



Conceptual Blending in Visual Discourse: Cognitive Insights from Socio-Cultural Cartoons

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1. Introduction

Press cartoons function as powerful media tools that transcend mere entertainment by expressing and critiquing political, social, economic, and cultural concepts. Through visual and multimodal metaphors, cartoonists can present abstract ideas in tangible and effective formats. Despite growing recognition of the communicative function of cartoons, the underlying cognitive mechanisms that enable their persuasive and critical capacity remain underexplored, particularly within the socio-cultural genre. Most previous research has focused on political cartoons, leaving a significant gap in understanding how cartoons addressing cultural and social issues such as family relationships, traditions, and social norms operate cognitively.

The present study addresses this gap by examining conceptual blending (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) as a fundamental cognitive mechanism in the production and comprehension of socio-cultural press cartoons. The research pursues three objectives: (1) to identify and analyze examples of conceptual blending in a selected corpus of socio-cultural cartoons; (2) to quantify the frequency of conceptual blending and its specific types; and (3) to interpret the distribution of blending types to gain insight into the cognitive strategies used in this genre.

2. Literature Review

Previous research on conceptual blending can be grouped into three thematic strands. The first strand comprises theoretical explorations of blending theory. Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2009) examined the explanatory scope of blending within cognitive poetics, while Adiguzel (2024) clarified the distinction between conceptual blending and conceptual metaphor theory. Razavian et al. (2024) demonstrated that the structure and function of blends vary systematically across literary and scientific genres. The second strand includes applications of blending to verbal media discourse. Kia et al. (2021) analyzed 1,000 political news headlines, and Kia et al. (2023) extended this approach to economic, political, and sports headlines, confirming the flexibility of blending theory across textual genres. The third strand comprises cognitive analyses of political and advertising cartoons. Delibegovic Dzanic and Omazic (2011) explored the role of blending in political cartoons, while Malek et al. (2021) investigated meaning construction in English political cartoons. In the Iranian context, Ansarian (2023) analyzed 24 political cartoons, and Ghaderinejad (2023) examined 21 advertising cartoons.

Although these studies have significantly contributed to understanding cognitive mechanisms underlying cartoon discourse, they share three limitations: a primary focus on political or advertising genres, reliance on relatively small datasets, and predominantly qualitative approaches. The present study builds on this body of research by shifting focus to the socio-cultural genre, examining a large-scale corpus of 1,000 cartoons, and integrating quantitative frequency-based analysis with qualitative cognitive interpretation.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining descriptive frequency analysis with cognitive qualitative analysis based on Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) conceptual blending framework. The corpus consists of 1,000 Iranian press cartoons from the socio-cultural genre, randomly selected from the "Iran Cartoon" website covering the period 2016 to 2024. Socio-cultural cartoons are defined as works whose primary focus is the representation, criticism, or interpretation of lifestyles, attitudes, values, daily concerns, and cultural developments without directly

referencing official political actors, government institutions, or political competitions.

The analytical procedure was conducted in three steps. First, all 1,000 cartoons were examined for the presence of conceptual blending. Second, identified instances were classified according to blending network type (simple, mirror, single-scope, or double-scope) based on standard theoretical definitions. Third, representative samples were selected for in-depth qualitative analysis, examining input spaces, generic space, cross-space mappings, vital relations, and the three processes of composition, completion, and elaboration.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed that 310 out of 1,000 socio-cultural cartoons contained at least one instance of conceptual blending, confirming that blending is a highly prevalent cognitive strategy in this genre. The distribution of blending types showed a clear pattern: double-scope blends were the most frequent, with 210 cases (67.7% of all blends), followed by single-scope blends with 100 cases (32.3%). Mirror and simple blends were entirely absent from the corpus.

Double-scope blending predominates because socio-cultural cartoons seek to challenge the status quo, highlight contradictions, and offer radically new perspectives on social realities. By integrating two conceptually unrelated domains, double-scope blending creates cognitive dissonance that serves as fertile ground for humor, irony, and exaggeration. For example, a cartoon depicting a sinking refugee boat inside an aquarium rather than the open sea compresses human tragedy into museum display, generating the emergent meaning of the "spectacularization of human suffering."

Single-scope blending ranks second due to its role in simplifying and concretizing abstract concepts. Many socio-cultural notions such as freedom of expression, social responsibility, or the impact of artificial intelligence are highly abstract and difficult to visualize directly. Single-scope blending enables cartoonists to present these concepts in accessible forms. For instance, a cartoon depicting the human brain as a tea bag with an "AI" label transforms complex cognition into instant brewing, critiquing the superficiality of technologically mediated thinking.

The absence of simple and mirror blends is explained by their insufficient conceptual complexity. Simple blends (role-value combinations) resemble caricatures focusing on individuals rather than ideas, while mirror blends lack the creative tension necessary for generating critical humor.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that conceptual blending functions as a central cognitive mechanism in socio-cultural press cartoons. The frequency distribution reveals that cartoonists deliberately employ more complex cognitive tools: double-scope blending for creating novel concepts and radical critique, and single-scope blending for simplifying abstract ideas. Simpler blending types are ineffective for achieving the communicative goals of this genre. The highest frequency of blending was associated with environmental issues, followed by virtual space and artificial intelligence, reflecting the dominant orientations of contemporary socio-cultural discourse.

The study contributes to cognitive linguistics and visual communication by providing a systematic analysis of an often-overlooked genre and by offering quantitative evidence complementing previous qualitative research. Limitations include focus on a single data source. Future research should employ more diverse corpora, conduct empirical studies on audience perception of different blend types, and undertake cross-cultural comparisons.

Keywords: cognitive semantics; conceptual blending; editorial cartoons; socio-cultural genre.

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