand of hair, and the patient is Rapunzel. The crucial connection in the mapping of two spaces is the encyclopedic knowledge that hair can be detached by different means and being cut is one of the means. Thus, the information views of this meme are getting in the cutting hair space is: A man has cut off a strand of Rapunzel’s hair. I noticed that, this process of blending is actually forced on the audience. The picture and the text originally do not have obvious mapping. The picture merely shows the strand of hair has been detached while the text space did not point out the object that had been cut off. By putting the two things together, the audience will then unconsciously try to build the cross-domain mapping to make sense of the combination of picture and text. To make this meme humorous, such forced blending is necessary.

Now that the input space one is clarified, I will move on to the illustration of input space two: stop contacting space. In this space, the agent is “you”, as it stated in text, and the patient is “I (me)”. However, the action is no longer “cutting something off”, but “stop contacting someone”. The crucial encyclopedic knowledge needed here is that the expression “cutting someone off” is a metaphorical and idiomatic usage of English, meaning to stop contacting someone.

Here, the reason why the metaphorical use of cut contributes to the humorous effect of the meme is practically because the metaphor is not obvious. People have to go through a process of distinguishing and identify the literal meaning and the metaphorical meaning of “cut off” to understand the meme. Although the expression “cut somebody off” is already a conventionalized expression in English, it is still a metaphorical use of English that involves the conceptual metaphor +RELATIONSHIP IS BOND+. This feature of this particular and other similar memes make them optimal tools for teaching metaphorical use of language. The motivation for the metaphor is salient in the meme, where students can perceive the literal meaning and the metaphorical meaning at the same time and therefore make
connection. In this case, the literal meaning of cutting off is visually depicted while the metaphorical meaning is inferred.

Apart from the cutting hair space and the stop contacting space, there is actually a third input space: the lyric space. In this space, the agent, patient and the action are the same as in the second input space. The different element in this space is the encyclopedic knowledge of the song named Somebody That I Used to Know, a pop song that was released in 2012 and has became one of the highest charting song since then. The popularity of this song has made its lyric ubiquitous among Internet memes. By singing “But you didn’t have to cut me off” in this song, the singer was complaining about the fact his ex-girlfriend stopped contacting him and even pretended not knowing him after their break-up.

Having this background knowledge enables the viewers of this meme to assume that the text serves as a message from one person to another person in a romantic relationship. For second language teaching, one of the greatest merits of analyzing pedagogical materials from the blending conceptual perspective is that the analysis can identify the specific area of cultural/background knowledge that needs to be taught explicitly. In this case, breaking the process of understanding the meme into different mental spaces and identifying the sources of knowledge enables me to pinpoint the song as the exact background knowledge to provide for L2 learners who are from different culture.

Although the encyclopedic knowledge of the song helps viewers to have a better understanding of the meme, the lyric space is not necessary for people to realize meme’s humorous effect. The punch line would still make perfect sense for the people who never heard of the song, because the “cutting hair space” and the “stop contacting” are able to be produce a humorous blended space through compression. In the blended space, where the meme is finally viewed in a holistic fashion, the message is clear. The agent is “you (a person who are/was is a romantic relationship with the patient)”, which could be the addressee in the viewer’s mind; the patient is both “Rapunzel (a girl with long hair)” and “I (the viewer)”; the actions are “stop contacting” and “cutting the hair”. The emergent structure therefore could be that “you” stopped contacting me as if “you” cut my hair my hair. Naturally, not everyone would come up with the same emergent structure. The above assumption of the emergent structure based merely on my understanding and speculation.

As I mentioned above, it is possible for different people to have different perception and mental processes, which would finally leads to the different emergent structure we have. In the process of analysis, I noticed that not all the viewers built up the input space two (the metaphorical space) as the “stop contacting”. Rather, some of them perceived it as “stop providing money space”, and some of them think it should be “interpreting speech space”. Interestingly, “stop providing money for someone” and “to interpret someone while he/she is talking” are all very common usage of the expression “cut somebody off”. Although I think the “stop contacting” meaning of the expression is more prototypical in this particular meme, and that the lyric space provides evidence that “stop contacting” was the meaning in the author’s perception when this meme was created, I do not see any necessity to exclude any of other interpretations in input space two.

According to the review’s encyclopedic knowledge, the metaphorical use of language should not be taken literally. However, making the metaphorical and the literal meaning collide is exact what the meme is trying to achieve. When people see this meme, they would naturally build up at least two mental space of input: cutting hair space and stop contacting space. Then, the review will experience certain degree
of confusion because the blending is not successful at that time. The literal meaning and the metaphorical meaning, in this case, are incompatible. Therefore they have to consciously seek exaptation to make the blending work and to produce an emergent structure that is plausible. The process of seeking explanation, which is initiated by the compression of two mental spaces, is the crucial reason why the viewers perceive this meme as humorous.

(Please see the next page for the visual depiction)
Generic Space
The first person (or a part of this person) has somehow been cut off while the second person is responsible for the action “cut off”.

Input 1.1 Picture space
Patient: Rapunzel/ a girl
Action: holding a strand of hair
Bystander: man
Encyclopedic knowledge:
1. Hair can be detached from head by different means.
2. The strand of hair belongs to Rapunzel, a character in the Disney animation tangled, who has very long hair.
Implied: the strand of hair belongs to the girl.

Input 1.2 text space
Agent: “you”
Action: “cut off”
Patient: “me”
Encyclopedic knowledge:
Being cut is one of the means to detach hair from head.

Input space one: cutting hair space
Agent: man (implied)
Action: Cut
Object: a strand of hair
Patient: Rapunzel

Input space two: stop contacting space
Agent: “you”
Action: “stop contacting me”
Patient: “me”
Encyclopedic knowledge:
Cut sb. off is a metaphorical and idiomatic usage of English, meaning to stop contacting someone.

Input space three: lyric space
Encyclopedic knowledge:
Goyte—Some body that I used to know

Alternate input space two:
Other metaphorical meanings of the expression “cut somebody off”.

Blended Spaces
Agent: “you”, (probably someone in a romantic relationship)
Action: stop contacting
Patient: me
Encyclopedic knowledge: metaphorical usage of English should not be taken literally
Emergent structure: “you” stopped contacting me as if “you” cut my hair my hair.

Visual Depiction of the Blending Process of the “Cut Me Off” Meme

Restrict the theme to romantic relationships
Lesson Plan

Class Size: About 15-20 students

Class Time: 90 minutes

Target Audience:
- 18-22 years old Chinese EFL students
- Admitted into American universities for Bachelor/Master programs
- Have four to seven months before their departure to the U.S.

➢ Who are the students?
This population is composed of 18-22 years old Chinese EFL learners, who are just admitted into American Universities for Bachelor or Master programs. Normally, there are four to seven months after they receive offers from American Universities and before they leave for the U.S. In this period of time, most of them have no classes or internship to do. They also finished the standard tests, including the TOEFL/IELTS and the SAT.

➢ Why use memes to teach them?
The most salient characteristic of this group of students is that, although they earned intermediate or even high scores in standard tests, they do not necessarily have adequate communicative and cultural competence for socialization with native speakers. Among all the aspects that affects to their communicative and cultural competence, understanding humor, being humorous, and producing figurative language are the most difficult task for them to preform. This is why I am design this lesson that focusing on the above three aspects simultaneously.

Another characteristic of this population is that they use various types of social networks excessively. This means that the form of meme is already familiar to or even favored by most of them. Using the material of their interest would provide motivation for them to learn. Besides, in their experience of learning English, most of them have been learning English for pragmatic reasons, like passing a test. Using memes would make them realize that popular culture and social networks can all be reasonable and useful resources for them to improve English. It also motivates students to learn English for pleasure, which will achieve the optimal learning result for L2 learners.

General Goals of Lesson:
- To improve students’ cultural and communicative competence
- To help students to understand humor in English
- To help students to understand figurative language in English
- To build students’ confidence in producing humor/figurative language in English
- To facilitate to recognize cultural resources for English Learning

Objectives of Lesson:
- To understand the concept of meme as a cultural phenomenon
To have a better understanding how humor works in English, especially puns
To be able to understand and produce the idiomatic expression “cut somebody off” using its literal meaning and several metaphorical meanings
To have a better understanding of idioms and idiomatic usage of English
To raise the awareness of figurative language

Procedure:

A. Briefly introduce the concept “meme”

B. Discuss the meme students bring to class:
   - Encourage students to look for memes before the class and ask them to bring the memes they found interesting in class. Each one of the students are allowed to bring 1 or 2 meme(s) to class, either in Chinese or in English. In this activity, whether the text on the meme is English does not matter, because the objective of this activity is only to give them a rough idea of what meme is and why memes are interesting.
   - Break students into pairs and ask them to: a) describe the meme they have; b) try to explain why the meme made them laugh/ appear to be humorous
   - Ask several students to present their discussion and findings in class

C. Present the Disney meme “cut me off” and discuss why is it interesting with class.
   - Present the meme of the screen and assess students’ understanding by their reaction. Meanwhile, the instructor can provide some background knowledge for students to have a better understanding of the meme, for example, to remind/introduce student of/to the song “Somebody That I Used To Know”.

D. Explain how this meme works (using the data analysis)
   - Apart form identifying the appropriate background information to provide in class, the Blending Theory contributes the most explaining how meme works, that is, how does this meme achieve the goal of being humorous. The data analysis could serve as a reference for the explanation. However, the explanation in class should be much more concise more it is presented in the data analysis. Plus, instead of using the terms “mental space” and “input space”, the instructor could simply say, “there are two parts/levels/aspects of this meme.” In the process, raise the awareness of figurative language.
E. Introduce other metaphorical meanings of “cut somebody off”
   ❖ Material needed: A video clip of The Big Bang Theory

F. Provide each group with one meme

G. Break the class into groups of four and then assign each group a meme that contains idiomatic use of English and humor factors. Give the students some time to discuss how their memes work. Then, pick one student representative from each group and guide the students to explain their thoughts.
   ❖ Material needed (sample):
H. **Raise the awareness of idioms/idiomatic use of English**

I. **Provide Grumpy Cat memes**

J. In the end, the instructor is going to expand the students’ repertoire of idioms and idiomatic use of English by teaching the expressions explicitly. A series of famous memes known as Grumpy Cat memes are going to be presents. Because every picture of the Grumpy Cat memes looks similar to each other, students can focus more on the expressions. Plus, the consistency of this series of picture helps students to understand each expression more accurately.

- **Material needed (sample):**
Reference


