Deixis and multiple blends: the role of recursion in meaning construction

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It is by now widely recognized that deictic phenomena have abstract conceptual meanings which invoke basic cognitive models. As for personal pronouns, it has been suggested that an Idealized Cognitive Model – the ICM of deixis –, defined as a ‘pointing-out’ ICM, organizes speaker and hearer’s roles in the speech event (Lakoff, 1987, Marmaridou, 2000). It has also been suggested that first and second person pronoun’s meanings are constructed through higher-order blending (Langacker, 2007).

Based on Mental Spaces Theory, and specifically on work relying on the notion of multiple blend (Fauconnier and Turner 2002), this paper investigates first and second person personal pronouns, using attested data from English and Brazilian Portuguese. It is claimed that personal pronoun’s meanings prompt us to call up an input space structured by the speaker-hearer frame and project speaker and/or hearer roles onto individuals in the Ground Base Space. A blended space is thus created by projecting the relevant counterparts onto corresponding personal pronouns. For example, the meaning of first person singular “I”, in the sentence “I’m called John”, should be represented as follows:

Data analysis has shown, however, that first person “I” can be used not only to explicitly code the speaker, but also implicitly code the hearer(s). For example, if John were a teacher, he could take the viewpoint of his students and give them the following advice: “If I want to pass
the exam, I have to study hard”. By the same token, second person “you” can explicitly code the hearer, but implicitly code the speaker, as when someone enters a crowded store and says “You have to be patient to shop here”.

In cases of the type just discussed, it is assumed that recursion takes place, and a blended space from one network can be used as an input to another blending network. In the teacher’s example, a cross-space mapping connects first person “I” (speaker/John) in the blended space to “students” in the “school space”, made available due to the nature of the speech event. The two elements in the input mental spaces are thus projected to a single element “I” in another blended space.

The main contribution of the paper is to provide an integrated account of person deixis, by explaining the creation of more complex meanings via recursive blending. It is shown that deictic meanings are not predictable from the language forms used to evoke them, but they are predictable from the mapping schemes of an earlier more simple blend.

References


