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## Conceptual blending in "house M. D."

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## CONCEPTUAL BLENDING IN *HOUSE M.D.*

**Key words:** blending, conceptual integration, metaphor, medicine

The purpose of the present paper is to show how conceptual metaphor theory and blending theory or conceptual integration model can be complementary in analysis of language. We are going to analyse the language of the medical television series *House M.D.* (seasons 1–5) with the aim to demonstrate how the use of conceptual metaphors and blends reveals the mysterious workings of the human body, disease, diagnosis and treatment to laymen – the viewers.

### 1. Conceptual metaphor versus conceptual blending

One of the fundamental notions discussed within the paradigm of cognitive linguistics is conceptual metaphor theory, with its origins in Lakoff and Johnson [1980, 1999], and further discussed and explored by Lakoff and Turner [1989], Kövecses [1986, 1990, 2000, 2002], Turner [1991, 1996], Gibbs [1994] and others, who have successfully shown that metaphor is not the matter of the language we speak, but more importantly it is the way we think – we conceptualise the reality. Metaphor is something we use unconsciously, efficiently and on an everyday basis. Numerous analyses have shown the pervasive presence of metaphors not only in our everyday speech, but – more importantly – in the way we think about the reality.

The research on metaphor has concentrated on structure-mappings from a source domain onto a target domain. Some of the widely known examples given by Lakoff and Johnson [1980] include: ARGUMENT IS A BUILDING, TIME IS MONEY and LOVE IS MAGIC, where, respectively, the domains of BUILDING, MONEY and MAGIC are mapped onto the domains of ARGUMENT, TIME and LOVE. The mappings project new structures from the source onto the target, thus allowing us to conceptualise ARGUMENT in terms of a BUILDING.

The research on conceptual blending – or conceptual integration theory, as developed and discussed by Fauconnier and Turner [1996, 1998, 2002, 2008], Fauconnier [1997], Coulson [1996, 2001] and others – has shown, however, that models of cross-domain or cross-space mappings do not themselves explain the relevant data, and that in addition to mappings, there are dynamic integration processes which build up new blended mental spaces [Fauconnier 1994]. The blended spaces are characterized by an emergent structure, which is not directly available from the input domains.

Fauconnier and Turner suggest [2002] that blending is one of general cognitive operations, like categorization, which plays a “crucial role in how we think and live” [Fauconnier and Turner 2002: v]. As they write, people like to pretend and fantasise; “our species has an extraordinary ability to operate mentally on the unreal, and this ability depends on our capacity for advanced conceptual integration” [Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 207].

Although conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) and blending theory (BT) are treated as contradictory, at least in some respects [Kalisz 2001], they may also be treated as complementary [Grady, Oakley and Coulson 1999; Evans and Green 2006]. While CMT focuses on conventional metaphors used by a certain language community, well entrenched in the native speaker’s conceptualizations of the reality, BT treats blending as a routine process, dynamic and active at the moment of thinking; its products may become entrenched in conceptual structure and grammar, but they need not. Thus, BT often studies novel structures, such as jokes, cartoons, or headlines [Coulson 2001].

## **2. Mental spaces in blending and blending processes**

While conceptual metaphor typically involves mappings between two domains, blending involves mappings between four spaces: two (or more) input spaces, generic space, which contains abstract elements shared by the two input spaces, and the blended space, which inherits the structure of the inputs, and contains its own emergent structure.

Blending involves three processes: composition, completion, and elaboration. Each of the processes creates the possibility for a new structure to emerge.

In the process of composition, a relation from one space is attributed to an element/elements from the other input spaces. The emergent structure arises from the fact that a predicate from one domain accommodates in order to apply to elements from a different domain, on the basis of the contextual information.

Completion refers to completing patterns which takes place when the emergent structure – projected from the inputs – finds matching information in the speaker’s memory – or rather, more specifically, the frames that the speaker has collected in her memory.

Elaboration is the process in which the event in the blend is simulated and elaborated on, which is constrained by logic or illogic of the blended domain.

Although it might seem that elaboration is in fact the same cognitive process as completion – that is, evoking novel structure in the blend – the difference between the

two lies in the fact that in elaboration novel structures can be activated by mental simulation, whereas in completion it relies on interaction with the environment as construed with blended models which are already available. Thus, as Coulson claims, elaboration “is more of a creative process than completion, and is potentially more cognitively taxing due to the demands of mental simulation” [Coulson 2001: 123].

The focus of the present paper is on what particular functions blends fulfill in the medical drama *House M.D.* Conceptual integration in the blend is a result of compression, which provides human scale, the scope of human experience, the primary goal of conceptual blending. Evolution and culture we live in have equipped us with the ability to understand and follow some aspects of the surrounding reality, which can be represented as frames or scenarios. The easiest frame refers to a situation or event which is happening in one place, within a short period of time, with a clear cause-effect relation and direct intentionality, involving few participants, which, taken altogether, create a simple, coherent story. Fauconnier and Turner [2002] enumerate five subgoals which help to achieve the primary goal of blending:

- 1) compress what is diffuse,
- 2) obtain global insight,
- 3) strengthen vital relations,
- 4) come up with a story,
- 5) go from many to one.

We would like to demonstrate that due to the special character of the series *House M.D.* blends selected for the present analysis achieve these aims really well: they are “human-friendly” [Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 322] and they allow the viewers to obtain global insight into the nature of disease, diagnostic medicine and the job of a doctor. We would also like to prove that all the analysed blends are coherent, concise stories.

A characteristic feature of one kind of blends, double-scope networks, in which both inputs contain distinct frames but the blend is organized by structure taken from each frame, is that it may clash, that is, include structure from inputs that is incompatible [Fauconnier and Turner 2002]. Some of the examples below demonstrate that phenomenon.

### **3. *House M.D.* and metaphors of medicine**

*House M.D.* is an American television medical drama shown on the Fox network since 2004. So far five full seasons were produced (110 episodes), season six is currently on air. *House M.D.* seems to be a typical representative of a medical drama, with a team of diagnosticians solving difficult and unusual cases, with some focus on the doctors’ private lives. However, it is different from other series of this kind, like *ER* or *Grey’s Anatomy*, in a few respects: first of all, the main character of the series, doctor Gregory House, played by Hugh Laurie, is far from a caring, altruistic and empathic doctor often presented in medical series; House is cynical, sarcastic and does not seem

to care about his patients. On the other hand, House will go to any lengths to discover what is wrong with still another patient – for him, making a diagnosis is a fascinating challenge, an intellectual riddle, and the more difficult the case, the better. He will sacrifice his time, effort, relationships and sometimes even his health and life to solve the case – that is, to make the right diagnosis and, if possible, to cure the patient. That is why House is often compared to Sherlock Holmes [Abrams 2008, Matamas 2007]. Secondly, the focus of the series is on the process of diagnosis rather than treatment or a patient's involvement in the process of recovery: patients are not even reliable sources of information – as House repeatedly says, “Everybody lies” – it is only their symptoms that reveal the truth about the patient's condition.

The analysis of metaphorical language in *House M.D.* [Cichmińska and Topolewska 2010] revealed that the conceptual metaphors used in the series are commonly used in language of medicine, though their distribution is not typical. The script displays numerous uses of such metaphors as MEDICINE IS WAR, BODY IS A MACHINE, VIRUSES/BACTERIA/DISEASES ARE PEOPLE/OBJECTS, but the most frequent metaphor referring to medicine in the first five seasons of the series is MEDICINE IS A DETECTIVE STORY, supported by MEDICINE IS A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY and MEDICINE IS A PUZZLE. This particular characteristic is not surprising considering the focus of *House M.D.* and its main character's approach to his job and medicine in general.

#### 4. Blending in *House M.D.*

As it was mentioned earlier, conceptual blending or integration can be considered complementary to conceptual metaphor. The present section will focus on the use of blending in *House M.D.* and its function within the series. We would like to demonstrate that both CMT and BT complement each other and help the viewers understand the language of the series, and the nature of medicine, disease, diagnosis and treatment in general. Where conceptual metaphor explains what these concepts mean in more general terms, blending helps explain particular cases. In many situations using conceptual metaphor is not enough and then blends develop. It is usually Gregory House who explains – or tries to explain – what is happening in a given case, often resorting to using metaphors and blends. As *House M.D.* is a television series addressed to mass audiences who may not have any medical expertise, it is obvious that this process of “translating” the language of medicine into the language available to laymen, simple yet imaginative, must be successful if the series is to appeal to viewers.

House is fully aware of what he is doing as he says (words underlined in all quotations by M. C. and M. T.):

(1) House: *Let me **translate that into Tolkien** for you guys – means Doctor Cuddy's got no idea why your daughter's lung suddenly popped like a balloon.*

House knows that he has to explain things to his assistants, other doctors, patients and viewers. He needs to translate it into the language they all speak – for example, Tolkien, which may mean the language comprehensible to laymen, or literary, imaginative, metaphorical language. House must realize the power of metaphors as occasionally he actually calls his attempts to explain the situation metaphors (as in 4 below); for example, after explaining a certain condition (analysed in detail below in 8), House says:

(2) House: *It was **an excellent metaphor**.*

The examples below will all demonstrate situations in which House and other doctors try to explain the condition of yet another patient. A typical blend in the series consists of two input spaces: one connected with medicine and the other connected with a certain sphere or aspect of everyday life, or a current political situation, well known to television audiences (at least some of them). The “everyday/political” input serves as a presentation space as the frame which is more accessible to viewers who may have no knowledge of medicine, while “medicine” space functions as the reference space [Brandt 2002, Coulson and Oakley 2005].

(3) Chase: *The Hartig baby. She's getting sicker, too. The Vancomycin isn't working, either.*

House: *Vancomycin doesn't kill it. Aztreonam doesn't kill it. What the hell is this?*

Foreman: *It's **a super bug**.*

Chase: *It could be VRSA.*

House: *This is our fault. Doctors over-prescribing antibiotics. Got a cold? Take some penicillin. Sniffles? No problem. Have some azithromycin. Is that not working anymore? Well, got your Levaquin. Antibacterial soaps in every bathroom. We'll be adding Vancomycin to the water supply soon. **We bred these super bugs. They're our babies. Now they're all grown up and they've got body piercings and a lot of anger.** (Season 1, Maternity)*

Treating viruses or bacteria as people is a common conceptual metaphor, but typical conceptualization involves seeing them as opponents, aggressors, which we fight with. In (3) bacteria are our babies, which we have bred ourselves: some bacteria are resistant to antibiotics (for example VRSA is a staph – Staphylococcus aureus – resistant to vancomycin, [Internet 1]) as a result of people taking them for any slight problem; thus, we become less and less immune to bacteria which cause diseases, and no medicine can help us when we fall ill. The name “super bugs” can be analysed as a blend as well, as this is in fact a kind of bug which is like a super hero among bugs, able to survive even a course of antibiotics, prescribed to kill it. The medicine input space refers to the life and development of bacteria, the “everyday” input space refers to parents having babies and babies turning into teenagers, displaying anger and typical teenage rebellious behavior. The revealing force of this blend seems to lie in the process of elaboration as we may easily imagine – and thus “run the blend” – what is going to happen in the future when grown-up rebellious teenage super bugs start to turn against us – their parents, and their anger will explode. In the conceptual metaphor MEDICINE IS WAR our bodies (immune system) and doctors fight with diseases

and their causes – in the blend (3) we deal with our own grown-up kids, who turn against us. Another interesting element of the blend is that it clashes: people cannot breed any bacteria, they are not our babies, though some of them, like staph, are commonly found on people's body, in the nose or skin, and occasionally cause minor infections; yet, by overprescribing and overusing antibiotics, we are responsible for how dangerous and powerful they have become, just like parents may feel responsible for the process of upbringing their babies and turning them into angry teenagers.

- (4) House: *You see Abigail's immune system is like a shy guy in a bar. The ear infections – they come in, they try to coax him to... to hell with the metaphor. You get the point right?*  
Cameron: ... **gets drunk, thrashes the bar.** *One of the autoimmunes triggered by a minor infection.* (Season 3, *Merry Little Christmas*)

In the example above the immune system of the patient and ear infections she is suffering from are referred to as people: a shy guy and people who meet in a bar and behave like typical bar customers. The shy immune system is persuaded by the infections-customers to drink with them and as a result gets drunk and violent – much like the immune system which gets activated when it has to fight an infection. However, in the analysed case, the reaction of the immune system is excessive and, instead of coping with a minor infection, it develops an autoimmune disease which destroys its own organism – like the shy guy who “thrashes the bar” he is in. Again, typical behavior of people serves as an input space while the medicine input space refers to the activity of the immune system. Even shy people when drunk behave in unexpected and exaggerated ways, like destroying a bar they are in or fighting with others.

In two episodes of the series *No Reason* (season 2) and *97 Seconds* (season 4) House uses the common knowledge of rubbish and what people do with it as one of the input spaces in the blends.

- (5) House: ***Cervical lymph node is a garbage dump.*** *A very small one. Just one truck comes in and it only comes from one home. The home... Cuddy: **The home is the right eye.** I get it. Do a biopsy.* (*97 Seconds*)

The “medicine” input space is the function of lymph nodes while the “everyday” input refers to rubbish and what people do with it. Lymph nodes, small organs distributed all over the body, are a part of the immune system. They act as filters for unknown, foreign particles, that is pathogens (e.g. viruses, bacteria, fungi) and cancer cells [Mayer 2006]. House compares them to garbage dumps where garbage (pathogens and cancer cells) is brought by special trucks from people's homes. In the analysed case the garbage comes from one home only – the right eye which is ill and is the source of garbage – cancer.

The same input spaces are present in (6), but the blend is much more extended and reappears throughout the episode:

- (6 A) Cameron: *Everything that lives, eats; everything that eats, poops: that's why every organ has a sanitation department, a lymph system. Whatever's doing the damage is dumping its waste in there. That's what you meant by trash.*
- (6 B) House: *Check the brain's trash, see what it's hiding.* Chase: *The brain doesn't have a lymph system.*  
 House: *I know, all its garbage just gets caught in the snow fence by the side of the road.*  
 Foreman: *You're referring to the blood-brain barrier?*  
 House: *What else? Biopsy the barrier.*
- (6 C) Foreman: *Test was negative.*  
 Cameron: *No trash against the fence.*
- (6 D) House: *What do you do if your trash cans are full? You use your neighbor's trash cans. Except it's still light outside, your neighbour will see you. So you go out the back way, into an alley and drop off your trash by their garage.*  
 Chase: *We'll check the lymphatic system in the chest.*  
 House: *You got that from trash cans in the alley?*  
 Chase: *The saliva glands in the tongue are connected to the lymphatic system in the lungs. It's the next lymphatic system over.*

The blend is more extended and it refers to how the immune system works in the whole body, where every organ except the brain has its own lymph system to deal with foreign particles. The lymph system corresponds to a trash can next to each house where its residents dump their garbage or waste (6 A). The patient in the episode has a swollen tongue and the biopsy shows nothing, no infections, so the doctors have to keep on looking for the “garbage”. If there is no trash can, all the garbage from a house lies on the side of the road, as is the case with the brain – its garbage (“whatever is doing the damage”) has no lymph system to go to and thus gets into the blood (6 B). However, when the next biopsy turns out negative (6 C), they have to keep searching, this time in the neighbour’s trash cans, that is the nearest lymphatic system in the lungs (6 D).

The four blends analysed so far have referred to some everyday-life frames as their input spaces. The other two are slightly different, as (7) refers to pop music and (8) refers to the current political situation. The examples discussed below require that viewers have to possess significant cultural knowledge in order to comprehend the blends.

- (7) House: *Pete Best. Good God! Has none of you ever read a history book? The original Beatles drummer. A bunch of nerves controls the tempo of the heart. They're all playing in time, except one dude can't keep the beat. Wrecks the whole thing. So we hire Ringo.*  
 Kutner: *Pete Best was actually a great drummer, but I assume you mean the patient needs a cardiac sympathectomy?*  
 House: *Probably should have just said that, huh? (Season 5, Adverse Events)*

The patient has a problem with the heart (unexplained arrhythmia) and House suspects that it is caused by the wrong functioning of the autonomic nervous system which controls blood pressure. The “medicine” input space is the functioning of the heart (and the influence of the nervous system on its regular beat), and the other is the Beatles space. A bunch of nerves which control the heartbeat correspond to the Beatles

playing. However, there is one faulty nerve which cannot keep the beat and as a result the whole song is not played in time – the heart beats irregularly. Thus, in the blend, the nerve – the drummer who cannot keep the beat, Pete Best – must be replaced by a better drummer, Ringo Starr, in order to keep the rhythm of the song – the heart.

This particular blend also clashes as in the Beatles input Ringo Star did replace Pete Best (though, as dr Kutner noticed, he was a great drummer), however, in the medicine input space, a faulty nerve is not really going to be replaced by a new nerve; House actually suggests that the patient needs a cardiac sympathectomy, that is severing nerves which link the brain and the heart to stop the irregular heartbeat. The use of the Beatles blend, though not really accurate, may reveal House's love of music which fans cannot fail to notice.

The last example to be discussed relies heavily on the background knowledge of the political situation in America and the world.

- (8) House: *The tumor is Afghanistan the clot is Buffalo. Does that need more explanation? Ok, the tumor is Al Qaeda. Big bad guy with brains. We went in and wiped it out but it had already sent out a splinter cell; a small team of low level terrorists quietly living in some suburb of Buffalo, waiting to kill us all.*

Foreman: *Whoa, whoa, you're trying to say that the tumour threw a clot before we removed it.*

House: *It was an excellent metaphor, angio her brain for this clot before it straps on an explosive vest.* (Season 2, Autopsy)

The patient is a nine-year-old with a terminal cancer treated in various ways, with an unexplained bleeding in her eye. The doctors suspect the bleeding might have been caused by a blood clot in the brain, which is a frequent occurrence in patients with cancer [Internet 2]. The medicine input refers to cancer and the formation of clots, while the second input refers to Al Qaeda and its activities. In the blend the tumor – Al Qaeda, which was wiped out by various cancer treatments (surgeries, chemo and bone marrow transplant), had sent out a group of terrorists who are waiting quietly in Buffalo – where the clot is situated – and are ready to strap on an explosive vest and “kill us all” – that is, attack the patient all of a sudden and kill her.

The blend reveals a few interesting features. First of all, it has explanatory power, as it successfully explains to the laymen-viewers what a clot can do (wait without showing any symptoms and suddenly lead to the patient's death). Secondly, the use of Al Qaeda, referred to as “big bad guy with brains”, is metonymic – as if House wanted to suggest that behind what we know Al Qaeda is there must be one leader, someone who is intelligent and plans ahead. A “splinter cell” is a blend itself – we commonly talk about a “splinter group”, while in the analysed case we do not deal with a group of people but a group of cells. Finally, the whole blend clashes, since a tumor does not act with intelligence and intentions – it is a disease which just happens to people, while the bad intentions of terrorists and their intelligent strategic planning are unquestionable. The common thread is that they both result in death of many people – as House says, they are “waiting to kill us all”, which obviously does not refer to the clot and cancer, but terrorists who may actually be living in some quiet suburbs of America.

Thus, in running the blend, it seems that House wanted to draw our attention to the fact how Al Qaeda works – they send their people to different areas of America, where they wait for a signal to start their killing activities. Additionally, he seems to be implying that it is run by an intelligent leader, whose tactics cannot be underestimated. The whole blend sounds a little like warning – it is not warning against cancer, but terrorists.

## 5. Summary

The aim of the present paper has been to show the usefulness of conceptual integration or blending for analysis of novel expressions, sometimes lengthy pieces of discourse (6, 8), which cannot be analysed with the use of conceptual metaphor model. The conclusions from the analysis in the paper are as follows:

- It seems that both the models complement rather than compete with each other, focusing on different areas of use: conceptual metaphors reveal the ways we commonly think and speak about medicine, human body, diagnosis and treatment, while conceptual blending allows us to gain insight into particular cases, into the very nature of some conditions and diseases, providing human scale of reasoning about them.
- The inputs that are used together with medicine inputs refer either to everyday activities and functioning of people, or their cultural and political knowledge (the Beatles and Al Qaeda in the examples above). While “everyday life” blends seem quite simple and self-explanatory to follow, the cultural and political inputs (and there are far more in the whole series) may not be that obvious to comprehend; even though they may seem easy to grasp, more in-depth analysis shows that they are much more complex than they look when first heard from the characters of the show.
- The blends in the series range from quite simple and straightforward to more complex, full of hidden meanings. However, we are convinced that they achieve their goal, which is to provide human scale to experiences which we – laypersons – are not familiar with.
- We hope we have demonstrated that the analysed blends, apart from providing global insight into the described situations, successfully achieve another subgoal: they tell a story. In each of the analysed examples House and the other doctors tell simple (or simplified) stories about people and their behavior – whether it is about angry teenagers, customers in a bar, people throwing rubbish, musicians or terrorists. This way of developing a blend seems to achieve its explanatory power rather well.
- It has also been demonstrated that some of the analysed blends clash – that is, they include structure from inputs that is incompatible [Fauconnier and Turner 2002].

The present paper has discussed only a few examples of blending in *House M.D.* It is beyond the scope of the present study to demonstrate other interesting features of the language of the series, such as humor and irony, which may also be analysed with the help of blending operations. Imagination, creativity, wit and a sarcastic sense of humor, together with revealing comments on people’s behavior and life in contemporary

America, which House is admired and criticized for, are elements of the language that is open to analysis with the use of such cognitive tools as blending, metaphor and metonymy.

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