

## The textual genre *comic strips* under the light *Gilles Fauconnier*



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### ABSTRACT

The present study is a reflection on the Cognitivist Theory, based on the reading of Mental Spaces, from the point of view of Gilles Fauconnier.

Fauconnier's cognitive approach is applied to the textual genre comic strips to illustrate the occurrence of the comprehension process that is based on Mental Spaces. As a discursive genre, we seek to conceptualize the comic strip to situate it as an important object of reading. The proposed analysis is directed to the Armandinho comic strips produced by cartoonist Alexandre Beck.

**Keywords:** Cognitivism, Fauconnier, Comprehension, Comic strips.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The practices of reading and comprehension of texts allow the reader free access to the most varied means of information and types of knowledge. The complexity of the act of reading and the multiplicity of components involved in the process are questions raised by scholars and professionals in the field who, from different perspectives, try to unveil the "art" of reading.

Due to the importance of reading for man and for the society in which this man lives, this work proposes a discussion about the cognitive approach to reading, based on *Gilles Fauconnier's Theory of Mental Spaces*. The field of analysis in which the theory will be applied focuses on the textual *genre comic strip*, understood as an emergent space that is constituted through the information from the reading in processing in the working memory, which searches in the long-term memory for pertinent prior knowledge and also processes the new knowledge arising from the reading of the text online.

## 2 COGNITIVE APPROACH TO READING

The reading perspective addressed in this study is based on cognitive linguistics, specifically, on the model of mental spaces, proposed by Fauconnier. However, one cannot begin a discussion like this without first reviewing the ideas that became the starting point for modern linguistics in the twentieth century. It was decided to search for some concepts of modern linguistics, which as a *counterpoint*, will start the analysis. Initially, the *book* that exposes Saussure's ideas, built from notes written by his students between 1907 and 1911, at the University of Geneva, is resumed. The studies



present language as an articulated system, in this approach language is form and not substance, and must be studied in and of itself. From this perspective, the *immanent study of language* is carried out, abandoning any extralinguistic factor. Recognized as structuralist theory, it understands language as a set of rules, which constitutes an organization, a system. Martelotta then exposes more characteristics of this approach:

From this perspective, the relations between language and society, language and culture, language and geographical distribution, language and literature or any other relationship that is not absolutely related to the internal organization of the elements that constitute the linguistic system are excluded (MARTELOTTA, p.114, 2013)

From this perspective, language studies are based on linguistic forms that are carriers of meaning; That is, the meaning is in the word, and the linguistic sign is formed by a signified and a signifier. For Saussure, the meaning of the word needs to be deciphered by the mind.

Noam Chomsky opposed structuralism by proposing generativist theory. Theorists of this approach assume that language is not an independent component of the mind, or other mental faculties. Unlike the Saussurian theory, in this one, it is essential to keep in mind that linguistic competence is innate, stemming from human genetic inheritance.

Classical cognitivist theories are based on symbolic representations, which can be manipulated by certain rules. These theories compare the human mind to a computer, since the mind would be formed by modules and submodules, which would perform their functions unconsciously, quickly and mechanically, such as reflexes. There are several hypotheses that underlie the cognitive theory, Koch makes the following reflection on it:

In any case, a basic principle of Cognitive Science is that man mentally represents the world around him in a specific way and that, in these structures of the mind, certain processes of treatment take place, which enable very complex cognitive activities. This is because knowledge does not consist only of a static collection of experiential contents, but also of skills to operate on such contents and use them in social interaction (KOCK, p. 37, 2011).

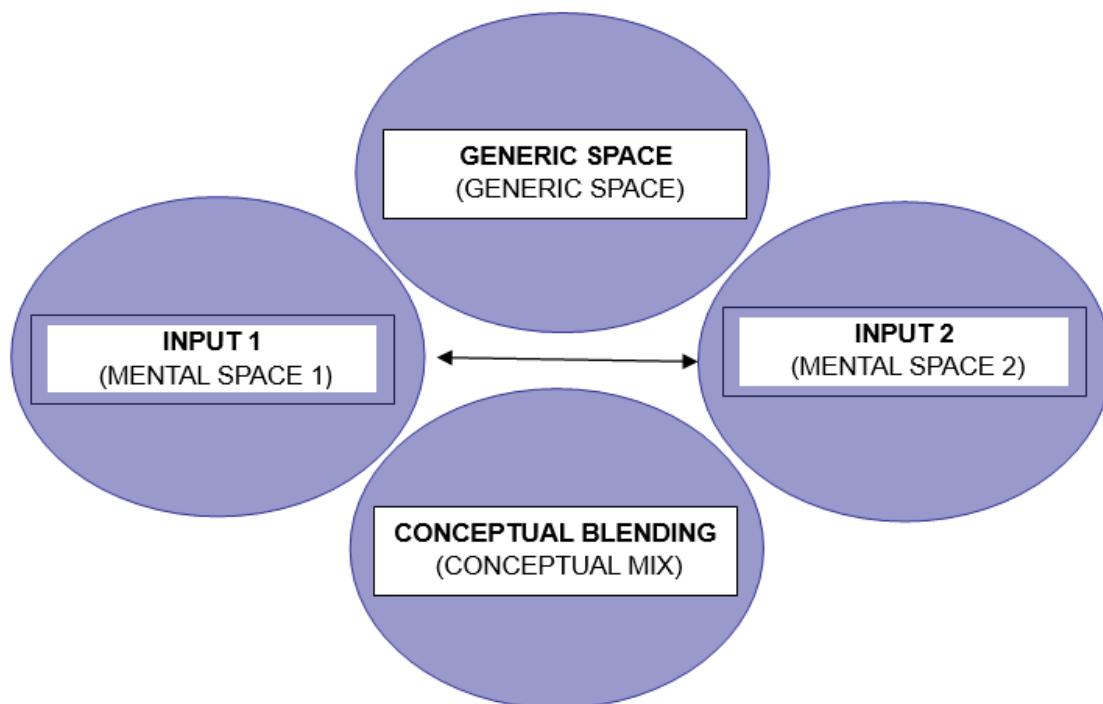
On the other hand, Gilles Fauconnier's Theory of Mental Spaces is based on the conception of *language as a cognitive instrument* and no longer as a mental faculty. This dissidence of cognitive linguistics that has detached itself from classical theory treats meaning from a different perspective, it is not the word that possesses the meaning, but the mind; language has the function of guiding and activating the meaning. The model works with an integrative perspective of cognition, which goes against modular cognitive theories such as Chomsky, considering cognitive organization as an integrated system of language and sociocultural structure.

The role of language for Fauconnier is to construct *mental spaces* – *space builders*, characterized as demarcated fields, are equivalent to a part of the mind, which is imagined as a vast space. In other words, mental space is part of a large terrain, which is the human mind. Texts, words,



and linguistic forms, in general, are considered responsible for the construction of these spaces, which are formed at the time of speaking, reading, writing, and thinking. They play the role of guides for these actions, which create these spaces as new subjects arise, meeting the momentary needs of use. Because they are made up of linguistic forms, they are discursive mental spaces, because they serve the purpose in which language is involved.

Fauconnier's theory postulates that imagination and integration of identities is a process represented by four hierarchically organized circles, which he calls the *Minimal Network*. The network works with two mental spaces – input 1 and 2 – and from them, a third mental space is obtained, the so-called *Conceptual Blending*. As an example, below is a diagram of the *Minimal Network*.



The conceptual blend integrates the components of inputs 1 and 2, creating an emergent structure. *Conceptual Blending* refers to the ability that differentiates man from other animals: the ability to conceive concepts and integrate them to form new patterns of thought. According to these considerations, one can conceive how meaning is processed by the human mind. According to Ferrari:

Conceptual blending is a mental operation that can be considered the origin of our aptitude for inventing new meanings. It consists of an operation through which a partial projection is established between two initial spaces (*Input 1* and *Input 2*), which allows a correspondence between analogous elements. This correspondence, in turn, is licensed by the *Generic Space*, representative of the abstract structure that the initial spaces have in common. Finally, there is a fourth space, called *Blend*, which brings together elements projected from the *inputs*, establishing an emergent structure of its own that does not exist in the initial spaces. (FERRARI, p. 120-121, 2014)



In accordance with Fauconnier's theory of mental spaces, it is proposed the analysis of the cognitive processing of reading and the production of meaning, applying its concepts and form of conception to the concepts of *comic strips*, as a discursive genre present in the educational environment.

### 3 THE COMIC STRIP GENRE

The act of reading has become an essential activity for civilized man, because it inserts him into a world of knowledge and social possibilities unimaginable without its presence. Knowing how to read has become an indispensable condition for access to any area of the sciences and, even more, for effectively participating in life in society, since reading has a utilitarian function, but also a transforming function of this society. Morais (1996) discusses the social function of reading as follows:

Reading is already indispensable in everyday life, even outside the professional sphere. Written texts replace spoken information, individually, at airports and stations, shops, banks... It is no longer a question of being able to read only the name of the subway station, the advertisements or the telephone number of someone on the list, but of knowing how to read computer information, weather reports, tourist catalogues, medicine leaflets, instructions for the use of household appliances, etc. p.21, 1996)

There is a consensus among researchers and teachers that reading and understanding texts are highly complex cognitive activities. They are made up of numerous internal processes related to the mind; and external, related to the text and the extralinguistic context. As an internal brain activity, the Theory of Mental Spaces proposes the study of cognitive processes that interrelate language and cognition. In this sense, the knowledge acquired in the school environment is recorded, stored and consolidated in long-term memory; With the emergence of new data throughout the educational process, the information that is already stored and the new data are reorganized and integrated with the existing ones, thus originating new systematizations of knowledge.

In order to deepen the discussion and in order to better characterize the study proposal presented here, we resort to the concepts of textual genre, textual type, discursive domain and, subsequently, the definition of comic strip. The variety of genres is considered immense, but not infinite. Textual genre is understood as the texts found in everyday life and that have the function of fulfilling certain social needs: letter, phone call, report, horoscope, public notice, restaurant menu and so on. The *textual type* is considered a theoretical construction with defined properties that are established within the genres; the categories of the types are determined by lexical, syntactic, logical and verbal aspects; the types are known as narration, argumentation, exposition, description, injunction. Discursive domain is understood as the existence of different spheres of discursive production or human activities (MARCUSCHI, 2008).



According to the concepts of genre, type and discursive domain exposed here, which are based on theorists of textual linguistics (MARCUSCHI, 2008), it is inferred that any and all verbal manifestations that fulfill a social function and lend themselves to communication are considered a textual genre; the textual type, on the other hand, is a kind of sequence defined by its nature and its linguistic composition; as for the *discursive domain*, it is not a question of texts or discourses, as the term supposes, but from social spheres that provide the emergence of specific discourses. As an example, the religious discursive domain is cited, in which several textual genres circulate. In this work, the *Minimal Network* will have as *Generic Space* the *educational discursive domain*. It is noteworthy that the educational sphere is a didactic space, and therefore, in addition to the genres of education, any and all genres that have a didactic function fit.

In view of the concepts of *genre, type and discursive domain*, mentioned above, the need to define the *comic strip* and situate it in relation to the definitions addressed emerges. Considered as a textual genre of the subgroup of comic books (comics), and preferred among readers of the children's audience, the strips are shorter, written between 3 and 6 comics. Some characteristics are pointed out by Ramos (2011), in order to structure this genre: fixed and horizontal format; drawn images; characters can be fixed or not; use of dialogues; theme approached in a humorous way; tendency to an unexpected outcome, such as a joke; It may have thematic continuity in other strips.

The comic strips are predominantly narrative typological compositions, but due to their heterogeneous character they also present themselves as expository, injunctive or argumentative types. The discursive environment of the comic strip is journalistic, so that the "producer" uses this genre to criticize, satirize, or even emphasize his opinion in a persuasive way on some subject that is in vogue in society. Sérgio Roberto Costa, in his Dictionary of Textual Genres, defines the comic strip as:

COMIC STRIP (e.g. COMICS, *COMICS*, CARTOONS, COMIC BOOKS, COMIC STRIPS, MANGA): A SEGMENT OR FRAGMENT OF COMICS, USUALLY WITH THREE OR FOUR FRAMES, PRESENTS A SYNCRETIC TEXT THAT COMBINES THE VERBAL AND THE VISUAL IN THE SAME UTTERANCE AND UNDER THE SAME UTTERANCE. It circulates in newspapers or magazines, in a single horizontal strip of about 14 cm x 4 cm, in general, in the "Comics" section of the amusements, amenities or also known as recreational [...]. (COSTA, 2014, p.219)

The production of the humorous sense, which also defines the comic strip, is formed by the visual and verbal character. The humorous position of this genre provides students, in the educational discursive environment, with a different posture to the readings, which most of the time are made with uninteresting texts that do not arouse the student's curiosity.

The comic strips that will be the stage for this analysis were chosen from the proposal of Alexandre Beck, from Santa Catarina, who since 2009 has been creating comic strips and is the "father" of the character Armandinho, who in his stories usually talks to adults and leaves readers an invitation to reflection. The communicative potential of "Armandinho" has led to the comic strips being



published in several newspapers around the country and on pages on social networks where he has a large number of followers, Beck said in an interview with the electronic magazine Wide.

#### 4 CONCEPTUAL BLENDING: TIRINHA

In line with the concepts presented here, it risks illustrating the Theory of Mental Spaces from the knowledge derived from the textual genre comic strip, which necessarily mobilizes knowledge present in long-term memory. The verbal-visual constitution of the comic strip provides an articulation between the linear dimension of the word and the non-linear dimension of the image, requiring more efforts from the reader to produce meaning. To understand the communication contained in these comic strips, the reader needs to recognize the characteristics and functioning of a school. Below are two comic strips of the character *Armandinho* that will be analyzed, for such activity, here they will be named *Comic Strip 01 and Comic Strip 02*. In both examples, there are visual and verbal resources, which enable the interaction of information. It can be seen that Armandinho, when he arrives home from school, is questioned by the figure of an adult, his father, about how his day as a student was.



Source: Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/tirasarmandinho/?fref=ts> Accessed on: June 20, 2016

**Generic Space: Educational environment.**

**Input 01 (mental space 01):** behavior, activities performed, grades, attendance, participation, teachers, students, coordination, recreations, schedules.

**Input 02 (mental space 02):** bathrooms, doors, chairs, walls.

**Conceptual Blending (conceptual mix):** the junction of the two spaces results in the merging of information, which while Armandinho's father questions him about the activities resulting from student life or any event foreign to this daily life, in which he uses the question: *How was the school today, son?* Armandinho replies: *It was fine! Bathrooms, doors, chairs, walls... All right!* In a disinterested way, Armandinho refers to the physical space of the school, as if any "wrong" or "strange" fact were related to the school itself, and not to the student, in this case Armandinho. The cartoon addresses a typical behavior of students, who, when questioned by their parents about how they are performing in school activities, divert the conversation so as not to give the requested information.





Source: Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/tirasarmandinho/?fref=ts> Accessed on: June 20, 2016

### Generic Space: Educational Environment

**Input 01 (mental space 01):** learning, doubts, tasks performed, performance, class, participation, subjects, contents, teachers.

**Input 02 (mental space 02):** Your Excellency, Your Magnificence, Your Majesty, pronouns, address pronouns, Portuguese class.

**Conceptual Blending:** The conceptual blending of this cartoon emerges from the integration of mental spaces 01 and 02. In the first mental space there is information that has already been acquired and remains in the memory, it is the information that refers to the two questions of Armandinho's father: *How was the class, son? And what's the matter?* The questions asked by Armandinho's father assume that the answers would be related to his son's learning process, and to the contents that were taught at school. In turn, Armandinho, in a positive way, responds to his father using forms of address that direct the reader's understanding to the content of the lesson: *Excellent, Your Excellency! Indeed, it was magnificent, Your Magnificence! Imagine, Your Majesty!* Loaded with humor, the cartoon brings to reflection the contents that are addressed in Portuguese language classes and that, in a way, are decontextualized from the student's daily life.

## 5 FINAL THOUGHTS

By way of conclusion, the considerations launched by this study intended, through the concepts worked, to exemplify the cognitive processing of reading. The expositions made throughout this work point to a perspective of mental processing based on Fauconnier's theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics. In the conceptual blending, the textual genre *comic strip* stood out in which, from the reading of the character *Armandinho*, it became possible to illustrate the steps in which the process of interpretation occurs according to the Mental Spaces. The importance of the *comic strip* as a potential genre for the consolidation of reading practices in the classroom is emphasized, in view of the verbal and visual characteristics that need to be incorporated into the comprehension process.



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