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Executive Function, Pretense Play and Conceptual Blending

In their Conceptual Integration Theory (CIT), Fauconnier and Turner (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002; Fauconnier, 2009; Turner, 2014) make three claims: First, that conceptual blending is operative in our understanding of counterfactuals, analogies, metaphors, etc., as well as in our (belief of) object perception. This entails that some blends bear a “reality sense” and others an “irreality” sense, although -they claim- there is no cognitive difference between them (2002: 230). Second, they claim that advanced conceptual blending is what differentiates us from other animals, for children are certainly capable of complex blendings. Third, they claim that CIT is a theory that helps us explain human imagination and creativity.

These general claims, however, do not capture the differences in child development, from relative ‘simple’ tasks to more ‘complex’ ones. For instance, ¿why, if conceptual integration networks (CIN) consist in “the same principles and processes” (Fauconnier, 2009), only children around twelve are able to fluidly manage counterfactual reasoning (Rafetseder, Schwitalla & Perner, 2013), whereas three- or four-year old children can perfectly understand other blends like the story of *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (Johnson, 1995), which also requires counterfactuals and advanced blends?

I claim that a careful analysis of the *executive function development* may be quite fruitful when tracking some differences in blending achievement. For instance, it seems that there is a correlation between executive function development and ‘pretense actions’, particularly, the *pretense play*, when children act ‘as if’, for instance, when a child takes a banana and puts it on her ear ‘as if’ it were a phone (cf. Leslie, 1987; Carlson, White, Davis-Unger, 2013). Moreover, these ‘pretense actions’ appear in children at around 18-month old (Friedman & Leslie, 2007; Meinhardt, Kühn-Popp, Sommer & Sodian, 2013). Now, if we assume that pretending is an enactive expression of the cognitive blending, the study of executive function can plausibly show us different complexity ‘stages’ of the CIN, at the moments templates appear for their more abstract and complex realization (as in counterfactual reasoning or algebra operations). In this presentation I will pursue this idea, by reviewing the relevant literature about executive function development (including the cognitive differences between believing, planning, or desiring), pretense play and other forms of pretense (and fictivity), and will draw some consequences for the CIT in its aspiration to explain human imagination and creativity.

References

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