

Blending and polarization: Cognition under pressure

Peter Harder

English Department, University of Copenhagen, Njalsgade 130, DK-2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark

Received 9 December 2002; received in revised form 19 August 2003; accepted 10 February 2004

Abstract

Blending allows us to integrate pictures that do not co-exist in real life, which has implications for contexts where alternatives need to be considered, including politics. These special features can be illuminated by comparing blending with other ways of handling situations that do not lend themselves to simple and harmonious conceptual construal. In this article I describe some features of the conceptual processes that occur in polarization. Among the salient features of polarization are that the two parties develop more and more divergent and hostile positions, the conceptual freedom of movement gradually becomes more constricted, mental spaces are kept more rigidly separate, and new perspectives become harder to imagine. To understand the conceptual dimension, it is also necessary to consider how such processes are shaped by and contribute to the pattern of interaction of which they constitute one aspect. The main illustration of what happens in polarization is post-9/11 conceptualization, as reported in news reports and commentaries, of American policies in relation to the Muslim world. As a salient element in this process, I suggest an analysis of what was going on when President George W. Bush called Ariel Sharon a ‘man of peace’.

© 2005 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Polarization; Blending; Conflict; Political linguistics; De-differentiation

1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of blending has turned out to be applicable to a wide variety of issues in linguistics. The basic idea of two mental constructs which come together and give rise to a third has the kind of appeal that one associates with the fundamental laws of the universe, cf. [Fauconnier and Turner \(2002\)](#). The following article, however, takes its

E-mail address: harder@hum.ku.dk.

point of departure in the sophisticated type of blends (Bache's 'third order blends'), those familiar from demonstration examples such as the one where a present-day philosopher gives his argument the form of a 'debate with Kant'. Beginning where established metaphors (with well-entrenched mappings) leave off, such complex blends add a new dimension of conceptual creativity by virtue of the power of 'emergent effects'. In a very real sense, such blends can take us to mental locations where we have never been before, and create options that would not have existed without them. The philosopher who casts himself as Kant's discussion partner, leaving Kant without a good answer to his last and most important argument, situates his philosophical position in a way that would not be possible without the special imagined extension of the real world that 'third order blending' makes possible. For that reason I believe the complex end of the spectrum is where the notion of blending has its greatest strength.

In order to appreciate the opportunities offered by this advanced conceptual process, however, it is instructive to look at it not only in the context of its less sophisticated cousins, but also in the context of processes that run directly counter to it. The point of what follows is to introduce into the blending discussion a type of process, that of polarization, which moves conceptualization in the opposite direction from the one I describe as characteristic of blending. It occurs in situations where two opposed parties goad each other into more and more divergent and hostile positions, as a result of which the conceptual freedom of movement gradually becomes more constricted, mental spaces are kept more rigidly separate, and fewer new perspectives are allowed to emerge. But it is not just a matter of playing the film backwards. The dynamics involved can only be understood by expanding the perspective to include other mechanisms of dynamic conceptualization, thus simultaneously profiling some of the central characteristics of blending.

Furthermore, the problem is more than strictly conceptual. It is necessary to view conceptualization in a functional perspective, asking not only what conceptual processes are at work, but also how such processes are shaped by and contribute to the pattern of interaction of which they constitute one aspect. Over and above the conceptualizations per se, we must try to understand their contextual embedding, and the way that contributes to the creation or reduction of conceptual options. A central point in the analysis of polarization is therefore the way in which social and emotional forces interact with conceptual processes—and how both the degradation and advancement of conceptual capabilities must be understood in terms of the functional pressure exerted by such forces.

The distinction between a functional and a cognitive approach to types of human imaginative and linguistic skill is not so important in an individual perspective, since 'function' is typically indistinguishable from 'conceived outcome'. However, in a social context, the difference is clearer, because the way things work out depends on more than what can be encompassed inside an individual mind (cp. also Harder, 2003a). Since the dynamics of polarization depends on the reactions that two opposing parties trigger in each other, this process provides a clear case of how the conceptualizations of the individual minds involved must be understood in relation to forces that are external in relation to the conceptual content itself.

The emphasis on sophisticated blending, viewed in the context of less sophisticated and occasionally debased alternatives, goes with a focus that is not on the way subtle skills are 'grounded', but on how cognitive achievements 'get off the ground', enabling human

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10460186>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10460186>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)