

Mental space compression in ancient myths

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Ancient myths often include details that are incongruous with the events of the main story space. For instance, a major section of *Iliad* 24 (lines 143-484) describes the journey of Priam, king of the Trojans, to the tent of Achilles, his son's killer. This main story space, which on the most immediate layer of interpretation exclusively takes place between Troy and the Achaean military camp, has long been noted to include several allusions to a journey to the land of the dead (see Herrero de Jáuregui 2011 for a detailed discussion). Though never made explicit by the poet, this theme is hinted at by several incongruous language choices, pivotal elements of a hidden narrative with parallels in other Ancient Greek texts that explicitly attest to this theme, such as the "instructions to the dead" occurring in Orphic golden leaves. Traditionally, such cases within a Homeric narrative have been taken just as "allusions" to different themes, and have been exclusively studied from the perspectives of philology and literary criticism (see most recently Currie 2016).

As argued in Bonifazi 2018, however, from a cognitive-linguistic perspective what allowed Ancient Greek poets to simultaneously evoke multiple distinct narrative themes within a single oral performance is Conceptual Blending (Fauconnier & Turner 2002): originally distinct portions of thought – mental spaces – may be compressed into new, more complex spaces, called blends. Any blend, in turn, "can be unpacked to access the network of connections that make it meaningful" (Pagán Cánovas & Turner 2016:46). We posit that the mentioned incongruities/clashes in *Iliad* 24 reflect a compression - within blended mental spaces - of frames and scripts from different main story spaces.

In order to demonstrate that, we compare the incongruities in *Iliad* 24 with further incongruities occurring in two mythological accounts that, unlike *Iliad* 24, explicitly mention a journey to the land of the dead: the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* narrating Demeter's and Hermes's search for goddess Persephone, and the Old Norse "Myth of Baldr's Death" in *Gylfaginning* 49, narrating Hermóðr's search for the "dead" god Baldr. The analysis draws from Ginevra's (2019, 2020) comparative analysis of linguistic constructions identifying several parallels and differences between the two myths.

We isolate several NP and VP constructions that represent blended mental spaces revealing incongruities in these three main stories, and we unpack these blends with the help of a cognitive linguistic methodology (Bonifazi 2018: 128-135). See the example at the end of this text.

The data suggest that in these blended spaces the incongruous element works like a frame metonymy, as it activates a whole traditional script beyond the current narrative, such as the "ransom" script, the "quest" script, the "hospitality" script, and the "journey to the land of the dead" script.

More generally, our analysis advances that certain linguistic constructions in ancient myths constitute tangible traces of a long process of oral composition within which multiple distinct traditions of various origin progressively came to be compressed into single (blended) stories and single (blended) story details.

	Blend	Incongruity	Decompression
Iliad 24 473ff	“(Priam entered the tent) where Achilles, dear to Zeus, was accustomed to sit (<i>hízeske</i>). There he found him (<i>en dé min autòn / heûr'</i>)”	The construction [Subj <i>hízeske</i>] ‘X was accustomed to sit’ is never used for tents.	Input space 1: “Journey to the land of the dead”: Detail 1: hero finds “Lord of Dead” sitting on a special seat. Input space 2 “Priam’s visit to Achilles” Detail 2: Priam finds Achilles in his tent.
Hymn Dem. 342f	“[Hermes] found the [Realm of the Dead’s] lord (<i>ánakta</i> ; Hades) within his mansions, seated on a (funeral) couch (<i>hémēnon en lechéessi</i>) with his modest consort (Persephone)”	Apparently, Hermes finds Hades seated with his wife Persephone, but the construction [<i>en lechéessi</i>] ‘on the funeral couch’ is used for corpses and implies that Persephone is dead.	Input space 1: “Journey to the land of the dead”: Detail 1: hero finds “Lord of Dead” sitting on a special seat. Input space 2: Hermes’s journey in search for Persephone Detail 2: Hermes needs to find “dead” goddess Persephone.
Gylf. 49	“(Hermóðr) saw sitting there (<i>sá þar sitja</i>) in the seat of honour (<i>í ǫndugi</i>) his brother Baldr”	The Land of the Dead is supposed to be a grim place in Scandinavian mythology, but the construction <i>X sitja í ǫndugi</i> “X sits in the seat of honour” evokes the semantic frame HOSPITALITY in Old Norse.	Input space 1: “Journey to the land of the dead”: Detail 1: hero finds “Lord of Dead” sitting on a special seat. Input space 2: Hermóðr’s journey in search for Baldr. Detail 2: Hermóðr needs to find the dead god Baldr.

Table 1: blended spaces indexing the traditional script “journey to the land of the dead” in three different myths

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