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# The Problem of Relevance in Blended Mental Spaces

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Herbert Simon's 1994 essay "Literary Criticism: A Cognitive Approach" proposed that cognitive science could ground a more unified, less volatile method of literary study. Interpretation is to be seen as a process by which meanings are evoked in readers' minds when readers select actual meanings from among potential meanings, induce contexts, invoke archetypes, and utilize local knowledge derived from the text. Many respondents alleged that Simons merely showed how problematic was the question he thought he was answering: how do we determine relevance from among myriad potential mental representations, associations, and infinite relations among them?

I don't have an answer to this problem, but I have, by way of speculation, a suggestion that may comprise part of the solution. The brain may have a discrete number of default modes in which it processes and stores a given concept. Just as visual images are processed and stored by different parts of the brain specializing in size, color, shape, motion, and proximity, so less physical concepts may be processed and stored in a series of modes. I use the common-sense term *aspects* to name these modes.

A minimum number of aspects available for any concept would include:

- Image: the concept as icon, prototype image, or gestalt
- Agent: the concept as organism capable of action
- Structure: the concept as a form with relationships among parts
- Hierarchy: the concept's place in subordinate and superordinate classes
- Use or purpose: the ends to which the concept is applied
- Phase or stage: the concept as a specifiable part of a process
- Action: the concept as an action
- State or condition: the concept as a state of being
- Cause or effect: the concept as a result or cause of some thing or state

The concept "war," for example, can be apprehended as an image or images, as an agent, a structure with parts (conflict with combatants, etc.), a hierarchy (more specific than "conflict" but less so than "WWII"), a purpose, a phase or stage, an action, a state of being, or the cause or effect of other states. Because all aspects are potentially available when any concept occurs, any one aspect may be used as metaphor or metonymy for any other.

Something like these default aspects must exist to

explain how readily we create blends such as "boat house" and "house boat" and know which aspects of the concepts *boat* and *house* to blend in each case. Turner and Fauconnier have shown that "house boat" blends conceptual counterparts (things common to both concepts) such as place of residence, sleeping spaces, and kitchens; while "boat house" blends the same two domains by recruiting boat as an occupant of "house," which here is seen in its aspects of gestalt and purpose—a building meant to house and shelter people. To accomplish this feat, the mind must have algorithms for purpose and likely outcomes as it recruits potential elements from each domain for specific purposes.

Literary examples will be offered to show that a complex blended space can be explained as a series of concepts appearing in their relevant aspects.

## References

- Simon, H. A. (1994). Literary Criticism: A Cognitive Approach. *Stanford Humanities Review, Supplement, 4* (1), 1-26.
- Turner, M. & Fauconnier. (1995). Conceptual Integration and Formal Expression. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity, 10* (3), 183-204.