Japanese Letter Riddles: A Blending Perspective

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to attempt an analysis of Japanese letter riddles from the perspective of Conceptual Blending Theory (cf. Fauconnier & Turner 1994, 1998b, 2002, etc), and to suggest that a general cognitive process 'Blending' can be deeply involved in understanding them. The paper will therefore add further supportive evidence to the framework of Conceptual Blending, especially in the domains of literary studies and humor research.

2. Conceptual Blending Theory

Within the research field of Cognitive Linguistics, Conceptual Blending Theory as an extension of Mental Space Theory (cf. Fauconnier 1994, 1997) has been steadily developed by the following scholars: Gilles Fauconnier, Mark Turner, Seana Coulson, Todd Oakley, Eve Sweetser, among others. In this section, we will first see the overall framework of Conceptual Blending Theory.

Fauconnier & Turner (1998b) defines 'Blending' as follows: "blending is a central, orderly, powerful, systematic, and commonplace cognitive operation (*ibid.*: 184)." This operation is in principle very simple, and its constitutive principles are summarized as in (1) [see Figure 1]:

(1) a. *Partial Cross-Space Mapping*: a partial mapping of counterparts between the Input Spaces I_1 and I_2.
b. *Generic Space*: some common, usually more abstract, structure and organization shared by the Inputs I_1 and I_2.
c. *Selective Projection to the Blend*: the partial projection of the Inputs I_1 and I_2 onto the Blended Space.
d. *Development of Emergent Structure*: the Blended Space has emergent structure not provided by the Inputs, via three interrelated ways: *Composition* of projections from the Inputs, *Completion* based on independently recruited frames and scenarios, and *Elaboration* through "running the blend" imaginatively according to its own emergent logic.

As shown in (2), convergent evidence for the existence of Conceptual Blending far-reachingly ranges from linguistics to literary works, to mathematics, and even to music and film:

(2) *Morphology and Syntax:* Turner & Fauconnier (1995, 1998), Mandelblit (1997, 2000)
Mathematics: Robert (1998), Lakoff & Núñez (2000)
Literary Works: Turner (1996), Freeman (1997), Oakley (1998), Hiraga (1999)
Humor: Coulson (1995, 1996, 2001)
Music: Zbikowski (1999, 2001)
Gesture: Liddell (1998)
Sign Language: Dudis (2004)
Politics: Collier & Levitsky (1997)
Film: Bordwell (1996)

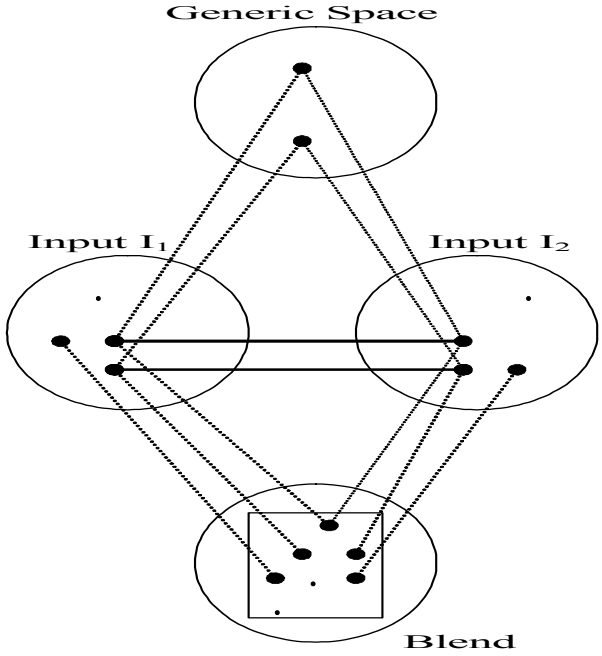


Figure 1: Basic Diagram (Fauconnier & Turner 1998a: 272)

3. Japanese Letter Riddles: A Cognitive Analysis

When we open Konomi (2001), a Japanese riddle book for children, we find that there are various types of Japanese letter riddles. In this section, we focus on the letter riddles introduced in this book[1] to analyze them within the framework of Conceptual Blending Theory.

3.1 Three Types of Japanese Letter Riddles

According to my research, three types of letter riddles at least can be specified in this book, with its focus on blending

[1] The letter riddles here may be thought of as a kind of rebus (i.e. "a form of WORDPLAY in which letters, numbers, syllables, words, or other symbols represent a letter, a word, or a longer message" (Morice 2001: 169)).

types. Examples of each type are represented in (3-5):

(3) Type A: by Formal Blending (Form + Form)

[Answers]

a. 当選 (Tosen) [Election] <当(to:)[Win]=10(to:), 選(sen)[Select]=1000(sen)> (Konomi 2001: 289)

b. 英雄 (Eiyu) [Hero] < 英(ei)=A(ei), 雄(yu)=U(yu)> (*ibid.*: 290)

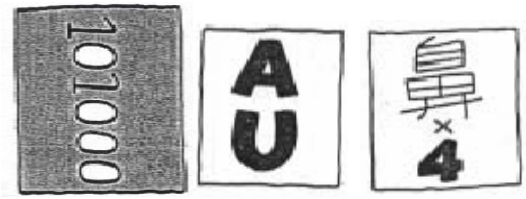
c. 話しかける (Hanashikakeru) [Speak to] <話(hana)[speak]=鼻(hana)[nose], し(shi)=4(shi), かける(kakeru)=×(kakeru)[multiply]> (*ibid.*: 285)

d. ビーカー (Bika) [Beaker] <ビー=B, カー=車=Car> (*ibid.*: 296)

e. ダウンベスト (Daunbesuto) [Down Vest] <タウン=町=Town, ベスト=最良=Best> (*ibid.*: 292)

f. クロダイ (Kurodai) [Black sea bream] <タイ(or ダイ)=鯛=Sea Bream> (*ibid.*: 280)

[Questions]



(3a) (3b) (3c)

(3d) (3e) (3f)

(4) Type B: Cross-Space Heterogeneous Blending (Form + Content)

[Answers]

a. シマウマ (Shimauma) [Zebra] <シマウマ=縞馬(Stripes+Horse)> (Konomi 2001: 290)

b. 思いやり (Omoiyari) [Sympathy] <Omoiyari=思いやり or 重い槍(Heavy Arrows)> (*ibid.*: 297)

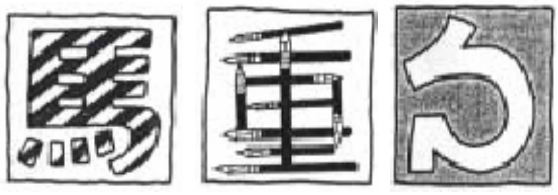
c. ひよこ (Hiyoko) [Chick] <ひよこ=ひ横=Lying the letter "ひ"> (*ibid.*: 293)

d. 逆転 (Gyakuten) [Reversal] <逆転(Reverse+Roll)=Reverse the letter "転(roll)"] (*ibid.*: 291)

e. イヤリング (Iyaringu) [Earring] <イヤ=耳=Ear, リング= Ring> (*ibid.*: 294)

f. 目がてんになる (Me-ga ten-ni naru) [Surprise] <目=め=Eye, てん=Points, なる=Make> (*ibid.*: 296)

[Questions]



(4a) (4b) (4c)

(4d) (4e) (4f)

(5) Type C: One-Space Heterogeneous Blending (Form + Content [in an Input])

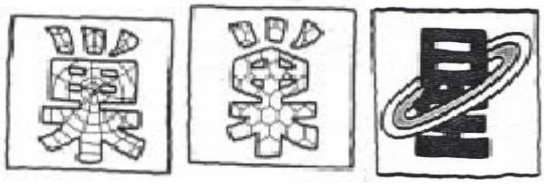
[Answers]

a. クモの巣 (Kumo no su) [Cobweb] <巣=Net> (Konomi 2001: 280)

b. ハチの巣 (Hachi no su) [Honeycomb] <巣=Net> (*ibid.*: 280)

c. 土星 (dosei) [Saturn] <星=Star> (*ibid.*: 294)

[Questions]



(5a) (5b) (5c)

3.2 Formal Blending Type

Let us first analyze the example (3a):

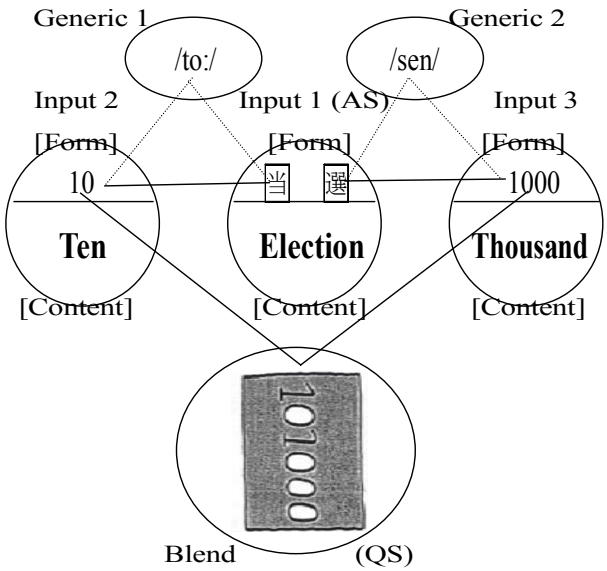


Figure 2: (3a)'s Riddle

(6) 1. Based on the phonological similarities /to:/ in

Generic 1 and /sen/ in Generic 2, two connectors are linked between Input 1 [Form] and Input 2 [Form], and between Input 1 [Form] and Input 3 [Form], respectively.

2. The formal blending of the Input 2 [Form] and the Input 3 [Form] makes the emergent structure as in the Blend.
3. The functions of Answer Space (AS)[2] and Question Space (QS)[3] are assigned to the Input 1 and the Blend respectively.
4. The AS-QS contrast or the recruitment of AS into QS triggers a comical effect.

3.3 Cross-Space Heterogeneous Blending Type

Let us next consider the examples (4a) and (4e):

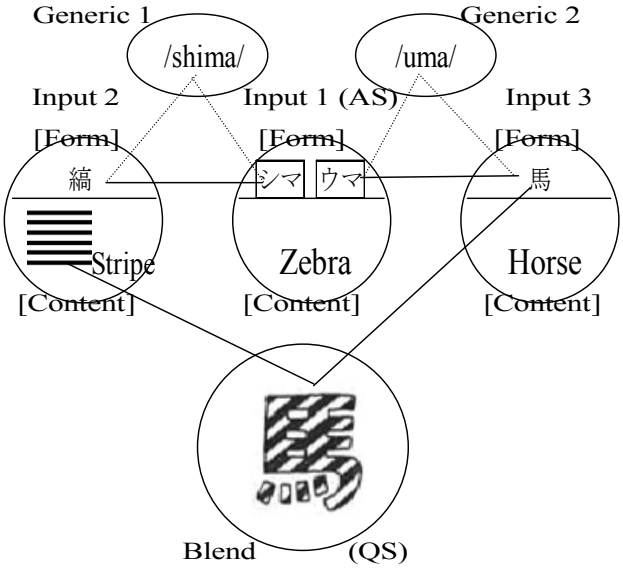


Figure 3: (4a)'s Riddle

(7) 1. Depending on the phonological similarities /shima/ in Generic 1 and /uma/ in Generic 2, two connectors are linked between Input 1 [Form] and Input 2 [From], and between Input 1 [Form] and Input 3 [Form], respectively.

2. The cross-space heterogeneous blending of the Input 2 [Content] and the Input 3 [Form] creates the emergent structure as shown in the Blend.
3. The Input 1 and the Blend serve as Answer Space (AS) and Question Space (QS) respectively.
4. The AS-QS contrast or the recruitment of AS into QS provokes laughter.

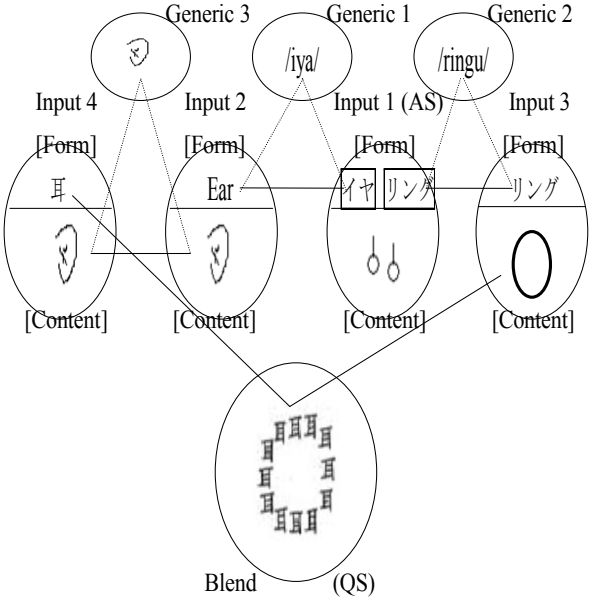


Figure 4: (4e)'s Riddle

(8) 1. On the basis of the phonological similarities /iya/ in Generic 1 and /ringu/ in Generic 2, two connectors are linked between Input 1 [Form] and Input 2 [Form], and between Input 1 [Form] and Input 3 [Form], respectively.

2. Focusing upon the semantic similarity in Generic 3, Input 4 is evoked.
3. The cross-space heterogeneous blending of the Input 3 [Content] and the Input 4 [Form] makes the emergent structure as in the Blend.
4. The Input 1 and the Blend receives the functions of Answer Space (AS) and Question Space (QS) respectively.
5. The AS-QS contrast or the recruitment of AS into QS leads to laughter.

3.4 One-Space Heterogeneous Blending Type

Let us finally make an analysis of the example (5a):

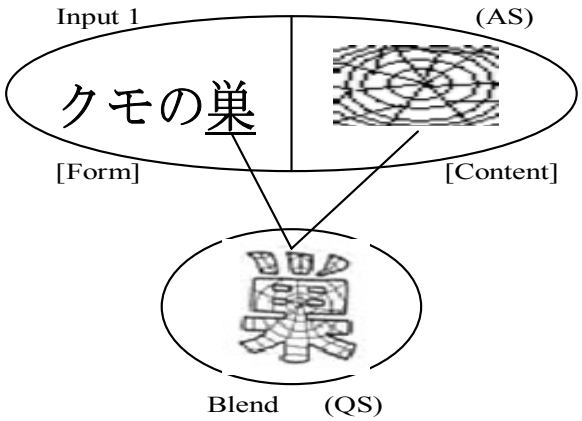


Figure 5: (5a)'s Riddle

[2] Answer Space (AS) contains the riddle answer.

[3] Question Space (QS) includes the conceptual original of the riddle question.

(9) 1. Input 1 is set up, which has the form-content pairing of "クモの巣 (Kumo no su) [Cobweb]".
2. The one-space heterogeneous blending of the Input 1 [Form] and the Input 1 [Content] produces the emergent structure as in the Blend.
3. The Input 1 and the Blend function as Answer Space (AS) and Question Space (QS) respectively.
4. The AS-QS contrast or the recruitment of AS into QS invites a comical effect.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen three types of Japanese letter riddles from the perspective of Conceptual Blending Theory. In conclusion, it is possible to say that the general cognitive process 'Blending' plays an important role in the language play of Japanese letter riddles. Otherwise phrased, the blending operation can be at the core of understanding Japanese letter riddles.

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