Meaning Construction and Purpose:

A Suggestion for Conceptual Blending Theory

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Introduction

Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner assert that "[m]ental spaces are small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for *purposes* of local understanding and action" (1998: 137, emphasis added; *cf*. Fauconnier & Turner, 2002: 102; Fauconnier, 2007: 351). Now, if a theory of meaning construction explicitly adopts the idea of purpose (as Blending Theory does), it should elaborate the role of meaning (mis)construction in the (un)attainment of purposes. The aim of this paper is to help clarify the role of "local purposes" in conceptual blending theory, through the application of a pragmatistic view of what a *purpose* is.

The Idea of "Local Purpose"

Purposes and local purposes

I will borrow the account of *purpose* developed by Thomas Short (2007) in the framework of an explanation of Charles Peirce's notion of sign (*cf*. Niño, 2010). According to this view, *a purpose is a type of possible outcome for which an agent acts or for which something was selected as a means* (Short, 2007: 109-110)[1].

With this in mind, we can divide purposes into two kinds: primary and derivative. A purpose is *primary* if it is created or adopted by the agent herself. Following Dov Gabbay and John Woods (2003), I will call it an *agenda*. A purpose is *derivative* if it is selected as a means by an agent, and thus, it is not intrinsic, but attributed (cf. Searle, 1983, 1995)[2]. For instance, my purpose of grabbing the pencil in front of me is intrinsic because as a human being, I am an agent. On the other hand, the purpose of the pencil as a device for writing or drawing is attributed by the designer. To put it briefly, we need to distinguish the purposes an agent intrinsically has (i.e. *agendas*) from the purposes attributed to something by an agent —i.e., designed objects, words, etc.

Following Gabbay and Woods (2003), agendas can be classified as *practical* or *theoretical*, according to the availability of time and other necessary resources for their resolution (*semantic complexity* among them). Typically, a practical agenda requires a short time and relatively scarce resources for its resolution. By contrast, theoretical agendas require more time and greater resources. In this sense, practical agendas are usually the purposes an individual person has in her everyday life, whereas theoretical agendas are institutional purposes, like NASA's purpose of taking humans to Mars.

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[1] The latter encompasses the idea that purpose is not always agent-relative: "Darwin did not banish purpose from the organic world. Rather, he shows how types of outcome can be explanatory even without there being conscious selection of means to outcomes of those types. In place of conscious selection he proposed what he called 'natural selection', that is, selection that is not made by any conscious agent" (Short, 2007: 109).

[2] A third kind of purpose would involve an outcome selected as a means, but not by an agent, as in *natural purposes* (cf. Weber & Varela, 2002; Thompson, 2007: Chapter 6). I will not pursue this kind of purpose any further here.

Following the kinds of examples given in *The Way We Think* and elsewhere by Fauconnier and Turner, I will assume that any "local purpose" is a *practical agenda* as described above.

In my opinion, the overarching goals of Conceptual Blending Theory (hereafter CBT)[3] (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002: 346) are too general to describe "local purposes". For instance, if your "local purpose" is to win this chess game, to describe it as "to achieve human scale" misrepresents what is at stake. "Local purposes" require a level of description which is not as abstract as the overarching goals. However, Fauconnier and Turner do not affirm that these overarching goals describe "local purposes", nor do they say how to describe the latter.

Now, I want to highlight two additional features of practical agendas or "local purposes":

Qualitative and Quantitative Achievement. In trying to achieve a purpose, an agent can succeed in different ways. For instance, achievement can be full or partial, to varying degrees. It can also be presumptive, counterfactual, or actual. Finally, different people can attain the same purpose in different ways.

Valuation and Purpose. "Wherever there is a purpose, such alternative[s] as success/failure, better/worse, suitable/unsuitable apply" (Short, 2007: 154). For the same reason, only where a purpose arises can ideas such as interpretation/misinterpretation, accurate/inaccurate, etc. arise.

The following three sections will present some consequences that the introduction of the notion of purpose has for CBT.

Interpretation and Misinterpretation

If "[m]ental spaces are small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action", we have to suppose that Fauconnier and Turner assume that "local understanding and action" is *actual* understanding and action. That would explain why they hypothesize that mental spaces operate in our working memory (2002: 102). We should distinguish meaning construction as either *actual* or *virtual*. That is to say, meaning *construction* with an actual, ongoing local purpose, and meaning *constructability* with a virtually projected/attributed derivative purpose. In this sense, when I view Figure 1 with the intention of interpreting it:



Figure 1

If I only see «a young woman», but not «an old woman», my *actual* meaning construction does not actualize the figure's *virtual* meaning, and in that sense I do not fully fulfil my agenda because of the incompleteness of my response. Of course, if, when viewing Figure 1, I do not succeed in recognizing any image, I fail entirely to achieve my purpose.

[3] I.e., to achieve human scale; and sub-goals, i.e., compress what is diffuse, obtain global insight, strengthen vital relations, come up with a story, and go from Many to One.

However, my error would be completely different if, in describing the young lady, I were to use the words "the joung man". This would be an error not because of incompleteness, but because there is no such word in English as "joung" and because "man" is misapplied where "woman" (or a synonym) is required. In this sense, the second kind of error arises from the *ungrounded* use of words. A similar error would arise if I recognized a /pigeon/ in the image. Notice, then, that when you use semiotic items (words, images, objects, etc.), you can misuse them either because your response is inaccurate in relation to their derivative purposes or because your response is ungrounded, even if accurate: a stopped clock is right twice a day!

Let me call grounded virtual responsivity significance (cf. Short, 2007)[4]. That is, the justified possible response a word, sentence, image or object (in general, a semiotic item) can have. *Signification* is the actual response an agent has in trying to achieve her agendas. In this sense, when an agent is trying to achieve her "local" agendas, she is always *signifying*. (In this sense, signification is subject to the constraints of cognitive economy and its "effects" are comparable to those which overarching goals try to describe). Now, often this signification consists in actualizing the significance of the semiotic items she interacts with (or better, *enacts*). And when an agent actualizes the significance of a semiotic item not by chance, but with the agenda of "enacting it properly", she tries to align her agenda with the virtual derivative purpose(s) of the item(s) in question. Therefore, her signification should match the item's significance. This matching process can also be subject to error, either because the agent misrecognizes or misattributes the item's derivative purpose(s).

For example, suppose that an agent has the agenda of interpreting a particular sentence (the practical agenda being to interpret it accurately). This sentence, in turn, has its derivative purpose(s). In order to achieve her agenda, the agent has to make the sentence's derivative purpose(s) her own. That is to say, she has to incorporate those purposes into her own agenda in order to interpret the words "as intended". Of course, she can fail to achieve it, for instance, by misapprehending any of their customary uses (use presupposes the purpose of that use), misrecognizing the words, etc. And thus, she can misinterpret the sentence. But also, she can succeed in matching her agenda to the sentence's purposes and in actualizing the sentence's significance, and thus in accurately interpreting the sentence. In this sense, the introduction of the idea of purpose and its "relatives" (signification and significance) provides criteria of correctness for distinguishing interpretation from misinterpretation.

Notice that the agent can "achieve human scale" or "obtain global insight" and, at the same time, misinterpret the sentence. Thus, achieving the overarching goals of blending does not provide criteria for distinguishing interpretation from misinterpretation. Error occurs when signification mismatches significance. This may involve an inaccurate actualization of a virtual response, a failure in the grounding relation between semiotic items, or a mismatch between the agent's agenda and the item's purpose(s).

Confronting the Threat of Solipsism

In *The Way We T*hink, Fauconnier and Turner propose that "the integration of cause and effect is the central feature of perception" (2002: 78). Their explanation for the perception of a cup is the following:

> The perception available to consciousness is the effect of complicated interactions between the brain and its environments. But we integrate that *effect* with its causes to create emergent meaning: the existence of a *cause* –namely, the cup- that directly presents its *effect* –namely, its unity, shape,

[4] In fact, this way of conceiving "significance" is a modification of Thomas Short's interpretation of the significance of Peirce's sign as a "grounded interpretability" (2007: 162).

> weight, and so on. As a consequence the effect is now in its cause: the color, shape, and weight are now intrinsically, primitively, and objectively, in "the cup" (2002: 78)

In stock examples of cause and effect integration (*e.g.* baby's ascent, impotent cowboy, etc.), we can construct «CAUSE/EFFECT» as a vital relation between mental spaces. The problem with perception is that, as Fauconnier and Turner say, the *cause is the cup itself* and not an element of a frame recruited in a mental space. By the same token, the *effect is its unity, shape, etc.*, and not the concepts of a certain unity, shape, etc. How, we could ask, should we construct the "perceptual space network"? Could the cup itself be an input space? Can the causation relation be reduced to our understanding of «causation»? It seems to me that at this point Fauconnier and Turner slipped on a semantic peel and fell—inadvertently—onto ontological ground[5]. In other words, «CAUSE/EFFECT» as a vital relation is a semantic category, whereas the /cause-effect/ as the ontological relation of causation is not. If we ignore the idea that perception works as a network of mental spaces, we have to conclude that mental spaces are "embrained" (cf. Gallagher, 2005; remember that mental spaces emerge in working memory). But how, then, could they be otherwise grounded or engaged with the world beyond the organism?[6]

For the sake of the argument, let's suppose that perception cannot be directly reduced to the blending model. Now, what other possibilities does CBT offer for linking mental spaces with the world with which we engage? My answer, as you may guess, is to turn to the idea of purpose: perception is not only an "imaginative *fiat*". It is an achievement of the organism (not only of the brain). The basic attitude of the human organism is to engage percepto-kinesthetically with its environment and enact it. In this sense, if accurate perception is our basic agenda, our signification is accurate not only if we have the perceptual experience of X (for instance, a purple cup), but also if the perceptual experience would allow sensory-motor coupling with that X. In this respect, we can say that our perception is successful if our perceptual agenda matches the identifiability of the cup. In doing so, we accurately actualize the cup's significance. Our response is the construction of a visual experience of a cup and the grounding of that response is that there is a cup where we locate it. Otherwise we would just be hallucinating a purple cup!

In this sense –even if our critique of CBT's account of perception is misguided– the idea of purpose brings what is necessary to retain our primary and vital percepto-kinesthetic engagement with the world. Does it mean that we always need the real world for meaning construction? Well, that depends on the ongoing agenda. If your agenda is to fantasize about triangular monsters, you can do it without grounding this fantasy in the real world. But it would be difficult to construct such a fantasy without a background, where you have enacted semiotic items recognizable as triangles and monsters[7]. On the

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[5] A similar consequence can be inferred from a common idea in cognitive approaches to meaning production according to which the "referent of a referring expression is an entity which inhabits a mental space and which is therefore also a mental entity" (Taylor, 2002: 74). One consequence is that if I say to you, "your father is a butcher" the expression "your father" refers to an "entity" in your mind: «your father». Now the question is how that "entity" in your mind connects with the "entity" outside your mind—that is, your father. In other words, if on one hand mental-space networks are constructed "as we think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action", and on the other language is integrated with the rest of cognition, how does this approach link language with the world with which we all engage?

[6] We are not denying that there is a problem in 'perceptual integration'. In fact, it is known as the "binding problem" (cf. Treisman, 1996). It consists in determining how we achieve the integration of different qualities (shape, color, movement, etc., processed in different parts of the cortex) in different locations (which, in turn, are processed in other zones of the cortex) for the identification of objects in a coherent and unified percept. What we are saying is that the "binding problem" is different from "conceptual integration". If they were the same, we would have to construct a mental-space network with individual inputs for shape, color, movement, etc., which would be odd, because «SHAPE» doesn't seem to be a mental space. Besides, where does the concept of the unified object come from in the mental-space network? Finally, notice that in perception there is integration in the sense of a unified and coherent percept, and not in the sense of a "blended" percept.

[7] This comment does not commit us to the compositionality principle.

other hand, it would be more difficult to find a person who speaks her native language fluently and accurately but has never engaged with or enacted any item she signifies.

Confronting the Threat of Subjectivism

Subjectivism is the idea that meaning exists only in a subjective mind. Therefore, there are no criteria of correctness other than those employed by that very same mind. In that sense, any meaning is as valid as any other. There is neither an intersubjective nor an objective framework for grounding the validity of meaning. In my opinion, CBT has no answer to the question of the intersubjective construction of meaning. That is to say, it is a proposal for individual meaning construction. How, then, could we construct collective meanings?

We can confront subjectivism if we keep in mind the idea of purpose, and by the same token, the idea that the achievement of purposes depends on objective conditions which ground our responses to achieve those purposes. Indeed, even if it is perfectly obvious that we cannot share mental states with others in the same sense that I cannot feel my neighbor's toothache, in any case we can—and actually do—coordinate our purposes with those of others in the sense that we can "have the same agenda". Of course, insofar as each agenda can have many solutions (and many possibilities of failure), each agent can construct different mental-space networks. They can achieve the agenda with different (or the same) degrees of accuracy. In this sense, the Problem of Grounding[8] and the Problem of Other Minds identified by Chris Sinha (1999) can have a simple solution. Keep in mind that cognitive psychology has demonstrated that by the end of the first year children achieve joint attention (Trevarthen & Hubley, 1978; Hobson, 2002; Reddy, 2008). Furthermore,

> At 18 months infants can re-enact to completion the goal-directed behavior that an observed subject does not complete, showing that they recognize the unfilled intentions of others (Gallagher, 2012: 183; *cf*. Meltzoff, 1995).

Since joint attention requires joint action and joint intention (Sinha, 1999), I would like to take a step further and propose that we have *joint agendas* with other agents. This means that if you and I have a joint agenda, you have an agenda and I have an agenda but those agendas behave in tandem, as one agenda: our agenda. And from these kinds of agendas we establish *collective agendas* that explain the emergence of social reality (cf. Searle, 1995). In this sense, a joint agenda is not the same as a shared agenda. A *joint agenda* requires mutual collaboration among the agents involved (as happens in verbal communication) and mutual awareness of the agenda (and in that sense joint affection which brings forth the fiduciary framework, cf. Niño, in press). In a shared agenda, two or more agents point to the same agenda without being collaborative or aware of other agents' agendas.

For instance, if my local agenda in asking you to pass me the salt is to obtain the salt, your recognition of my ongoing intention, gaze allocation, etc., is as important as the recognition of the words I use and their local employment (and, of course, your collaboration and the background of a shared world). The whole situation grounds—and backgrounds— the possibility that I achieve my local purpose. The words enacted (by me when I use them and by you when you understand them) are embedded in a shared situation, not just captured by a brain juxtaposed with, but separated from, another brain. Thus, for the achievement of local communication what matters is the joint agenda and the intention to fulfil it.

[8] The Problem of Grounding is "how linguistic expressions get [to] mean something, and how acts of meaning both fit with the world and make a difference to the world" (Sinha, 1999: 229). The Problem of Other Minds is that we cannot have direct access to others' processes of meaning production.

Final Remarks

I would like to end this paper with two claims. First, the role of "local purpose" in the definition of a mental space has been underspecified in cognitive semantics, particularly in CBT. Second, the importance of "local purpose" lies in opening the discussion of valuation and grounding in meaning construction. For instance, valuation allows the introduction of criteria of correctness for meaning construction. These notions, in turn, have consequences beyond mental spaces theory. I hope to explore those consequences in other papers.

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