Visual motivation for lexical blending

Daniel Kjellander[1] & Suzanne Kemmer[2]
[1]Linköping University, daniel.kjellander@liu.se [2]Rice University, kemmer@rice.edu

The word formation process of lexical blending has attracted attention from several perspectives in recent years. Lexical structure remains a central topic in analyses and hypotheses concerning blends (Balteiro & Bauer, 2019), but there are also other explanatory viewpoints. For instance, Kemmer (2003) suggests a schema-based approach to account for blend formation, Fandrych (2008) and Lalić-Krstin & Silaški (2018) highlight sociopragmatic concerns, and Kjellander (2022) argues that various types of ambiguity constitute an important motivation for blending.

One phenomenon that has emerged as a key factor in lexical blending is various manifestations of similarity. Semantic similarity, or association, between source words has been suggested in early 20th century accounts (e.g., Bergström, 1906), while structural similarity has been the main focus since the 1990s. For instance, Kelly (1998) explores phonetic similarities in breakpoints between source words, and Gries (2004, 2006) investigates the structural similarity between source words and between source words and blends. Arndt-Lappe and Plag (2013) argue that prosodic similarity between the second source word and the resulting blend is a central characteristic.

The current project takes a multimodal approach to similarity in blending. More precisely, it explores visual similarity in, for instance, typographic realizations. It is suggested that blends such as *Intellisense* (*intelligence* + *sense*) and *Dragula* (*Drag*[*/-and-drop*] + *Dracula*) draw on visual similarities as a means to create playful lexical constructs. For instance, a typographic similarity is identified between the graphemes *s* and *g* in the onset of the final syllable in *Intellisense* vs. *intelligence* (see Figure 1). This similarity is likely enhanced by the frequency-driven activation potential of *g* following the initial segment *intelli-* (cf. Gries, 2006 on the concept of selection point).

Fig. 1: *Illustration of the typographic similarity between the graphemes s and g.*

The analyses of the data are carried out from a Cognitive Grammar (CG) perspective (Langacker, 1987, 2001, 2008), and the data are taken from a database of 206 blends collected from the *News On the Web corpus* in Kjellander (2022). The methodology employed to collect these data has been shown to be statistically robust (Kjellander 2022:99), which is important given reported issues of empirical representativity in previous blend research (Wulff & Gries, 2019).

This project potentially contributes empirical support for seeing the distinction between non-linguistic and linguistic visual stimuli in terms of a cline. Such results align with a theory such as CG in which gradual entrenchment of patterns and multi-modal integrations of information would be expected. Moreover, the assumptions of the current project harmonize with Zhan et al. (preprint) in which it is pointed out that language acquisition involves the gradual development from visual stimuli to orthographic representations. Zhan et al. (preprint) also claim that the neurological patterns differ between speakers of English and Chinese in that users of Chinese typically employ a more extensive region in the ventral occipito-temporal cortex (VOTC) to process lexical constructs. Based on these observations, it appears cognitively realistic to assume that a continuum between visual and orthographic processing could serve as an available resource in the formation of blends.

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