

RETHINKING LEXICAL COHESION: A CASE STUDY OF COLLOCATION THROUGH FORMAL AND CONCEPTUAL INTEGRATION IN MEDIA POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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This article contends that the collocation of words in a given textual situation is closely linked to the establishment of mental spaces and to the construction of mental models which are generated online as information is received and discourse is interpreted and processed (Fauconnier 1994, Fauconnier and Turner 2002). This connects with aspects of Hoey's theory of priming (2005), where collocation is seen as a textual cohesive phenomenon governed by the text producers' choices of word combinations and by the text receivers' prospects of re-usage. The analysis of data from a small corpus of political discourse in the media supports the conceptual approach to collocation, and suggests considering this lexico-semantic cohesive function of words a cognitive property of linguistic expressions.

Key words: Lexical cohesion, collocation, priming, mental spaces, blending, conceptual integration.

1. INTRODUCTION

Fauconnier and Turner have described in a number of publications (1994, 2001, 2002) a model of cognition which they term the "conceptual integration

network model.” This cognitive model applies to all types of linguistic and non-linguistic situations in life, and is especially valuable when unpacking complex uses of language, especially those which are creative. The conceptual integration network model is recognized by Fauconnier and Turner as the cognitive system underlying most intellectual or public spheres such as classic philosophy, abstract theorizing, or traditional rhetoric practices; but they also show that it is the foundation for everyday conversation, social interaction, individual reasoning and a guiding force for children’s thinking skills development. In general terms, they identify three “*Is*” for the human mind: “identity, integration and imagination” and say that “they all work inextricably together” by way of complex trajectories and processes, although it is a common trait for these systematic operations, especially in the less involved cases, to remain “invisible to consciousness” (2002:15-18).

In their work, Fauconnier and Turner insist on demonstrating the universality of the cognitive phenomena they describe by providing numerous and varied examples, which they painstakingly analyze to make their point that “conceptual integration” or “conceptual blending” is a “basic mental operation, highly imaginative but crucial to even the simplest kind of thought” (2002:18). In this paper, this model of conceptualization will be implemented, firstly, to unload the semantic density set forth in the discourse of some journalists covering the Democratic Party’s nomination process in the long-running scenario of the US 2008 presidential elections. Both in the media and on the Internet, cognitive blending and complex conceptual integration have been used as efficient discourse strategies to support or attack the candidates. Secondly, the data gathered will shed light on some aspects of cohesive collocation and will demonstrate that the tendency of lexical items to co-occur is not necessarily a permanent quality of words, and must be related to their semantic proximity or to their pertaining to a given frame. Collocation may depend, as Hoey argues in his theory of priming (2005), on the (more or less creative) needs of language users who may decide to build or exploit a set of not frequently co-occurring items or semantic associations and keep them productive for specific reasons over a period of time.

The cases considered in this paper are relevant and pertinent to illustrate the point we are trying to make, because they involve recurrent associations of what may be termed “new” lexical items. More specifically, the elements analyzed here consist of made-up words which have been constructed through blending and involve more than one input in their process of conceptualization. The novelty of the lexical elements thus counts as evidence of the newness of their consistent connection, while their combination and recurrent usage define a network which is tightly bound to a time-limited context (that of the American

pre-elections debate) and is therefore expected to be, in all probability, transitory.

We are aware that the issues discussed here might also be relevant to some of the latest studies about political discourse which advocate the incorporation of cognitive linguistics into critical discourse analysis (cf. Paul Chilton 2004, 2005 or Hart 2007). The emphasis of this paper is, however, on the light which a cognitive approach might shed onto the lexico-semantic phenomenon of collocation, with no special focus on aspects related to the socio-political context and ideology.

2. THE ANALYSIS

The majority of the names fabricated in the media for the two competing Democratic candidates seeking nomination for the US presidency during the 2008 campaign are prototypical cases of what Fauconnier and Turner have identified as formal single-word integration or blending (2002:365ff.). The names invented for them are also witty, creative and striking, and therefore easy to trace consciously. For example, we have found in the media “Obambi” or “Sir Obamalot” for Barak Obama, or a set of conceptually very productive mixtures made up for Hillary Rhodam Clinton (some in combination with her husband, former president Bill Clinton), such as “Billary”, “Hilliam”, “Clintzilla” or “Hillzilla.” All these are cases of “novel conceptual blends” which make use of grammatical forms, proper names in these instances, to produce new, conceptually expanded, lexemes. Automatically, the fusion of morphemes from different inputs (Obama/Bambi; Obama/Sir Lancelot; Bill/Hillary; Hillary/William; Clinton/Godzilla; Hillary/Godzilla) triggers new conceptual material and a whole set of inferences is activated through the projection and integration of properties and capacities from the input sources.

The cases cited above undergo a structural process which is similar to some of the examples analyzed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002:365ff.), such as the blends in “Chunnel” (for the European rail tunnel beneath the English Channel), or “McJobs” (for the type of job which has the specific characteristics of low-level jobs at MacDonal’d’s). In these formal single-word integration processes, a basic morphological and phonological compatibility is required, and the conceptual load of the (modifying) input space which alters the morphology of the more central space (*Tunnel/Jobs* in Fauconnier and Turner’s examples; *Obama* and *Hillary* or *Clinton* in ours) is used to introduce meaning innovations in the blend. Fauconnier and Turner specify that the power and efficiency of the blended word resides in its “homogeneous internal structure and its

corresponding formal compression.” They also say that “formal blending can occur independent of whether there is any background conceptual blending” (2002:367). All the examples which are being focused on here, however, present cases of highly structured conceptual blends which run parallel to the formal blend evident at first sight on the surface level of the words.

In some of the examples under analysis, i.e. “Obambi” or “Sir Obamalot” “Clintzilla” or “Hillzilla”, the conceptual operation consists in drawing simplistic analogies between the candidates, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, and some “good” or “evil” characters from the tales, fables, movies, and books which sustain the blended words (*Bambi*, *Sir Lancelot* and *The Arthurian legend of the Knights of the Round Table*, *Godzilla*, *Bambi meets Godzilla*, *Bambi vs. Godzilla*). In the remaining examples (“Billary”, “Hilliam”), the strategy is to present the female candidate, Hillary Clinton, as a formally insoluble one with her husband the former President. In all cases, the hidden force of the blended words is aimed at altering the conceptualization/categorization frame of both candidates.

2.1 “WILL HILLZILLA CRUSH OBAMBI?”

Such is the effect achieved by journalist Maureen Dowd in an early campaign article entitled “Will Hillzilla Crush Obambi?” (*Times Select* December 13, 2006). In the body of the text, she explores rather literally the somewhat slippery position of both Democratic candidates in relation to the pros and cons of exploiting for their own benefit the (from a traditional white-men politics perspective) non-standard factor of their respective gender and race. In Dowd’s own words “the question of the moment is: Which would be a greater handicap in a presidential bid, gender or race? The answer will depend, of course, on how manly the woman, and how white the black.” Here is an example of how the article addresses the issue:

Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Hussein Obama both straddle two worlds, trying to profit from both.

Despite her desire to seem far more experienced than her rival, Hillary’s role in high-level politics has been mostly that of a spouse — a first lady who felt that she got elected too. The Yale-trained lawyer had one foot in the “The West Wing” and one in “Desperate Housewives”, one foot in the world of hotshot alphas ruling the globe, and one in the world of middle-age women humiliated by their husbands’ dallying with office cupcakes.

She won her Senate seat only after becoming sympathetic as a victim. And she still struggles with the balance between her Mars and Venus sides, sometimes showing her political steel and other times fetching coffee for male colleagues.

Senator Obama glides between the black and white political worlds. In New Hampshire on Sunday, speaking to nearly all-white audiences, the Harvard-educated lawyer looked utterly at home, dressing like a Wall Street banker on casual Friday and sounding as white as Lou Dobbs.

The shaky ground on which both candidates stand is also present in the following excerpt:

While Bill Clinton's campaign pollsters used to worry that Hillary was not coming across as maternal enough, Senator Obama peppers his talks with remarks about being a father and husband. "I don't miss diapers," he confided to some parents at a book signing in New Hampshire, and later told reporters that he would decide whether to run with his wife, Michelle — "the smartest, toughest, funniest best friend that I could ever hope for."

In the article's headline, "Will *Hillzilla* Crush *Obambi*?" (my highlighting), Dowd opts for packing the Democratic doubly ambivalent strategy of being at the same time tough and gentle into a complex blended space where both candidates inherit some relevant aspects of the personality and the situation of the fairy tale characters with which their names have been fused: softness and naiveté for Obama/Bambi, strength and harassing power for monster-like Hillary/Godzilla. In the blend, the candidates' names become a vivid and ironic representation of the image they anxiously seek to project, a fact that comes clear when at the end of the article a second question is made, "perhaps one that will trump race and gender. It's about whether he's tough and she's genuine." It is in this line that the blended nouns created for both candidates in the fairy-tale like title of the article develop their full potential and open a parallel cognitive scenario built up *ad hoc* to stage their confrontation.

Once the story frame is opened, with Obama and Hillary Clinton in the roles of Bambi and Godzilla, respectively, a new mental space and a counterfactual fictional context are set up in the mind of all participants in the communication process, offering new ways to talk and think about the Democratic candidates. Thus, words become tools to shape a new conceptualization model. In the built-up mental space, new and old meaning are compressed and reorganized, new properties are assigned accordingly and newly fabricated images are projected by the blended concepts. All these constituents can be reused, and, consequently, there is the possibility for media and other types of public discourse, of which the Internet is an excellent

exponent, to pass and develop information around these new pieces of conceptualization.

The immediate linguistic and semantic effect of the newly expanded frame is that the blended words and all other related lexical items, which the expansion incorporates, actually become “collocates” of the already existing lexical and semantic patterns of the original non-expanded frame (e.g. politics, elections, and so on) and, therefore, present a highly strong tendency to co-occur. We have examples of this fact. A quick search on the net for “Hillary” and “Monster” in combination results in 591,000 entries, while Obama and Bambi give out 154,000 appearances. Furthermore, Bill Clinton himself made use of the fairy-tale metaphorical analogy when he claimed in New Hampshire that Barack Obama’s candidacy was a Democratic “fairy-tale.” The number of entries on the Internet for this combination (fairy-tale/Democrats) is 185,000.

2.2 “OBAMBI VERSUS CLINTZILLA”

In this scenario, there are already a set of constituents which favour the construction of thought and argumentation. For instance, the same double blend Clinton/Godzilla, Obama/Bambi within the fairy tale mental model is found in Robert Tracinski’s article “Obambi Versus Clintzilla” (TIADaily.com, January 10, 2008). In this case, the Democratic party/fairy-tale combination triggers another set of semantic relations and cognitive projections which results in a double conceptual network: On the one hand, Obama – Bambi, Clinton – Godzilla; on the other, Obama – JFK – Camelot – Lancelot – Obamatot. A proof that the blend can be run with only the limits set up by imagination and common sense is that the whole text ends up establishing a third fictional link between Ted Kennedy and “Dorian Gray”, only to present Obama as the best successor of JFK. The string of relevant lexical elements in the following excerpt has been highlighted in bold:

The primaries were supposed to be a *Bambi versus Godzilla* conflict.

Obama was considered inexperienced and naïve —he’s been dubbed “*Obambi*” by his detractors— and with some justification. He is a “hothouse liberal,” nurtured in the protective environment of local Chicago politics, which is dominated by the left, so that he has never faced a serious ideological challenger. (He practically walked into his Senate seat when the Illinois Republican Party sabotaged its candidate, then replaced him at the last minute with the marginally sane Alan Keyes.)

In this scenario, the *Godzilla* expected to crush him was the allegedly fearsome Clinton political machine, run by two seasoned political operatives with a large staff of political professionals schooled in the use of dirty tricks and backed up by a vast network of Democratic Party insiders and cronies.

But something odd is happening. *Obambi* is arguably beating *Clintzilla*.

The reason is not hard to discern: it is Obama's fresh, earnest idealism. The root of his appeal is that the damned fool actually means it: he puts forth every liberal bromide as if it were still 1960. He has inspired many comparisons to *JFK*, with some dubbing his campaign "*Obamalot*," after the conventional view of the first years of the Kennedy administration as an idealized "*Camelot*." As I put it earlier this year, when Obama first emerged as a major candidate: "The left has always longed for a young, charismatic leader who will present the illusion of the left as a realm of bright-eyed, progressive idealists—an illusion that hides the tired, corrupt old ideas at the movement's core. They want *JFK* as they remember him—not *the portrait of Dorian Gray represented by his brother Teddy*. Obama restores that illusion for them."

2.3 "LUKE SKYWALKER VS DARTH VADER"

A second example of the productivity of conceptual integration and the reusage capacity of expanded frames is the article "Luke Skywalker v Darth Vader" by Gerard Baker (*The Times*, February 29, 2008). Here, the fictional tale frame is maintained, and expanded to the new domains of *Star Wars* heroes and old historical battles. The subject, this time, is not limited to the Democratic candidates as the cast also includes Republican John McCain. Links with the former articles exist. Carter's text starts with references to "Bill and Hillary Clinton" whom he says cannot be blamed for being "miffed that the American media have fallen in a collective swoon for the phenomenon that is Barack Obama", and both the fairy-tale conceptualization of Obama as Bambi and his connection to JFK are kept active in the article.

Carter describes the inter-domain projections used in the press and elsewhere to talk about the political fight for the presidency between the Democratic candidates as "ridiculously caricatured," and explicitly evokes under this sardonic expression the fairy-tale frame and the link with JFK. He shows in his account of what seems to be Obama's world-wide support that the blend of names and images also works beyond the United States: "The Germans call him, without irony, the Black JFK," Carter reports, and fuses past and present when he affirms that "the BBC evidently thinks he's the best thing to come out

of America since, well, in their rather limited worldview, since Jimmy Carter.” He himself contributes to the fictional construct built around these elections and strenghtens the imaginative side further when, after characterising support for Obama by using a new blended term, “Obamania,” which proves the doubtless flexibility of the candidate’s name, he draws an analogy between Obama as Luke Skywalker and McCain as Darth Vader putting forth the scenario of *America’s Death Star* (terms and projections again highlighted in bold):

And yet there’s no doubt he has a view of the world that is closer to European attitudes than anything we have seen in the past seven years and it is this that keeps *Obamania* in full swing. The effect is heightened, of course, by the identity of the Republican nominee.

The same morally simple narrative that hails *Mr Obama as Luke Skywalker*, bursting out of *America’s Death Star*, is beginning to portray *John McCain* as a kind of *Darth Vader*. Mr McCain is already, in the media’s account, the grumpy old white man who emerged from a field of grumpy old white Republicans.

The central inference that should be made from these metaphorical projections seems rather evident: McCain (or those White Men he represents) killed Obama’s father (or his Black ancestors). Within these grounds the fairy-tale turns, according to Carter’s conceptualization path into a “morality tale” which runs as follows: “rich, white corporate warmonger versus fresh new, African-American embodiment of hope and change.” He then takes yet another step and, performing a cognitive operation of intertextual compression, incorporates into his own conceptualization network elements from other texts (Maud’s and Tracinski’s, for example); within this rationale, and taking into consideration the conceptual components of the previous blend “Obambi,” Carter unpacks the blend and converts McCain into “The Man Who Shot Bambi”:

The problem is that there’s a danger that the presidential contest between Mr Obama and Mr McCain will become not a debate but a silly battle of conflicting icons. You can be sure that, in the eyes of the rest of the world, and much of America, if Mr McCain wins it will be not because of his superior experience or the quality of his ideas, but because America is irredeemably racist.

Instead of being the welcome break with America’s recent past that he truly is, he will be painted as a continuation of it. Worse, that that, he will have won by vanquishing Hope and Peace. He will be for ever *The Man Who Shot Bambi*.

Thus, the circle is closed in Carter’s article. Adding all items together we now have a frame for some of the political discourse surrounding the 2008 U.S.

elections which conforms a three-sided conceptual network, including fairytale, science fiction and morality-tale. Each frame incorporates its own cast of characters: Obama – Bambi, Clinton – Godzilla; Obama – JFK – Camelot – Lancelot – Obamalot – Ted Kennedy – Dorian Gray; Obama – Luke Skywalker – McCain – Darth Vader, and back to Bambi. The linguistic semantic fact is that, in the corpus written about the 2008 elections in the United States, all these lexical items collocate together and develop specific meaning. The cognitive fact is that they all help to build a concrete mental model for discourse receivers, one which comprises a set of images and relations projected from different fictional and non-fictional inputs onto the real candidates' scene. A foreseeable contextual fact is that these names and the conceptual/semantic network of associations formed around them are not very likely to last beyond election day.

2.4 “MEJOR ‘BILLARY’ EN MANO QUE ‘OBAMBI’ VOLANDO”

As has been seen above, once these frames have been opened, they can be maintained, expanded and exploited in multiple directions. Cognitive researchers have insistently claimed that the projections established between domains are a question of thought, not language (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1981; Lakoff 1987, 1993; Lakoff and Turner 1989; Fauconnier and Turner 1994, 2001, 2002; among many others). This is confirmed in the corpus analyzed here by the fact that the same conceptual networks and blended lexical items which have been considered so far have been found in other languages with equal semantic function and a parallel capacity for generating inferences. For example, within the same political discourse genre, we have come across the following headline in a Spanish newspaper: “Mejor ‘Billary’ en mano que ‘Obambi’ volando” (*El Mundo*, 10 de Febrero de 2008).

The utterance shows a case of complex conceptual integration, both linguistic and cultural, and requires several cognitive operations to reconstruct and interpret its full meaning: blends have to be unpacked, inputs identified and mental spaces set up and combined. In the article, which analyzes the U.S. political campaign from an outward perspective and draws some relations with the Spanish political arena, journalist Pedro J. Ramírez makes use of the blended names “Billary” and “Obambi”, already discussed above, and transports into the political discourse in Spanish some of the inferences which can be derived from them (indivisible coalition between Bill and Hillary Clinton in a hypothetical Clinton Presidency vs. gentleness, weakness, and inexperience

in Obama, plus the risks and benefits each option would bring about in and out of the U.S.).

But from the conceptualization point of view, which is one of the interests of this paper, the headline shows an even more complex case of multiple inputs integration. The formal and the conceptual structure of the headline comes from the wealth of Spanish idiomatic phraseology: “Más vale [in Ramirez’s article Mejor] pájaro en mano que ciento volando” (a sort of “Bird in the hand is worth two in the bush”, turned into “A “Billary” in the hand is worth two “Obambi” in the bush). The replacement of “pájaro” by “Billary” and “ciento” by “Obambi” automatically triggers a complex interpretation process which involves two languages and two levels of conceptualization: generic and specific. The blended “Billary” is graphic enough to be self-evident even to the non-speaking-English Spanish target reader; its counterpart “Obambi” is also easy enough to unpack in the western-cultural scenario that both countries have in common.

There is, however, a couple of new inferences which the Spanish reader is led to make in addition to those which s/he may share with the U.S. reader. The first has to do with the fact that, at some point in recent Spanish political discourse, the name, image and meaning associations of “Bambi” were also used to refer to the President of the Spanish Government, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, with similar connotations, i.e. implicating weakness and naiveté. Given the absence of phonological proximity between both names (Rodríguez Zapatero/Bambi), the projection holding between them was metaphorical with no actual formal blend. Ramírez profits from this coincidence in his article to conceptualize his perception of the Democratic candidate and his defence of the Clintons’ fight for the nomination in terms which are familiar to the Spanish audience, or what is the same thing, he hooks up external information coming from a different social and linguistic background to an already existing mental space and expands on it.

The second inference which may be drawn by readers of this article concerns the use of the Spanish idiom as a means to compress the complexities of Ramirez’s analysis and opinions on American politics into a package which is a part of the popular conceptual imagery of the target reader, and which also offers a solid, well-known structure to establish definite types of projections in a highly hypothetical and idiosyncratic frame, that corresponding to the journalist’s beliefs about who should win and why.

Both conceptually and lexically, the text in Spanish interacts with the articles in English; it develops within the same mental space, and makes use of the same language-specific terms (and concepts) active within this mental space. This fact invites us to reflect on the nature of certain word association

phenomena such as the concept of semantic collocation; it invites us to investigate the cognitive dimension of these phenomena and to reconsider the scope of their function.

3. SOME THEORETICAL CONCLUSIONS

In his theory of priming, Hoey (2005) sees collocation as a textual cohesive phenomenon governed by the text producers' choices of word combinations and by the text receivers' prospects of re-usage. He thus revises the traditional semantic notion of lexical collocation in a mentalistic way by moving the concept away from the paradigmatic axis of language to the actual dynamic system built by each text or discourse or sequences of texts or discourse. The data found in our corpus confirms this approach to lexical collocation. It demonstrates that lexical collocation may result from the on-going relations established ad hoc by language users as they conceptualize and construct discourse around a given topic. For Hoey, "text can be regarded as generating data for semantic associations," and so:

We can interpret matching relations of compatibility or contrast in texts either as textual exploitations of existing semantic associations or as creations on 'nonce' primings for a brief textual moment. In the former case, the writer/speaker makes use of the priming of a word or word sequence by drawing on that priming twice in quick succession and thereby making it visible and available for interpretation (e.g. as contrast). In the latter case, the juxtaposition is not licensed by the primings available for the writer/speaker (or, more accurately, not by the primings for semantic association – it is likely that other primings are conformed to), but the presentation of juxtaposition creates for the reader/listener a temporary priming such that the matching is interpreted in terms of that priming. (Hoey 2005:21)

In this sense, Hoey redefines collocation as a quality which derives from the language users' decisions, is related to context and is validated by re-usage. The semantic relation of lexical collocates may be, therefore, transitory or (semi)-permanent depending on the degree, stability and duration of co-occurrence (2005:8).

There are certain characteristics in the string of lexical items which we have been considering in our case study which allow us to confirm the points made by Hoey above. On the one hand, the blended names and the subsequent projections between fictional characters and fictional situations and real politicians in a real context are a case of creative language use saliently related to a specific period of time and to a type of discourse genre. The fact that their

use will certainly be ephemeral, probably not lasting beyond the current political contest, supports Hoey's theory of priming and our view that the collocation of words in a given textual situation is closely linked to the establishment of mental spaces and to the construction of mental models which are generated online as information is received and discourse is interpreted and processed.

A conceptual view of collocation converts this lexico-semantic cohesive function of words into a cognitive property of linguistic expressions which, as Fauconnier and Turner remark, have the potential to "prompt for meanings rather than represent meanings" (2002:277). Accordingly, the words and grammatical constructions which make up discourse do not refer to properties of the world but to cognitive configurations involving dynamic cases of mental space building and mental space functions. This has become evident in the imaginative multi-conceptual model, consisting of fictional characters from different story-worlds and genres, which the writers of the articles analyzed here have chosen to construct in their discussion of the U.S. Democratic candidates.

Fauconnier defines mental spaces as "constructs distinct from linguistic structures but built up in any discourse according to guidelines provided by linguistic expressions" and describes mental models as structured incrementable sets with elements and relations holding between them, such that new elements can be added to them and new relations established between their elements (1994/1985:16). Both descriptions suit the case studied here. The interaction between reality and fiction, plus the creation of a new expanded frame through blending of names, and analogy or compression of times, scenes and situations have provided a good example of a multiple-input integrated conceptual model and have shown that there are good grounds to focus on the notion of collocation from a different perspective, one which includes a cognitive dimension and a non-permanent approach.

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