

DIGGING ONE'S OWN GRAVE*

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Abstract: The paper aims to demonstrate that some points in the explication of the figurative expression *digging one's own grave* via the concept of blending given by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner are problematic: (1) Not understanding the consequences of one's deeds is an almost universal presupposition of and impulse or motivation for actualizing any utterance with a forewarning or gloating content (e.g., proverbs), not the singularity characterizing just the expression of grave-digging as such. (2) The inversion of causal and temporal structure is not the case because of metonymic association between the concepts of the grave and death, as a result of which specific causal and temporal order loses any significance. Many synonymous examples can be given in which the image refers to events before the death, between the death and funeral, as well as those after burial. (3) The source domain needs not to be restricted to natural death and modern civilized funerals but should include also the cases of violent deaths, e.g., the scenario of execution and the scenario of hunting and trapping. Preliminarily, a very brief synopsis of the main phases of development of cognitive linguistic theory of metaphor and some favourite examples of blends, used also in previous works, is provided.

Key words: metaphor, metonymy, blending theory, DIVIDED PERSON METAPHOR, idioms, proverbs

As we know, in Lakoffian cognitive linguistics the metaphor is conceived as a mapping or projecting operation between two “somethings”.

There are two kinds of such “somethings” – the larger and the smaller. The larger ones are called domains, conceptual or experiential domains. Inside them there are smaller “somethings” called schemas, scripts, frames, etc., which in the last ten years or so have also been referred to as mental spaces.

The main components connected by the operation of projection or mapping are called the *source* and the *target*. The source is about the same component as the *vehicle* in Ivor Armstrong Richards' rhetoric (1936): that is, the figurative component of the metaphor. Target is the “overt” or “literal” component of the metaphor, that is, the object which is characterized or conceptualized with the aid of figurative devices borrowed from the source object. Its approximate counterpart in Richards' rhetoric is the *tenor*.

★ *Sally is a block of ice* – here *Sally* is the target and *block of ice* is the source.

★ *The rock is becoming brittle with age* – this is John Michael Reddy’s (1969) famous sentential metaphor that consists only of the source component. The old professor of geology, here the target of the metaphor, is totally removed from the text and hidden into the context.

The development of views on the structure of metaphor in cognitive linguistics during the last twenty years or so has proceeded through three phases.

★ Initially, it was conceived that the mapping simply involves the source and the target and nothing else, and the mapping is straightforward and direct.

★ Then, in the *More than Cool Reason* by George Lakoff and Mark Turner (1989: 162 ff.), the third component was added – the so-called generic-level schema. It is interesting to note that the generic level was added just for the purpose of analyzing proverbial metaphors, more specifically, the expression *the blind blames the ditch*. The generic-level schema is something like a conceptual common part of the source and the target and it intermediates the transfer of information from the source to the target.

★ And, finally, the fourth component – the blend – was added by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, who have since the middle of the nineties developed their theory of conceptual integration, or blending. Since then, some people deeply believe in its heuristic capacities, while others deny it categorically. Only few researchers have a relatively calm, neutral or indifferent attitude to it.

In the blending theory, the basic components of the metaphor are now called mental spaces, not schemas, as before. The mental space is not an exact counterpart of the schema, it aims to reflect more flexibly and dynamically namely the online processes that take place in human thought and communication. Their defining nickname is “small conceptual packets”. The scope of the conceptual integration is not restricted to metaphors, though it involves metaphors as well. Actually, their spectrum is very wide – from two-word collocations like *brown cow* or *blue cap* to highly compound constructions with much more than the usual four components, like the notorious Grim Reaper blend.

In cognitive metaphor theory the amount of analyzable empirical material is reduced to a quite small number of favourite examples, reiterating tens or hundreds of times and wandering from works to works again and again. There are the favourite examples of blends as well.

One of them is the above-mentioned Grim Reaper, and another the Surgeon-Butcher. (Some schematizations of blending structures are quoted in Krikmann 2001: 46–49.) It is noteworthy that the structure of the Surgeon-Butcher blend happens to be imagined by different authors very differently. It is hith-

erto unclear what exactly does this or that blend borrow from either of the two basic spaces, in which way exactly does it manipulate and process that information, and what exactly are the alleged operations of integration, unpacking, backward projection and others.

Still, there exist other favourite and often reiterated examples of blends:

★ the imaginary race between the ships *Northern Light* and *Great America II* (in the years 1856 and 1993, respectively);

★ Arthur Koestler's paradox of the Buddhist monk who one day climbs to the peak of the mountain and the next day comes back down and, taken logically under certain preconditions, should meet himself somewhere in the middle of any of his trips;

★ the so-called counterfactual sentences, like *If Bill Clinton were the Titanic, the iceberg would sink*.

There are many others as well (see also Krikmann 2001: 45–46), but I would like to discuss, in more detail, only one of them – the expression ***digging one's own grave***.

Fauconnier (1997: 168–171); Fauconnier and Turner (1998: 149–151) claim that this expression cannot be analyzed without applying the notion of the blend either. The basic essence of their view is briefly as follows:

Superficially, what seems to happen here is a direct projection from the specific domain of deaths, graves and burials to the more abstract domain of failures and misfortunes, because the agent – the “digger” – cannot predict the consequences of his/her own deeds. But on closer examination one can find many paradoxical inconsistencies between the source and the target.

★ The causal structure is wrong: foolish actions cause failures, but grave digging does not cause death.

★ The intentional structure is also wrong: graves are being dug purposely, not in sleep or by accident.

★ The frame structure is also reversed, that is, the roles of the agent and the patient, and the sequence of events: people rarely dig graves for themselves (prisoners, for example, are sometimes forced to), and usually the graves are dug after someone's death rather than beforehand.

★ The internal event structure is also wrong: there seems to be a correlation between the depth of the grave and the probability of death, which does not actually hold.

Fauconnier and Turner suggest that in order to resolve these paradoxes, the blending space must be construed. The blend will inherit from the source

domain the concrete structure of the grave, digging and burials, but the causal structure, intentional structure and the internal event structure must be taken from the target domain, that is, from the domain of failures and misfortunes. In that “Thru the Mirrow” kingdom all the curious events do actually happen and the strange laws do hold. The existence of a grave brings along death. The depth of the grave correlates with the probability of death. In the blend it becomes possible not to understand the consequences of one’s own actions. And so on.

An alternative attempt of explanation is offered by Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez (1998: 269–273). Its basic component is the so-called DIVIDED PERSON METAPHOR. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 267–289), the human personality is conceived as consisting two components – the SUBJECT that covers in principle all the rational and controlled aspects of the human mind, and the SELF that, respectively, covers all its emotional, spontaneous, wild, uncontrolled aspects, and our mental and social activities bring forth manifold conflicts between the two. I bypass Ruiz de Mendoza’s interpretations and now try to propose some critical remarks against the necessity for using the concept of blended space in order to explain figurative expressions of the kind.

1. Not understanding the consequences of one’s deeds is an almost universal presupposition of and an impulse or motivation for actualizing proverbs. The universal aspiration of proverbs is to guide and control somebody’s behavior. To give only one example – *Do not spoil the old well if the new one is not ready* – this necessarily assumes that the addressee is not really able to predict the consequences of his/her foolish actions and therefore his/her behavior needs correction. Thus the blend would become a tool with practically universal applicability, a panacea for whatever diseases. Or to remember Matti Kuusi’s famous aphorism: The key that opens all the doors is not a key, but a picklock.

2. The inversion of causal and temporal structure. Neither Fauconnier and Turner nor Ruiz de Mendoza remembers the metonymy. But Seana Coulson in her *Semantic Leaps* (1997: 239) does: “a grave is metonymically associated with death” (cf. also Coulson & Oakley 2003: 66). But if to assume here the copresence of metaphoric and metonymic operations in processing the source domain (or schema, or space), the concrete causal and temporal order lose any importance. What remains important is that the conceptual realization of the image belongs to the grim and dark, axiologically negative domain of death. Exactly which part of the scenario is realized – that before or that after death – does not create any noise in understanding of the figure, simply because the

interpretation process will not reach these degrees of precision. Take, for example, the following “alternative examples”:

- ★ You are slowly killing yourself
- ★ It is a slow ~ lingering death
- ★ You seem to be searching for your death quite deliberately ~ on purpose
- ★ Well, order a coffin ~ your last rites!
- ★ You are making a coffin for yourself ~ a cross for your grave
- ★ You are crawling into your own grave ~ coffin
- ★ Well, start walking towards the cemetery!
- ★ Well, you can bury yourself ~ you are burying yourself
- ★ You are placing a cross on your grave
- ★ Are you picking flowers for your grave?
- ★ You are making a wreath for your own grave

The expressions refer in a straightforward manner to natural death and civilized funeral. They do not evoke any thoughts about the identity of the object of burial – whether it is an alive human being from the source domain, or a corpse, or a zombie from the blend, and whether someone is already in the coffin (supposing the burial involves the use of a coffin), or will he be really buried or will he escape, will he be buried alive or dead, etc.

I would like to use the opportunity to thank, once again, my dear and honored friend, Professor Wolfgang Mieder who provided me with a lot of information concerning the notorious *Sargnagel ~ coffin nail* which is also a junction of the metaphor and metonymy (a *metaphonymy*, as Louis Goossens would call it). Obviously, the physical similarity of a nail and a cigarette and the metonymic associative connection of both coffin and cigarette and smoking with death have been sufficient preconditions for its initial entrenchment in the phraseological tradition and for its later extrapolation to new, mental, communicative and social areas of application.

3. Expanding the source domain. Fauconnier and Turner, as said above, restrict their area of observation to natural death and modern civilized funerals. Still many fables, proverbs and phrases have born, grown and lived in much more rigorous, much less civilized conditions. The world, nature and human life are described as a journey through a “danger landscape”, as a merciless survival of the fittest. The environment is indifferent at its best, or deliberately unfriendly, dangerous, and hostile at its worst. Compassion is a rare emotion found only among the closest relatives. All this summed up in a huge

dangerous world, where even your children are awaiting your death and your mammon, your husband is violent and beats you, your wife is constantly ready to cheat on you, your friends do not know you when you are in trouble, your masters are greedy and angry, your cattle is threatened by wolves, your crops by flood, drought or insects, your house by fire or storm, your life by plague, wars, bandits, predators, snakes, crocodiles, whirlpools... To survive, one must be tough, he must kill animals, and, if necessary, also people.

So we could try to extend the domain of death to the cases of violent death as well. A violent death always involves an Agent, the Killer. There are at least two scenarios that could expand the list of possibilities to endanger ourselves.

The first one is the **scenario of execution**. Look at the examples below:

- ★ You are building a gallows for yourself
- ★ You are making a noose for yourself
- ★ You are climbing the gallows yourself ~ of your own free will
- ★ You are slipping ~ putting ~ your head into the noose
- ★ You are climbing onto the stake
- ★ You are deliberately putting your head on the block

The other – and in our case more important – is the **scenario of hunting and trapping**.

Coulson (1997: 239) mentions another important fact overlooked by Fauconnier and Turner – graves are a kind of holes, but holes as such are dangerous – the deeper they happen to be, the more dangerous they are. The digger of a grave is in danger (before his supposedly natural death) just because he is located in the grave, that is, in a pit, hole, in a potential trap.

It is not ruled out that the whole series of expressions of digging one's own grave originates etymologically in the biblical proverb *Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein* (Ps. 7, 16; Prov. 26, 27; Eccl. 10, 8; Sir. 27, 27). The proverb is internationally well-known (type H5d22 in Kuusi & Lauhakangas 2001): it is listed as the ninth in popularity in Europe (see Paczolay's "European Proverbs" 1997: 77–82) and the first in Finnic common repertoire (cf. Kuusi *et al.* 1985). Both holes and graves are represented in the records of the proverb and in many languages and dialects one and the same root may have both meanings (e.g., the Southern Estonian *haud*). This swarm of synonymous proverbs, in turn, diverges to various directions: holes are replaced with other kinds of traps, nets, fishing rods, etc., and further, to other kinds of malignance, like poisoning, spells, curses, slandering, gossip, etc.

In the case of traps, of course, there are no inconsistencies in the causal or temporal structure of the expression. Neither is the intentional structure re-

versed in the biblical version: the hole is meant for someone else and the digger falls into it by accident. The focus of the danger is the hole as a trap itself, and the only way to avoid the traps set by others or yourself when traveling through the “danger landscape” is to have a good memory.

COMMENTS

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