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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Cognitive Analysis of Euphemisms in *The Big Bang Theory* under CBT

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### ABSTRACT

This research delves into the pragmatic function of euphemisms in the context of the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, utilizing Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT) as the analytical framework. The purpose is to understand how euphemisms, as a form of polite language, are constructed to avoid direct and potentially offensive expressions, thus promoting social harmony. The methodology involves a detailed analysis of euphemistic language within the sitcom, focusing on the integration of mental spaces as proposed by CBT. The study identifies key euphemisms and constructs a conceptual integration network for each, revealing the input spaces, generic space, and the blended space that emerges, offering new meanings. The main results demonstrate that euphemisms are cognitively processed through the blending of spaces, where elements from different domains combine to form a less confrontational meaning. The conclusion underscores the efficacy of CBT in explaining the complexity of euphemistic language, showcasing its role in navigating social norms and cultural sensitivities. This research provides insights into American cultural nuances and the strategic use of language in social interactions, enhancing the understanding of euphemisms as a cross-cultural communication tool.

### KEYWORDS

Euphemism, *The Big Bang Theory*, Conceptual Blending Theory, Cognitive analysis

### ARTICLE INFORMATION

**ACCEPTED:** 02 October 2024

**PUBLISHED:** 28 October 2024

**DOI:** 10.32996/ijllt.2024.7.11.3

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## 1. Introduction

Euphemism is a typical polite language. It is a pragmatic phenomenon that deliberately violates certain principles of cooperation. In order to adapt to a harmonious society, people prefer to avoid direct, vulgar, embarrassing, or unpleasant expressions and use indirect, gentle, and euphemistic expressions. Its purpose is to avoid taboos, show elegance, and avoid hurting others. It is a means of regulating interpersonal relationships and making social communication smooth. Understanding euphemisms is a cognitive process. How can a seemingly irrelevant word or phrase take on a new meaning? Data show that the implied meanings of many euphemisms cannot be explained from the literal meanings, so there is a semantic gap between euphemisms and direct expressions. The theory of conceptual blending was proposed by the famous cognitive linguists Fauconnier and Turner. They believe that conceptual blending, as a very common cognitive process, plays a crucial role in the meaning construction process of natural language. Many scholars at home and abroad have applied this theory to explain many linguistic phenomena. This theory also provides us with powerful and important cognitive tools and research perspectives for understanding and developing euphemisms.

## 2. Euphemisms and Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT)

### 2.1 Euphemisms

As a common linguistic phenomenon, euphemisms are often regarded as the 'lubricant' of language. The existence of English euphemisms is closely related to linguistic taboos. It is undeniable that it was first used in religion and then extended to various fields. The most typical and common is 'death'. When people give up a taboo word, they look for a word to fill the gap, and thus

euphemisms are created. Euphemisms in English come from the Greek roots 'eu' (meaning nice, good) and 'pheme' (meaning words), so euphemisms literally mean 'nice things to say!'. Euphemism, according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary, is defined as: "an indirect word or phrase that people often use to refer to awkward or unpleasant situations that are more acceptable than direct speech." There are many ways to classify euphemisms. Traditionally, categorisation methods tend to focus on the linguistic structure itself, often ignoring the intention and purpose of the user. However, when we start from the perspective of social function and pragmatic psychology, Shao Junhang & Fan Weiwei(2002) classified euphemisms into three main types: altruistic, generalised, and egoistic. Among them, egoistic euphemisms are of particular interest because they are usually used to preserve the speaker's face or interests rather than out of politeness. This classification not only provides us with a new perspective to understand euphemisms but also helps us to explore and resolve the controversy about whether euphemisms are 'elegant' or 'hypocritical' (Shao Junhang & Fan Weiwei, 2002). Through this classification, we can see more clearly the functions and roles of euphemisms in different contexts and thus evaluate their real value in communication more comprehensively.

## **2.2 Conceptual Blending Theory(CBT)**

Gilles Fauconnier's Mental Space Theory is an important theory in the field of cognitive linguistics, which explains the inter-word and inter-sentence semantic relations in language by constructing a virtual mental space. Fauconnier first systematically put forward this theory in his monograph *Mental Space*, which was published in 1985. It delves into the embodiment of linguistic structure in human cognitive structure. Mental space theory focuses on the online construction of meaning, i.e., the collection of information constructed instantly by people in the process of communication and thinking, which is constantly updated as the discourse progresses. These mental spaces are interconnected and constantly adjusted as discourse unfolds.

In constructing mental spaces, we often extract abstract and concrete knowledge relevant to discourse comprehension from the frame. Mental spaces not only include some of the components of a frame but are often provided with a certain structure by the frame. Fauconnier (1985) proposes the principles of accessibility and identification to regulate the relationship between entities and referential discourse. According to these principles, if a mental space A is cognitively linked to another mental space B, then an entity or concept in space A can trigger or activate a related entity or concept in space B. For example, in the sentence 'In the novel *Harry Potter*, Hogwarts is a school of magic.' the phrase 'in the novel *Harry Potter*' serves as a spatial construction morpheme that guides the reader into a specific fictional world, the narrative world of the *Harry Potter* series of novels. The phrase constructs a mental space that, unlike the real world, contains fictional elements and events from the novels. 'Hogwarts' does not exist in the real space, but in the mental space it refers to a school of magic. 'It is a school of magic' is not possible in real space, but in mental space, it describes the nature and function of Hogwarts. The reader in the real space is guided to the mental space through spatially constructed discourse, where 'Hogwarts' acts as a trigger, pointing to a fictional entity in the novel, and 'is a magical school' acts as a target, describing the characteristics of this entity. Through this connection, the reader is able to construct an understanding of Hogwarts in mental space, even though the concept does not exist in the real world. Mental space theory helps us understand how fictional concepts are constructed and communicated in language and allows us to make cognitive connections between fiction and reality.

Moving into the mid-1990s, Fauconnier further developed Mental Space Theory by proposing Conceptual Blending Theory, also known as Conceptual Integration Theory. This theory combines the results of multidisciplinary research and provides an in-depth study of human thinking styles, behavioural patterns, and language, especially the metaphorical mechanism of language. Conceptual Blending Theory aims to reveal the cognitive mechanisms behind the online construction of metaphors and general verbal meaning (Shu Dingfang & Tian Zhen, 2021).

Conceptual Blending Theory suggests that the construction of meaning in discourse is a process of activating two or more mental spaces and integrating them to produce synthetic spaces and form new concepts. This process involves cross-space mapping and integration of components and relations from different input mental spaces. Fauconnier proposes a 'four-space' interaction model of meaning construction, which includes generic space, input space I, input space II, and blended space (Fauconnier, 1997). These spaces are mapped across spaces and selectively projected into the blended space, which in turn forms an emergent structure through the interaction of the three cognitive processes of 'composition', 'completion', and 'elaboration', which is based on analogy and recursion. This is a cognitive process based on analogy, recursion, mental modelling, and other mental activities. In the theory of conceptual blending, the principles of constitutive and governing together guide the immediate construction of meaning. These principles provide a structural description and specification of conceptual blending in language and thought, covering cognitive mechanisms such as unpacking, optimisation, connection, frame, and recursion. The central aim of these principles is to develop conceptual structures for intuitive perception and behaviour within familiar and easily understood frameworks. In this way, Conceptual Blending Theory aims to reveal how human beings, at the cognitive level, fuse different concepts and sources of information into a coherent, easy-to-process cognitive structure that facilitates the understanding and use of language.

Conceptual Blending Theory emphasizes the dynamic and network-based features of the online construction of meaning and reveals the complex processes involved in the construction of meaning in natural language. Fauconnier and Turner, in their 2002

work, point out that Conceptual Blending is a fundamental psycho-cognitive mechanism whose functioning, though complex, is crucial for language application. The theory of conceptual blending has a powerful explanatory power for linguistic phenomena and has been used to explain a wide range of linguistic phenomena such as metaphors, borrowings, and virtual sentences, providing a new cognitive interpretation for understanding human beings' use of language and their thinking activities.

### **3. Analysis of Euphemisms in *The Big Bang Theory* under Conceptual Blending Theory**

#### **3.1 *The Big Bang Theory***

Since its premiere in 2007, *The Big Bang Theory* has captured the hearts of viewers worldwide with its unique humour and wit. The American sitcom has not only won the hearts of its fans with its twelve seasons of hilarious stories but also harvested countless moving tears in its farewell season in 2019.

The series centres on four very different 'science geniuses' who live their daily lives at Caltech: Leonard and Sheldon, two highly intelligent physicists with a knack for experimentation and theory, respectively, whose lives are enriched by their beautiful next-door neighbour, Penny. Penny, a cheerful community college graduate with dreams of becoming an actress, is a stark contrast to these science geeks.

In addition to Penny, there are two other integral characters: Howard, a self-proclaimed suave engineer, and Rajes, an astronomer from India. The friendship and daily interactions between the four of them form the core of the show's appeal.

The linguistic character of *The Big Bang Theory* is one of the keys to its success. The humour in the show is not only in the pauses and speed of language but also in the euphemisms and ironies that the characters use in their exchanges. These euphemisms not only show the characters' politeness and respect but also bring unexpected humorous effects inadvertently.

In addition, the scientists in the show often use precise language when communicating, and this kind of communication, dominated by scientific thinking, can sometimes seem too strict or even a bit difficult for ordinary people, thus creating a unique sense of humour.

Overall, with its intelligent humour, distinctive characterisation, and profound cross-cultural communication, *The Big Bang Theory* has become a classic work loved by global audiences. It not only lets us appreciate the charm of science in laughter but also shows us how people from different backgrounds understand and integrate with each other.

#### **3.2 Analysis of the conceptual blending of euphemisms**

In the culture of every nation, 'death' can be said to be an unknown taboo word. Therefore, in both Chinese and English, people try to use euphemisms to avoid mentioning death directly. For example, Chinese commonly uses the words 'gone', 'rest in peace', and 'passed away' to refer to death, while English also has many corresponding words to refer to death. In *The Big Bang Theory* season 7, episode 22, Sheldon is making arrangements for Star Wars Day. Leonard walks into Sheldon's room and tells him the bad news that,

1. Leonard: 'I just read online that Arthur Jeffries passed away.'

Passing away is a euphemism constructed through semantic means. It is more acceptable for people to speak of death as leaving somewhere. Its conceptual integration network is a simple one. Input space I is based on the vernacular meaning of leaving, with elements such as: person, departure, tools used to leave, and leaving a place. Input Space II is framed in terms of death, with elements including: corpse, taking one's last breath, coffin, and disappearing in the real world. The elements of these two input spaces are projected into generic space. The generic space includes the abstract structure shared by the two input spaces, with elements including subject, action, vehicle, and outcome. The generic space projects the abstract structure to the input space, connects the two input spaces, and maps the corresponding elements of the input space. These elements are then projected into the blended space to form new meanings. A 'person' in Input Space I and a "corpse" in Input Space II are combined to form a new concept "a dead person". 'Departure' and "taking the last breath" combine to form "departure to death". The 'coffin' is the vehicle for the dead. Finally, 'leaving a place' and 'disappearing from the real world' combine to give 'leaving the real world'. Since ancient times, death has been a taboo. If the concept of death is expressed directly with the taboo word 'death', it will make the listener psychologically unhappy. Therefore, people prefer to integrate the meaning of the taboo word 'death' into 'passing away' and use 'passing away' to express the meaning of death. This process is completed in the completion stage, and the correctness of the conceptual blended process is finally ensured by the elaboration of the new meaning.

Across cultures, illness is often seen as a sensitive and taboo subject. People often choose to use euphemisms as an alternative to directly mentioning the names of diseases that may be uncomfortable. Such linguistic considerations reflect our concern for the

feelings of others, as well as the empathy and politeness that society generally promotes when faced with difficult moments in life. By doing so, we not only mitigate the potentially negative impact of our words, but we also send a message of respect and understanding in our communication. In the fourth episode of *The Big Bang Theory* Season 12, Sheldon and Amy's dialogue involves the use of the euphemism 'social diseases' (Yu Xiaohan, 2021).

2. Sheldon: 'I was afraid to move so far away from home. So Tam said he'd move out here with me and be my roommate. Then, over the summer, he got a girlfriend even after reading all the pamphlets I gave him about social diseases.'

Amy: 'Aw, I remember when you gave me those pamphlets.'

Input Space I is about elements in the field of medicine. The first one is illness; illness, in the field of medicine, refers to an abnormal state of the body or mind that may require treatment. The second is sociopathy, which usually refers to those health problems associated with social behaviour and patterns of interaction, such as sexually transmitted diseases. Input Space II is about elements in the social domain, the first element being socialisation, which involves human interaction and engagement. The second is sociopathy, which may be used in the social domain as a euphemism for behaviours or states that may be taboo or unacceptable in social interactions. The generic space contains common features of illness and socialisation, i.e., both in the medical and social domains, the health of individuals and their interactions with others are involved. In the blended space, the concepts of 'sociopathy' in the medical domain and related concepts in the social domain are combined. This composition reflects a tendency to use more euphemistic expressions when talking about topics that may cause discomfort or embarrassment. "Diseases" and "sociopaths" in the medical domain are mapped to "social barriers" or "social taboos" in the social domain. The projection of medical terminology into the social domain gives the term 'sociopathy' a new meaning in social communication, which refers to sensitive or inappropriate topics that may affect social interactions. Through this conceptual integration, we can see that Sheldon's use of the euphemism 'social diseases' in the dialogue actually avoids directly mentioning the names of potentially uncomfortable illnesses while at the same time demonstrating his sensitivity to such topics and his respect for social norms. This usage not only demonstrates the character's personality but also reflects a common strategy of how people handle sensitive information in communication. In the process, Sheldon's word choice reveals his understanding of social norms and respect for others while also providing the audience with a communication style to consider when discussing sensitive topics. Through the use of euphemisms, Sheldon maintains the seriousness of the topic while reducing the discomfort it may cause.

In the second episode of the first season, Sheldon and Leonard help Penny sign for a piece of furniture. Upon entering Penny's room, Sheldon finds Penny's room to be very cluttered, and since he suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), he starts to clean up Penny's room, which leads to the dialogue that follows (Sun Zhan, 2012).

3. Leonard: Sheldon, this is not your home. Sheldon: this is not anyone's home; this is a swirling vortex of entropy.

In this dialogue, Sheldon uses the scientific term 'entropy' as a euphemism for the state of chaos in Penny's room. We see this as a process of conceptual integration. Input space I contain the concept of entropy: in physics, entropy is a measure of the degree of disorder in a system; in thermodynamics, an increase in entropy usually means that the system is becoming more disordered. Sheldon: a physicist who used the term 'entropy' to describe the disorder he observed. Input Space II, there is the concept of a rubbish dump: a place filled with rubbish and waste, usually associated with chaos and disorder. Leonard: An ordinary person might use the everyday term 'junkyard' to describe a very chaotic environment. There is chaos and disorder in generic space: this is a common concept for describing the state of a system or environment, both in physics and in everyday life. In blended space, the scientific concept of entropy and the everyday language of a junkyard are combined to describe the chaotic state of Penny's room. This composition reflects Sheldon's attempt to express his observations of chaos in scientific terms while also showing Leonard's more direct and colloquial description of the same state. The 'degree of disorder' of entropy is mapped to the 'chaos and filth' of the rubbish dump. The 'system state' of entropy is mapped to the 'environmental state' of the dump. The concept of entropy is projected onto the blended space, i.e., Penny's room is considered as a physical system whose state can be described by entropy. The concept of the junkyard is also projected into the blended space, i.e., Penny's room, which is seen as a chaotic environment in everyday life. Through this conceptual integration, we can see how Sheldon applies his scientific background to everyday life, describing the phenomena he observes in scientific terms. At the same time, it shows how Leonard uses more colloquial language to make the same point. This interaction not only reveals the personality differences between the characters but also demonstrates how different backgrounds and expertise can affect how people understand and express the same phenomenon. In the process, entropy, as a euphemism, is used to describe chaos in a more academic and less direct way, while junkyard provides a more visual and vivid image. This conceptual integration makes for a richer and more interesting dialogue whilst also demonstrating the interaction between the characters and how they communicate and understand each other's perspectives through language. In Season 1, Episode 6, Leslie and Leonard practice the cello at Leonard's house (Sun Zhan, 2012).

4. Leslie: I admire your fingering. Leonard: Thank you. Leslie: May be sometime you can try that on my instrument.

In this dialogue, the interaction between Leslie and Leonard involves the concept of 'instrument' and Leslie's appreciation of Leonard's cello playing skills. Input Space I is about cello playing. Leonard is playing the cello, and Leslie appreciates his fingering technique. There is also the element of the cello, which is a stringed instrument that needs to be played by the precise manipulation of the fingers on the fingerboard. Input Space II contains an element of sexual innuendo. Leslie's comment may be interpreted as an appreciation of Leonard's technique, but at the same time, her use of the word 'instrument' is also commonly used in English as a sexual reference, especially in this context. Leonard may not have realized Leslie's pun, or he may have deliberately ignored it. There are concepts of appreciation and skill in the generic space. Appreciation is the expression of admiration for someone's skills or achievements. Skill is the demonstration of proficiency in a particular domain (e.g., music playing). In the blended space, the appreciation of cello playing and the metaphor of sexual innuendo are combined. Leslie's comment is ostensibly an appreciation of Leonard's cello playing skills, but it also implies another layer of meaning. Leonard's 'fingering' is mapped onto Leslie's appreciation. Leslie's word 'instrument' is mapped to sexual innuendo. The appreciation of the cello playing is projected into the blended space, i.e., Leonard's playing skills are recognised. The metaphor of sexual innuendo is also projected into the blended space, i.e., Leslie's comment may have another meaning. Through this conceptual integration, we can see that Leslie's comment has a double meaning: on the one hand, it is a direct appreciation of Leonard's cello playing skills, while on the other hand, it may contain a veiled appreciation of Leonard's sexual prowess. This use of puns adds to the complexity and interest of the dialogue, as well as demonstrating the subtle interactions between the characters. In the process, Leonard may not be aware of Leslie's pun, or he may choose not to react to it, depending on his personality and his relationship with Leslie. This conceptual integration not only demonstrates the polysemous nature of language but also reveals how people convey multiple levels of information through language in communication.

#### 4. Conclusion

In today's harmonious society, people try to avoid direct, vulgar, embarrassing, or offensive language expressions and use indirect, gentle, and euphemistic expressions. In order to better understand the mechanism of constructing euphemisms, this study takes the euphemisms in *The Big Bang Theory* as the corpus and explains the understanding of euphemisms from the perspective of conceptual blending theory. Through the analysis in this paper, we find that the power of conceptual blending theory is so strong that it can analyse obscure and difficult texts in life clearly. The four spaces in the conceptual integration network, the cross-space mapping, and the three processes of composition, completion, and elaboration explain the meaning of euphemisms very well. By analysing these euphemisms in the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, we can fully understand the connotations of euphemisms in different cultures and have a better understanding of American culture, which provides the possibility of cross-cultural communication.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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