



Blending Viewpoint of Teaching “Teaching as Mountaineering”: A Cognitive Stylistic Approach

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Abstract: This paper aims at a cognitive stylistic approach to teaching “Teaching as Mountaineering”, an essay by Nancy K. Hill. Analogies are interpreted by conceptual blending theory, a cognitive stylistic approach. This theory is to work out the process of how meanings are constructed. In this manner, this tentative attempt at non-literary works will extend to more explorations of non-literary works through cognitive stylistic approach.

Keywords: cognitive stylistic approach, conceptual blending theory, teaching, mountaineering

“Teaching as Mountaineering” is an essay that employs analogy between teaching and other different professions. In a traditional classroom teaching, we analyze this type of text by way of comparison to describe and explain the text per se rather than explore the process of meaning construction. In the similar manner, cognitive stylistics mostly works on literary works instead of non-literary ones. Thus, how meanings are constructed between these analogies in non-literary works? This paper aims to use one of the cognitive stylistic approaches—conceptual blending theory, to retrieve the process of how meanings are constructed in this non-literary essay.

1. Introduction

1.1 A brief introduction to “Teaching as Mountaineering”

“Teaching as Mountaineering” is written by an American teacher and author, Nancy K. Hill. This is an essay that combines exposition with argumentative analogy. Hill starts with a young man scaling the wall of the library where Hill and her colleagues are having a meeting, which strengthens her idea of teaching as mountaineering. But she does not come to this analogy directly while “beating about the bush” by comparing “a series of popular analogies as a way of building up to her thesis that teaching is best compared to teaching” (Li, 2001, p. 247).

1.2 Conceptual blending theory

Cognitive stylistics tends to apply theories of cognitive science, cognitive linguistics, psychology, etc. to literary works. It is more concerned with the process of meaning construction in literary works. Dozens of approaches stem from cognitive linguistics developed by Lakoff, Langacker, Fauconnier and Turner, Talmy etc. This paper works on conceptual blending theory, also called conceptual integration theory from Fauconnier and Turner. According to Dancygier (2008),

Conceptual integration (or blending) theory was introduced by Fauconnier and Turner in a number of papers and given its final form in their book, *The Way We Think*. It postulates that numerous cognitive mechanisms responsible for construction of meaning rely on interwoven configurations of mental spaces. Such configurations, called blending networks, allow us to construe situations in complex and more communicatively efficient ways (p 48).

The most typical integration network involves four related spaces: two input spaces, generic space and blended space. The input spaces have a partial mapping of counterparts. The generic space reflects more abstract structure shared by the two input spaces. When the two spaces are integrated into the blended space, their content is partially mapped onto the new space. Furthermore, “by creating a new configuration of elements, the blended space contains a new emergent structure, which allows for the construction of meanings that would not have been possible in any of the input spaces alone” (p.48). The following is the mental space network:

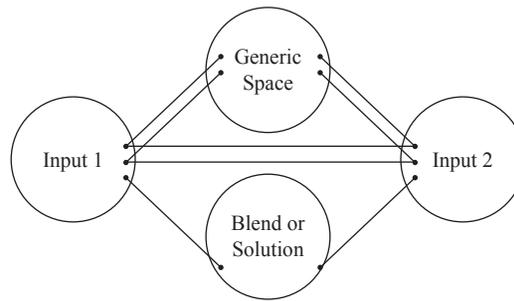


Figure 1. Mental space network

In the blend or solution space, there occurs the emergent structure. This happens in three (interrelated) ways:

COMPOSITION: Taken together, the projections from the inputs make new relations available that did not exist in the separate inputs.

COMPLETION: Knowledge of background frames, cognitive and cultural models, allows the composite structure projected into the blend from the Inputs to be viewed as part of a larger self-contained structure in the blend. The pattern in the blend triggered by the inherited structures is “completed” into the larger, emergent structure.

ELABORATION: The structure in the blend can then be elaborated. This is “running the blend.” It consists in cognitive work performed within the blend, according to its own emergent logic (Fauconnier, 1997, p. 151).

2. Teaching “Teaching as Mountaineering” via conceptual blending theory

There are altogether fifteen paragraphs in this essay, of which five paragraphs (paragraphs 6, 7, 8, 9, 10) elaborate upon the traditional popular analogies—teacher as preacher, shepherd, curator, actor, salesman as well as researcher, and four paragraphs (paragraphs 12, 13, 14, 15) upon the new analogy—teacher as mountaineer. In this section, paragraphs 6, 10, 12 and 15 will be instantiated.

2.1 The traditional popular analogies

Nancy K. Hill devotes her time to demystifying the traditional analogies first. Paragraph 6 is a case in point:

The preacher exhorts, cajoles, pleads with a congregation often so benighted as to exist in a state of somnolence [...] (Li, 2001, p. 242).

How is meaning constructed according to conceptual blending theory? We have basically two professions compared in spite of the fact that Hill does not mention teachers here in the least. As readers, however, we bear in mind that Hill is drawing an analogy between teacher and preacher. Thus, both professions are the two inputs that are projected in minds; linguistically, we can identify linguistic expressions conceptualized in the input space 2 in the following figure 2, and then come up with expressions mapped onto input space 1. Figure 2 is the input spaces:

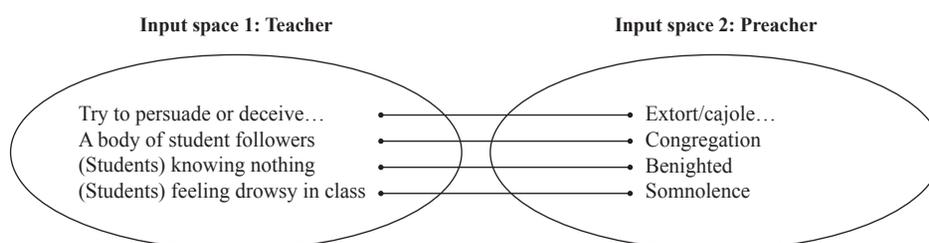


Figure 2. Input spaces of an analogy between teacher and preacher

The two professions compared correspond to these two mental spaces which are reflected abstractly in the generic space (see Figure 3): a preacher who extorts, cajoles and pleads with a congregation is one who is not a qualified one in light of teaching; thus an ineffective way. Congregation has a very strong religious connotation, implying that the students are followers of the teacher, even without an awareness of challenging him or her, for they know nothing about what their teacher is going to talk about. In consequence, the drowsiness of the followers implies their activity is boring enough. Figure 3 adds generic space to the input spaces:

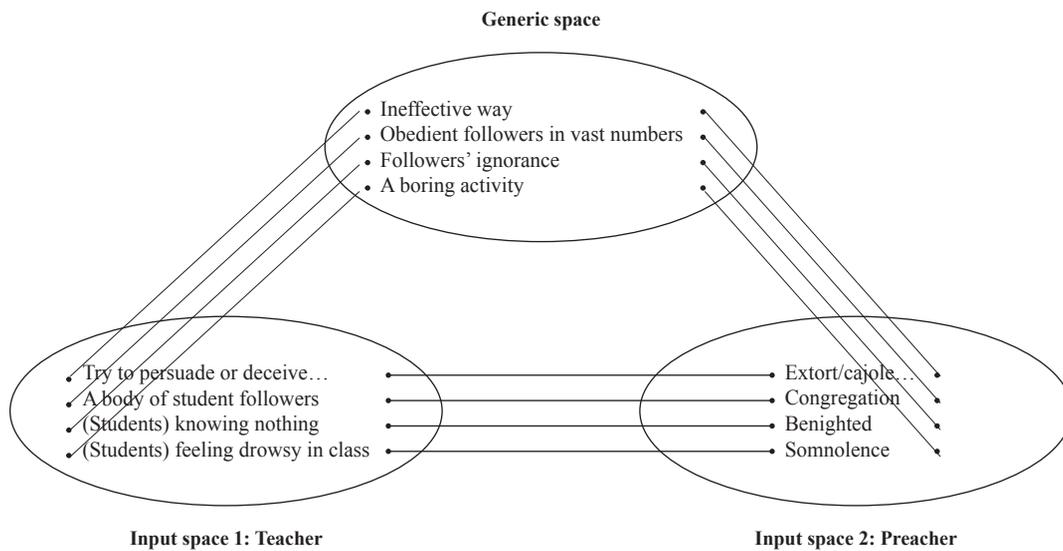


Figure 3. Input spaces and generic space of an analogy between teacher and preacher

This is not the end of the conceptual blending theory. Another space, i.e. blended space, partially maps the two inputs and selectively projects these two input spaces onto its own. In this context, Hill intends to fully compare both professions, therefore, a full mapping and projection is made onto the blended space. As a result, meaning is constructed in the emergent structure of the blended space through completion and elaboration; that is, the analogy of teacher as preacher is inappropriate. Figure 4 is the overarching conceptual or mental space network with the blended space added:

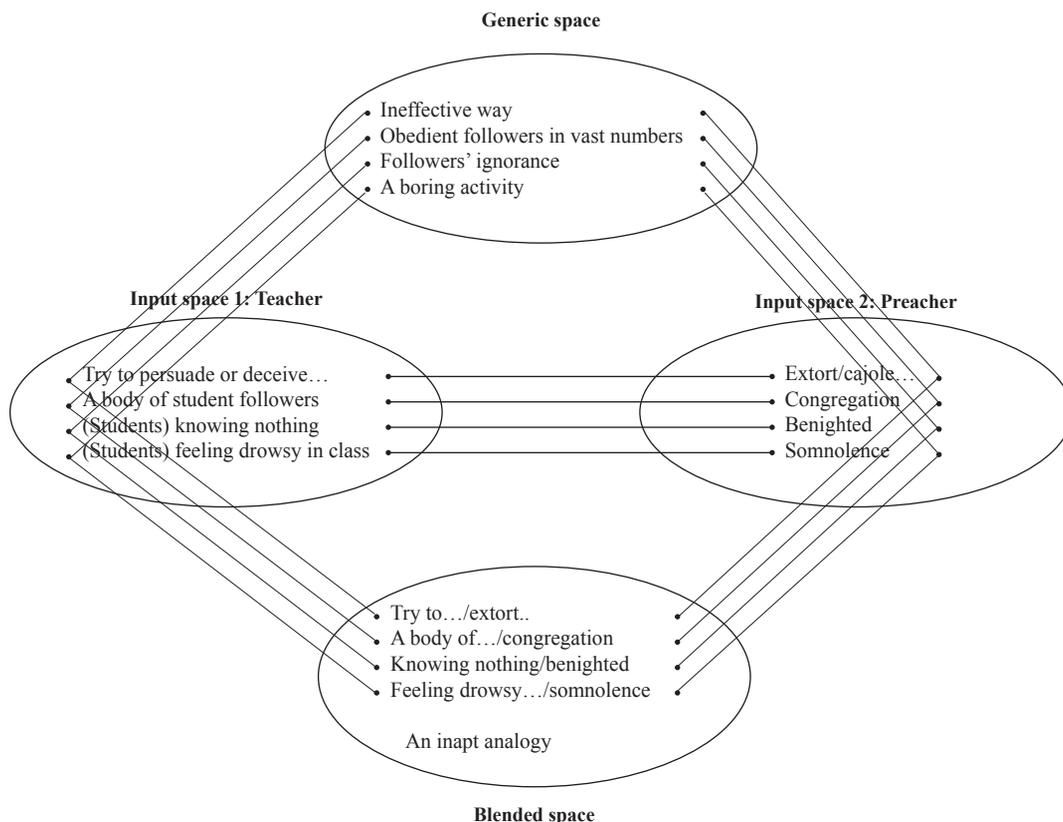


Figure 4. Mental space network of an analogy between teacher and preacher

Figure 4 is the mental space network that showcases how meaning is constructed in minds. To recapitulate, input spaces are based on linguistic features that mirror how meaning is originally constructed; the generic space reflects the abstract structure from the two input spaces; the blended space is to map both spaces onto its emergent structure through

completion and elaboration in this analogy.

Let us take another analogy for example: teacher as shepherd. This is also in paragraph 6:

Somewhat like the preacher is the shepherd who gathers and watches over a flock clearly inferior to himself [...] (Li, 2001, p. 242).

From the analogy above, we can identify features that the shepherd boasts. In the input space of the shepherd, linguistic expressions are *gather*, *watch over*, *a flock and inferior*, which will be mapped onto the input space of the teacher. The shepherd who gathers and watches over her flock of sheep is compared to the teacher whose students are like sheep to be taken care of or superintended. Now that there is an inferior status of a flock, the relationship between the preacher and the sheep are not equally established, as would be true of that between the teacher and the students. So the two spaces are set up, which would be mapped onto the generic space. The abstract structure arising from both spaces that share a more schematic frame of the shepherd and the teacher is a professional who is a caretaker for animals and who surely assumes to have a higher position than its counterparts. These two input spaces are connected by this generic space. As a result, each linguistic expression from the two input spaces is projected into the blended space, in which there occurs the emergent structure: an inappropriate analogy for teacher as shepherd.

Similarly we can use blending theory to explore the process of meaning construction in paragraphs 7, 8, 9 and 10. For the sake of space, let us proceed with teacher as researcher in paragraph 10.

Taciturn, solitary, he [the researcher] disdains the performing arts and is content merely to mutter out an assortment of scattered facts to the young only dimly perceived beyond his clouded trifocals. His measure of success is his students' capacity to regurgitate factual data (Li, 2001, p. 243).

We can identify the input space of the researcher, which will be mapped onto that of the teacher. In turn, "the generic space is an abstract scenario which consists of the basic structure shared by the two input domains" (Semino, 2002, p.115). The blended space, "arises from the fusion of material from the two input spaces into a single scenario, based on the cross-space correspondences and on their shared generic structure" (p.115). Figure 5 is the mental space network for the analogy: teacher as researcher.

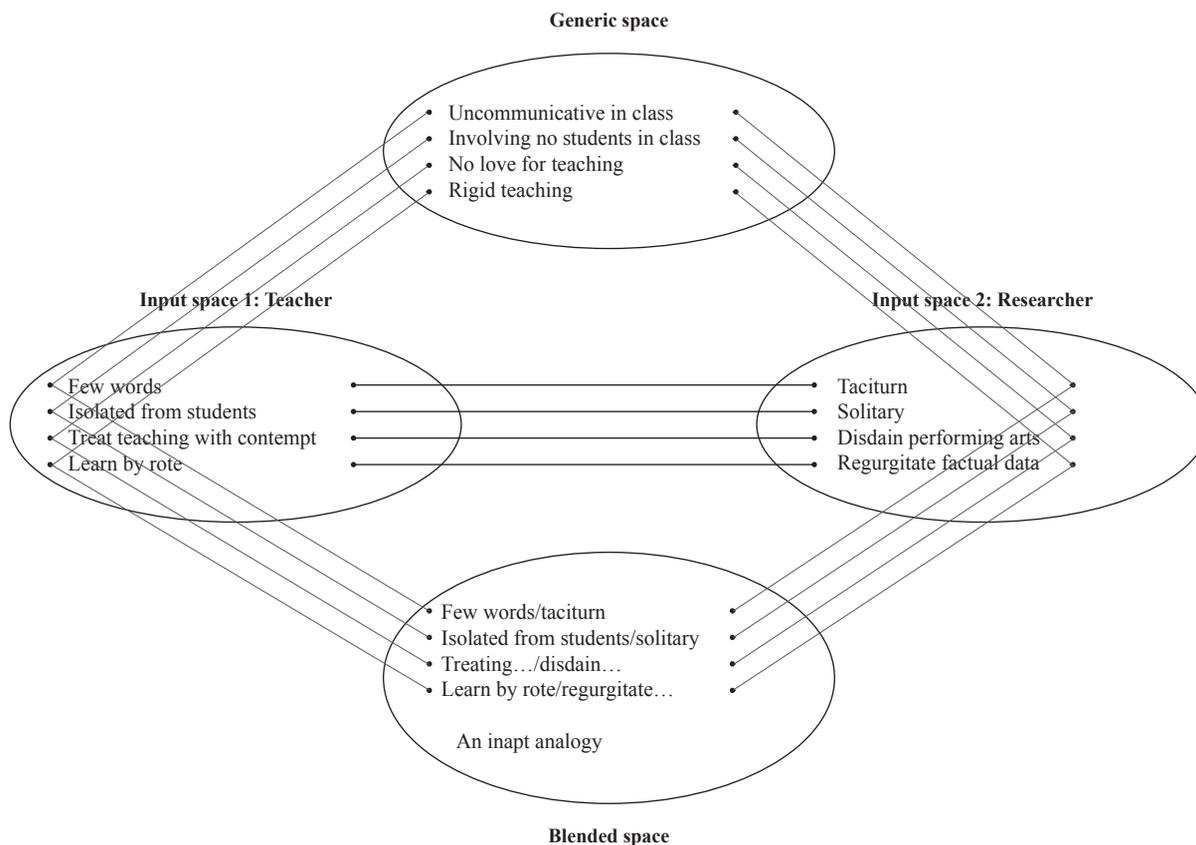


Figure 5. Mental space network of an analogy between teacher and researcher

2.2 The new analogy

From paragraph 12 to the very end, i.e. paragraph 15, Hill irons out the difficulties of analogy by fleshing out the relationship between teaching and mountaineering. We are to zoom in on paragraph 12 and the last paragraph using conceptual blending theory in the context of this positive analogy.

Hill starts to spell out the analogy by comparing teaching to mountaineering in paragraph 12, from which we are to distill the linguistic expressions that facilitate our mental construction of the analogy. Here is the whole paragraph:

Mountaineering furnishes the needed analogy. The Swiss mountain guide, like the true teacher, has a quiet authority about his very person. He or she endangers trust and confidence so that one is willing to join the endeavor. The mountaineer accepts his leadership role, yet recognizes that the success of the journey (measured by the scaling of the heights) depends upon close cooperation and active participation by each member of the group. He has crossed the terrain before and is familiar with the landmarks, but each trip is new, and generates its own anxiety and excitement. Essential skills must be mastered if the trip is to be successful; lacking them, disaster looms as an ominous possibility. The very precariousness of the situation necessitates keen focus and rapt attention; slackness, misjudgment, or laziness can bring doom (Li, 2001, p. 243).

The new analogy i.e. teacher as mountaineer is a metaphor. A very famous and classical example is *Life is a journey* where life is the target, and journey is the source. In this metaphor, teacher is the target while mountaineer is the source. According to Semino (2002), blending theory explains the production and comprehension of specific metaphorical expressions in terms of conceptual networks involving four mental spaces (p.114). Let us identify and explain the linguistic expressions that might be conceptualized into the source input space of the MOUNTAINEER DOMAIN: *a quite authority* about the guide, *trust and confidence* in the guide, *join the endeavor* of climbing, *leadership role* as a guide, *journey* of climbing, *close cooperation and active participation* among all mountaineers, *terrain* of the mountain, *landmarks* of the mountain, *essential skills* in mountaineering, *mountaineering trip*, *lacking skills* in mountaineering, *disaster* of mountaineering, *precariousness* in mountaineering, *keen focus and rapt attention* in mountaineering, *slackness, misjudgment, or laziness* in mountaineering, *doom* in mountaineering. On the other hand, in the target input space of the TEACHER DOMAIN, we can find equivalents that dovetail with the MOUNTAINEER DOMAIN, i.e. the source input space. So the TEACHER DOMAIN has: *a quite authority* about the teacher, *trust and confidence* in the teacher, *join the endeavor* of teaching, *leadership role* as a teacher, *journey* of teaching from the first minute to the end of the class, *close cooperation and active participation* among the teacher and students, *terrain* of the discipline, *landmarks* of the discipline, *essential skills* in teaching, *teaching trip*, *lacking skills* in teaching, *disaster* of teaching, *precariousness* in teaching, *keen focus and rapt attention* in teaching, *slackness, misjudgment, or laziness* in teaching, *doom* in teaching. As aforementioned in previous sections, generic space is one that represents “conceptual structure that is shared by both inputs” (Grady, et al. 1999, 103). To generalize, mountaineering and teaching enjoy the similarities that emphasize mutual relationship between participants of the activity, in which skills, empathy, and so on are compulsory; otherwise that will lead to a failure or even mental killing of the participants. By running the blend in the blended space, meaning is constructed. The blend inherits the basic structure from both the source and target space, i.e. input 1 and input 2 through completion and elaboration. In this context, the emergent structure in the blended space is that mountaineer is the most appropriate analogy for teaching, for it requires the same discipline as done in teaching.

Finally, let us take paragraph 15, i.e. the last paragraph for instance where the author leaves here thesis at the very end.

To encourage and further such mountain-top experiences the society must recognize teaching for the sublime art it is--not merely an offshoot of research, not merely a performance before a passive audience, but a guided expedition into the most exciting and least understood terrain on earth---the mind itself (Li, 2001, p. 244).

According to the conceptual blending theory, we have input space 1 and 2, generic space and blended space for the analogy between teaching and mountaineering. Figure 6 is the mental space network for paragraph 15:

In the blended space that projects the inputs from both input space 1 and 2, the emergent conceptual structure is that teaching as mountaineering is an apt analogy, though unlike mountaineering, a physical activity, teaching is a mental, or rather, intellectual activity. Interestingly, Hill uses the mind itself as a pun. In other words, the conceptual structure, the mind itself in the source input space turns into the target input space, because it implies both the summit of the mountain and the mind itself, which is the frontier of knowledge. In the 21st century, it is probably the mind science that tallies with the summit of the mountain in both teaching and learning. Therefore, this paper has worked towards a cognitive approach to teaching a non-literary work for an exploration of meaning construction in our minds.

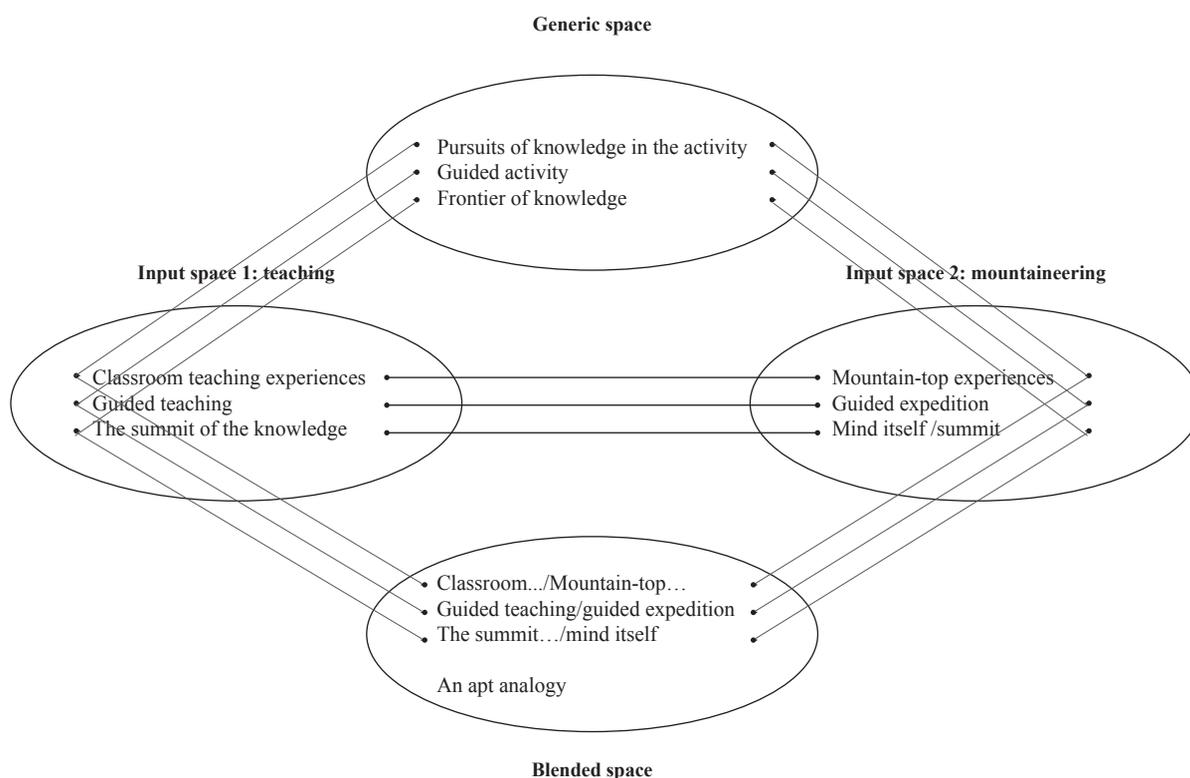


Figure 6. Mental space network of an analogy between teaching and mountaineering

3. Concluding remarks

This paper works on teaching the essay by Nancy K. Hill using a cognitive stylistic approach — conceptual blending theory. Though this theory largely applies itself to literary works, an attempt here has been made to apply it to an analysis of a non-literary work. It does not, however, mean that it can be employed for every non-literary work. From the linguistic expressions that we come up with in this essay, it is certain that conceptual blending theory can push back its frontier of knowledge from literary works to non-literary works that are related to analogy. In this case, the methods in both teaching and learning languages, particularly foreign languages, can be introduced and extended. Above all, conceptual blending theory can help us understand the process of how meanings are constructed in our minds.

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