

Conceptual Blending and Meme Humor on the Internet: The Example of COVID-19 Publicity Posters in Chinese Microblogging

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Internet memes, as multimodal cultural products disseminated through the Internet, usually take the form of short videos or images that express humor or satire. The creation and dissemination of humor in memes are both creative and complex, and the successful perception of meme humor reflects humans' universal thinking capacity. Based on the theoretical framework of conceptual blending, this paper selects a set of COVID-19 publicity posters from the official Weibo account of China Guangzhou Fabu (Guangzhou Internet Information Office), analyses the multi-level structure of Internet memes, and explores the dynamic cognitive process in the interpretation of humorous memes to reveal people's ability to make simultaneous analogies and integration between elements in different mental spaces.

Keywords: conceptual blending, Internet meme, humor, COVID-19 prevention and control

Introduction

Purely verbal humor over the past generation has given way to new kinds of Internet meme humor in the sweeping advancement of digitally driven life. Internet memes, often spread via social media platforms, are usually created to perpetrate a hoax or just be funny. Within the field of cognitive linguistics, revealing the cognitive process has been important in delineating humor research, which has led other researchers to build and expand on many approaches. These methodologies have done much to help us understand the ways humor can arise from language, but few empirical studies have traced the specific details of humor processing, especially for multimodal humor. Thus, this study examines a group of posters for their COVID-19 and humor topics to illustrate the cognitive mechanism of meme humor from the perspective of conceptual blending theory.

Internet Meme

The term “meme” was derived from the imitation of the word “gene” and was first introduced by the British evolutionary biologist Dawkins (1996) in his book *The Selfish Gene*. As a cultural unit of information, a meme refers to an idea or thought that can be replicated (He, 2005). For example, the novel coronavirus that emerged in late 2019 was named “COVID-19” after it became a pandemic and was widely disseminated in news reports and interpersonal communication, becoming a language meme with a specific meaning. While language memes are part of the meta-information of linguistic representations, the subject of this paper—Internet meme (also

known as image macro)—is a multimodal Internet communication medium that contains both text and image, integrating both linguistic and visual aspects, and is more complex than a language meme.

Shifman (2014) believed that Dawkins's definition of a meme is rather ambiguous. Therefore, he defines an Internet meme as a collection of digital contents that share certain characteristics, which is intentionally created and distributed online by Internet users. There has been a significant diversification of the forms of Internet memes in the digital age, which are generally comprised of a set of digital content with multiple media elements (e.g., images, text, audio, and video). During 2019-2022, Internet memes about the novel coronavirus gained popularity and revolved around the virus itself, people's attitudes toward the epidemic, prevention, and control strategies, and other topics related to other people and society (Guan & Gu, 2021). They produced effects, such as fear, irony, and humor. Memes are comprehensible and humorous primarily because of the cognitive abilities humans generally possess, such as conceptual reasoning, visual and non-visual perception, and mental simulation. Therefore, cognitive mechanisms allow humor to be appreciated and interpreted.

Using the conceptual blending mechanism in cognitive linguistics as a theoretical tool, this article focuses on image macros consisting of static images and text, citing a group of epidemic prevention and control publicity posters issued by the official Weibo account of China Guangzhou Fabu to discuss the following question: How is humor understood in Internet memes?

Research Status-Quo

Both domestically and internationally, many linguists have sought to find the mechanisms behind Internet meme humor. Ostanina-Olszewska and Majdzińska-Koczorowicz (2019) pointed out that metaphor, personification, metonymy, and exaggeration are all important means of constructing humorous memes. Korostenskiene (2021) examined the construction of humor in Internet memes from two dimensions, using intertextuality theory and indexical order. His research suggested that the main differences between Internet meme humor and verbal or comic humor can be attributed to differences in perceptions of how memory and medium operate. Yu (2022) demonstrated that both forms of memes with and without text are humorous by being "incongruous (i.e., contrary to common sense)" and that the subject that produces "incongruity" is associated with the composition of the meme. Tian (2016) employed visual grammar theory and incongruity-resolution theory to analyze the humorous effects produced by the reproductive, interactive, and compositional meanings in the sitcom *Mr. Bean* and argued that the incongruity-resolution theory is also applicable to the analysis of other modalities.

However, few studies have attempted to interpret Internet meme humor from a cognitive-linguistic standpoint. This article will explore the dynamic process of generating the humor effect, using conceptual blending as the theoretical underpinning, and using COVID-19 publicity posters in Chinese microblogging as an example to show how meme receivers process humor from memes cognitively.

Conceptual Blending and Internet Meme

As anticipated above, Internet users create Internet memes based on widely shared cultural knowledge and particular social contexts. To make sense of memes, the receivers construct two conceptual packs (Fauconnier, 1994) that are typically unrelated and merge them to produce the unexpected effect of humor; thus, the perceptibility of humor is a testament to the ability of humans to simultaneously operate two different modes of thought.

Explanation Model of the Mechanism of Internet Meme Humor: Conceptual Blending

Understanding mental spaces is necessary to fully appreciate conceptual blending theory. This concept was first established by the American linguist Gilles Fauconnier (1994), who noted that while the structure of mental spaces differs from that of language, it is built in accordance with the content of linguistic expressions. The various parts of a linguistic expression are put together by predetermined relationships to form a conceptual pack or mental space. To put it another way, when people talk about things in the outside world, their minds instantly evoke these fleeting conceptual packs, which make up the mental space. For instance, people immediately think of certain elements related to “Brazil” (i.e., different mental spaces) when talking about the country, such as Brazilian culture, history, eating customs, or the love of soccer.

Fauconnier (1997) and Fauconnier and Turner (2002) further advanced an important theory to explain human cognitive processes: conceptual blending theory, which is based on the idea of mental space. Conceptual blending is a thinking tool for human creativity that mainly relies on cognitive mapping between mental spaces and comprises at least four mental spaces: two input spaces, one generic space, and one blended space. The generic space, created by the cross-spatial mapping between the input spaces, highly abstracts some of the organizations and structures shared by the two input spaces. Additionally, some components of the two input spaces are projected onto the fourth space to form a blended space. The following example is given:

“疫情结束后，我要带着256G的胃去这8条美食街”！

(After the epidemic is over, I will go to these 8 food streets with a 256 G stomach!) (from “南京吃喝玩乐” WeChat channel)

This title can be seen as the outcome of conceptual blending. Figure 1 (a solid arrow denotes a mental trajectory, a circle represents a mental space, a solid line signifies a conceptual mapping, and a dashed line refers to the selection of a few elements of the input spaces for the blended space) shows Input Space 1—“Mobile phone” and Input Space 2—“Stomach”. The cross-spatial mapping reflected in generic space refers to “storing something in a container”. After spatial blending, a non-existent emergent structure is developed, according to Fauconnier and Turner (2002), and proceeds through three stages: composition, completion, and elaboration. “Combination” refers to assembling the components of the initial input spaces to lay the foundation. If the elements in the two input spaces are not brought together, “256 G” and “stomach” in this case are not linked in reality. The term “completion” describes the unconscious integration of a person’s own background information and structural framework to complete space integration. In other words, a viewer can automatically complement the other elements in a frame after seeing a certain piece of it. In the case of the “256 G stomach”, the combination of “256 G” and “stomach” is completed to form an emergent structure of “a stomach filled with a huge capacity for food”. “Elaboration” indicates a simulation and performance of the process of blending space via one’s imagination. Specifically, food steadily fills up more room in the stomach as it goes from 0 to 64 G, then 128 G, and finally 256 G. As can be observed, conceptual blending is a dynamic and open cognitive operating process that draws from the material and spiritual worlds of people (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002).

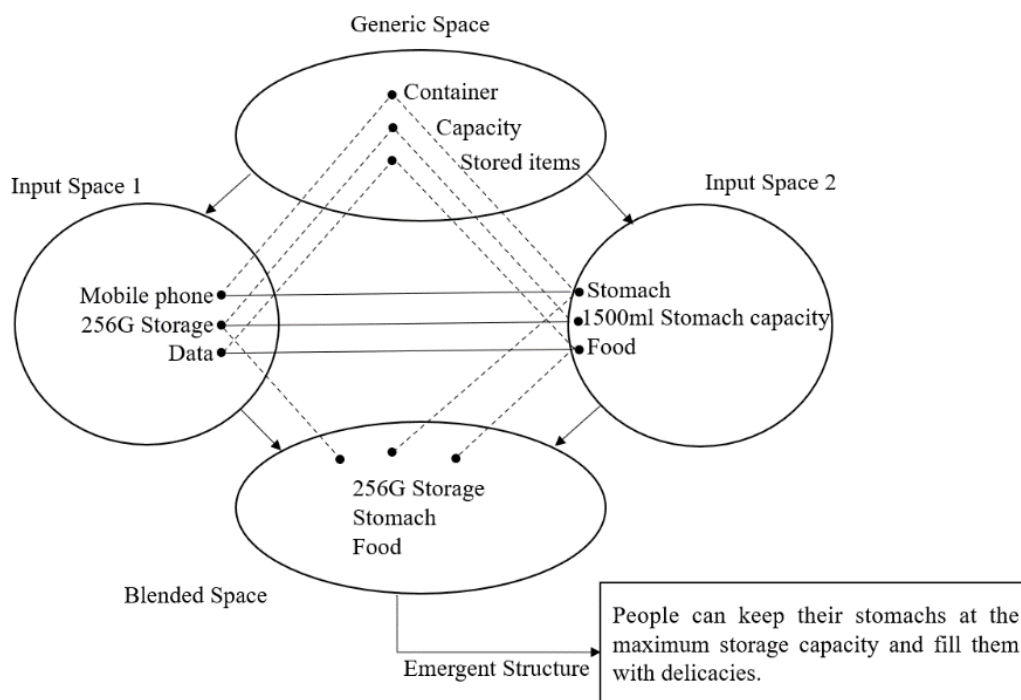


Figure 1. Flow diagram of conceptual blending.

The Potential of Unveiling Internet Meme Humor

Internet memes are digital media content containing a variety of elements whose humor should arise from their collision and fusion. When attempting to understand Internet memes, there is interaction of information pertaining to language, vision, socioeconomic situation, and culture, and their psychological processing is almost instantaneous, demonstrating the speed with which the human brain can process information. Therefore, it is necessary to begin exploring the generation of Internet meme humor from the perspective of deconstructing elements, mastering the combination of elements, and then fully comprehending the generation process as it relates to humorous effects.

Taking mental space from different cognitive domains as the basic unit, conceptual blending offers a new perspective for analyzing and interpreting Internet meme humor. After psychological cognitive operations, originally independent elements are selected and fused, and a new and humorous semantic structure is dynamically created. Hence, conceptual blending provides not only basic tools for the development of creativity but also an interpretation path for the production of humor.

Sample Analysis

The corpus that is studied for this paper is web-based, containing three COVID-19 publicity posters from the official Weibo account of China Guangzhou Fabu in Chinese microblogging. It adopted a relaxed and humorous approach to publicizing COVID-19 prevention and control measures by incorporating Chinese mythology. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to discuss how Internet meme humor is perceived. The following analysis will explain the cognitive process behind meme humor in these three COVID-19 publicity posters, including “The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl”, “Nezha Conquers the Dragon King”, and “Hou Yi Shoots the Suns”. Before proceeding with the data analysis, the Chinese mythology will be briefly introduced.

“The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl”—“Keep a One-Meter Distance”

The caption at the top center of Figure 2 “牛郎织女，鹊桥相会” (The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl) is a romantic Chinese folktale that tells the story of the romance between two lovers: Zhinü, the Weaver Girl, and Niulang, the Cowherd. Legend has it that the Emperor of Heaven ordered the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl to separate. They were only allowed to reunite on the 7th of July every year in Tianhe, and magpies would build a bridge for them, commonly known as the magpie bridge. These main characters in the story also compromise the image elements presented in Figure 2 below, whose humor resides in a surprising and incongruous, yet most appropriate, comparison between, and hence the blending of, two input spaces, that is, the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl, as well as the COVID-19 precautions to keep a one-meter distance. As Figure 3 shows, Internet users initially construct the cognitive framework of Input Space 1, namely, “the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl meeting on the magpie bridge”. However, the import of the conversation text above the two characters—“咱们这次相见就不拥抱了，保持一米距离” (We better not hug this time, keeping a one-meter distance)—is transparently incongruous with the underlying information in the original story. For example, the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl would hug or do something intimate to express their love for each other when they meet, which is also in line with the public’s general understanding of the concept of “lovers meeting”. The bottom text “保持一米距离” (to keep a one-meter distance) is one of the key points of health protection in public places during COVID-19, which evokes the presentation of Input Space 2, together with that conversation. Soon, netizens become aware of the mapping relations between the two spaces, and the emergent structure is completed and elaborated upon after their blending; that is, the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl would rather hold back their longing for each other than avoid close contact to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This humorous blend also suggests that members of the general public should maintain a one-meter social distance to avoid becoming infected with COVID-19.



Figure 2. The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl.

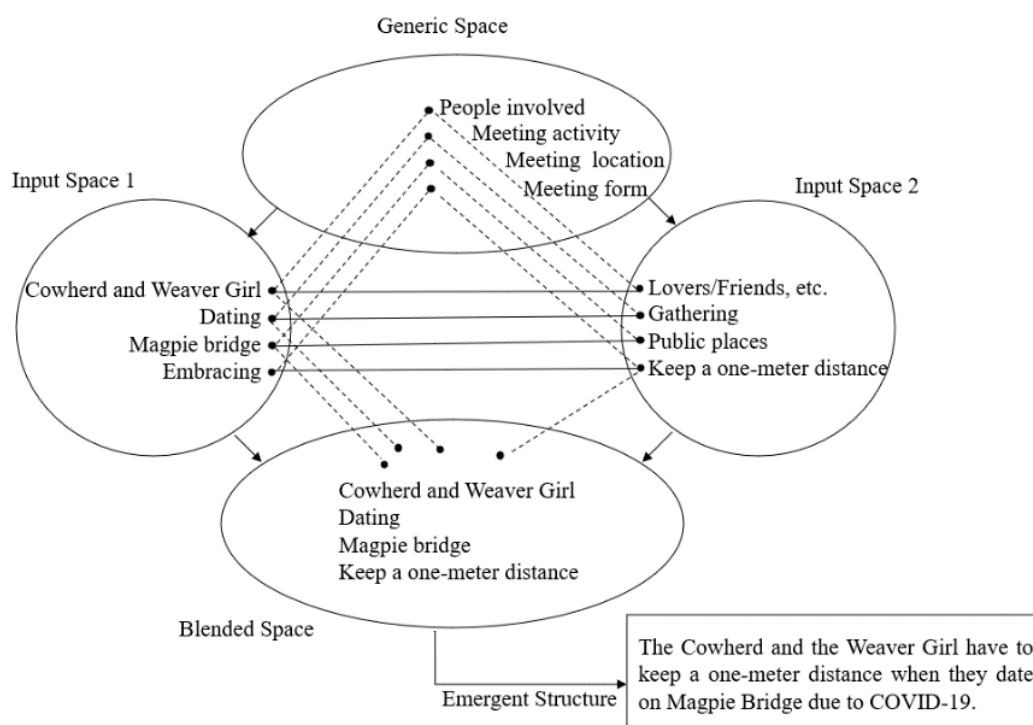


Figure 3. Flow diagram of conceptual blending in Figure 2.

“Nezha Conquers the Dragon King”—“Detecting COVID-19”

There are two cartoon characters clearly visible in Figure 4 for COVID-19 testing, including Nezha (on the left) and the Dragon King (on the right) named Ao Guang, who are both from the story *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*. In the story, Nezha, as a warrior deity, confronts the Dragon King, who plagues Chinese people with destructive storms and drought, and ultimately triumphs. As shown in Figure 5, the humor in Figure 4 represents a blend using conceptual structure from two incongruous domains—*Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (Input Space 1) and detecting COVID-19 (Input Space 2)—which can be deduced from what Nezha says, “龙王出来做核酸啦!” (Ao Guang, come out to take a COVID-19 test!) Moreover, the fire-tipped spear, the original weapon of Nezha, is metaphorically substituted with a cotton swab, which is frequently used to detect nucleic acid in real life which is full of epidemics. The absent elements (i.e., the medical staff and the social public) in Input Space 2 need to be conceptualized in terms of Input Space 1. Thus, the hybrid poster blend is rooted in the construction of a novel form of the way Nezha treats the Dragon King. Within the new scenario, Nezha makes a COVID-19 test for the Dragon King, who may carry the virus to contain the spread, which causes humor. Note that the hostile relationship between Nezha and the Dragon King is neglected in the blended space by the netizens and that they are more in a state of harmonious coexistence. Using parody rhetoric, meme creators deliberately mimic well-known myths and transform character relationships to suit the needs of humor.



Figure 4. Nezha Conquers the Dragon King.

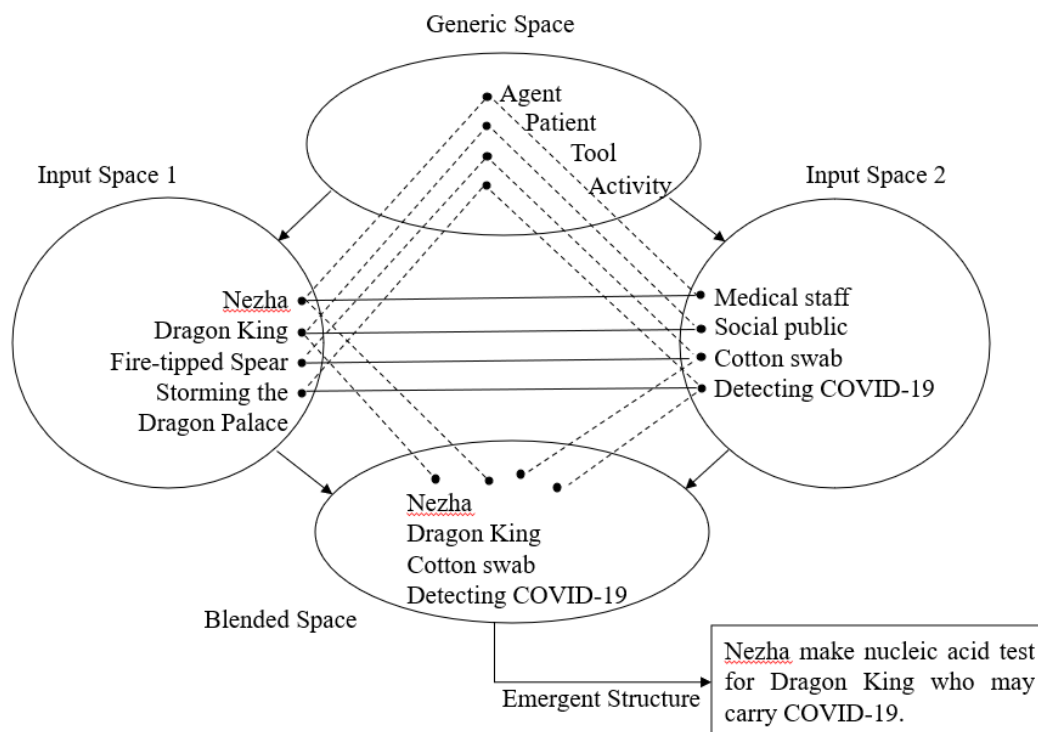


Figure 5. Flow diagram of conceptual blending in Figure 4.

“Hou Yi Shoots the Suns”—“Giving a COVID-19 Booster Shot”

Hou Yi (后羿) is a mythological Chinese archer. One day, 10 suns came out at once, scorching the earth. Hou Yi was tasked with reining in the suns, and he eventually shot at them one by one with his bow. This is the mythical story titled “后羿射日” (Hou Yi Shoots the Suns). Figure 6 also uses the format of an image of two characters (Hou Yi and the Sun) and a textual conversation between them. When the mental space of “Hou Yi Shoots the Suns” is constructed, the receiver is able to “access” any element and other subspaces associated with it. In Figure 7, Input Space 1 illustrates the conventional cognition of the myth. However, the appearance of the text—“你又来干嘛” (Why are you here again?), “来给你打加强针了” (I’m here to give you a booster shot!)—requires the receiver to re-evaluate the previous cognitive framework and combine it with the Input Space 2 evoked by this text. As the newly emergent structure appears, Hou Yi does not destroy the sun, as was previously believed, but rather boosts its resistance to the novel coronavirus. It is also due to the use of parody that Hou Yi can establish a friendly relationship with the sun. It can be found that the visual elements in Figure 6—the masks worn by Hou Yi and the arrows used to shoot the sun—form a mapping relationship with the masks and vaccine needles used by modern medical staff. Additionally, what the sun says—“你又来干嘛” (Why are you here again?)—implies that this is not the first time that Hou Yi shot the sun. Upon establishing Input Space 2, people are immediately led to believe that they have received two or three vaccinations in real life. It is thought that vaccination booster shots can not only reduce the scorching heat brought by multiple suns in ancient mythology and benefit people and nature but also reduce the risk of infection with mutated novel coronavirus and protect people’s health in modern society, so humor is formed.



Figure 6. Hou Yi Shoots the Suns.

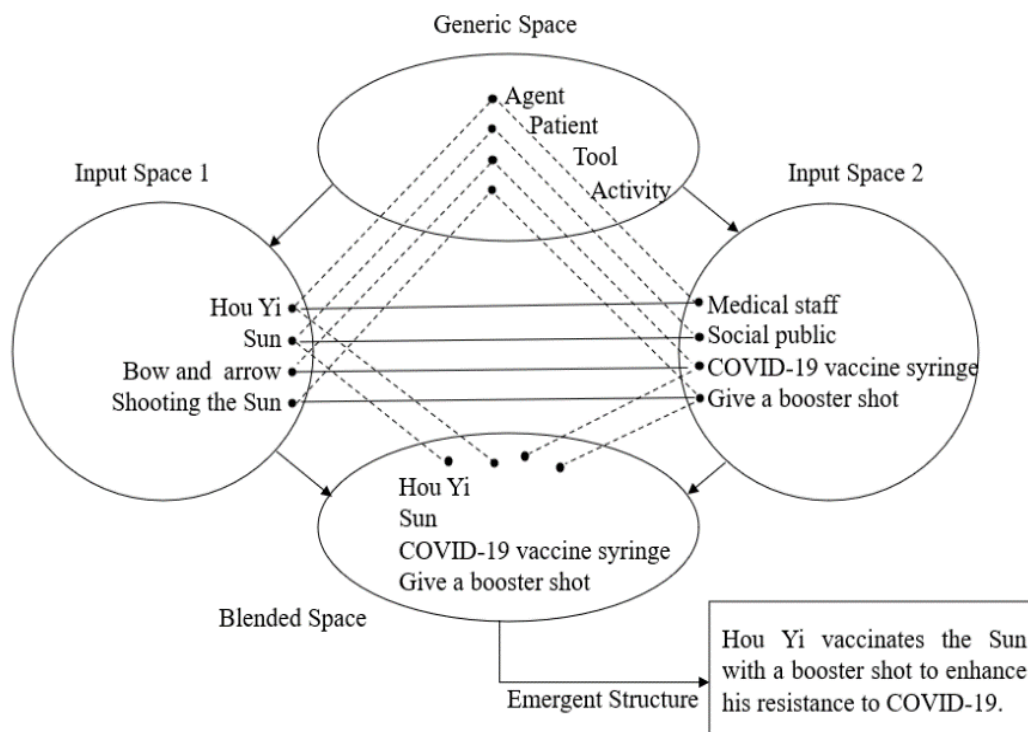


Figure 7. Flow diagram of conceptual blending in Figure 6.

Conclusions

The current paper has analyzed how netizens understand Internet meme humor in their minds in light of the conceptual blending theory, adducing evidence that this cognitive model does account for various Internet memes and can be successfully interwoven into the production of creative memes. First, Internet memes are multimodal products that convey social culture and personal feelings. Creating humor is primarily dependent on the interaction between images and texts. Second, as previously stated, it can be inferred that although the kinds of input spaces used for each type of Internet meme are different (images and texts), the basic cognitive mechanisms responsible for blending the material are roughly the same. To begin this process of mental simulation, the recipient of the meme should be equipped with basic knowledge of the scenario presented in the meme. The first step in this process is to construct a mental space based on the image provided and simultaneously activate a second mental space in accordance with the accompanying text. Following that, the recipient can instantly identify the similarities underlying both elements of images and texts in the two input spaces and automatically link them. Then, the salient elements are chosen and combined in the blended space. Thus, a semantically coherent plot that contradicts reality comes into existence, giving rise to humor.

Traditional cognitive humor theory, namely incongruity theory, focuses on the conflict between cognitive expectations and physical realities and claims that humor is a consequence of the abrupt shift from expectation to disappointment. However, conceptual blending theory emphasizes the gestalt nature of the blended space in terms of semantic expression after conceptual blending, instead of the contrast between the input spaces. The purpose of this paper is not to address humor in all media, and the above analysis shows that conceptual blending theory can be used to interpret a wider variety of meme humor.

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