GRAMMATICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION AS A POETIC STRATEGY IN E. E. CUMMINGS' *yes is a pleasant country*

PILAR ALONSO RODRÍGUEZ
University of Salamanca

1. Introduction

Recent research in the fields of cognition and linguistics has shown the interconnectivity there is between the many facets of thought, language, and human interaction (Lakoff 1987, 1993, 1996; Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Langacker 1987, 1991, 1998, 2001; Fauconnier and Turner 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2001; Fauconnier and Sweetser 1996; Talmy 2000). All researchers have put the emphasis on the cognitive operations which underlie linguistic communication at either end of the production and reception processes, and have explained how domains of knowledge get linked and enriched through mapping, and how mental spaces containing new or modified information are created through blending. This appreciation of facts is based on empirical observation of real language phenomena, and therefore is not restricted to specific language constructions or to language uses of a certain type. It is a question of how ideas get projected on and through language and how all intervening components, whatever their nature, are mutually influential in the course of meaning creation.

In the following pages we will make use of this cognitive perspective to propose what may proved to be a novel investigation of E.E. Cummings' poem: *yes is a pleasant country*. The analysis will illustrate how this poem takes the meaning potential of grammatical structure to its highest expression through usage which

may not be exceptional but which produces remarkable effects when employed creatively, thus making true Langacker's assertion that "grammar (or syntax) does not constitute an autonomous formal level of representation. Instead, grammar is symbolic in nature, consisting in the conventional symbolization of semantic structure" (1987: 1-2). The analysis will at the same time confirm Lakoff's claim that the traditional assumption which maintains that "the concepts used in the grammar of a language are all literal; none are metaphorical" is false (1993: 204).

2. Theoretical foundations

The investigation will take as its point of departure some of the theoretical principles developed within the framework of cognitive linguistics mostly by conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Lakoff 1987, 1993, 1996; Lakoff and Turner 1989), blending theory (BT) (Fauconnier and Turner 1994, 1996; Fauconnier 1997; Fauconnier and Sweetser 1996; Coulson and Oakley 2000), and, more recently, by the conceptual integration network model (CIN) (Fauconnier and Turner 1998, 2000, 2001; Grady 2000). They all share the view, central to this analysis, that conceptual projections between knowledge domains and/or mental spaces are a fundamental feature of human mental processes.

CMT sustains that metaphorical thinking is an essential tool of our cognitive system, and sees the metaphorical mapping between conceptual domains as a basic straightforward operation which allows the structure and properties of a given area of knowledge (source domain) to be projected onto another, usually more complex and abstract area of knowledge (target domain). According to CMT, the target domain inherits the characteristics of the source domain including its cognitive structure and associated lexical elements, which are then integrated in the target domain both at the levels of concept and expression. BT and its more recent development CIN expand this view. BT and CIN contend that conceptual projection is not necessarily a direct one-way move between two areas of knowledge; they recognize metaphorical mappings as conceptual operations but have identified other types of cognitive operations involving non-metaphorical relations as well; these include analogical mappings, cross-space mappings of counter-part connections, fusion, etc. (Fauconnier and Turner 1998, 2001). The complexity of the panorama described has led them to develop a theory of conceptual integration where all these interactive connections find their place. For these reasons, they prefer to talk about mental spaces and input spaces instead of domains and claim that "conceptual projection from one space to another always

involves mapping to 'middle' spaces-abstract 'generic' middle spaces or richer 'blended' middle spaces" (Fauconnier and Turner 1994:1).

Blended mental spaces are a particular instantiation of a specific situation projected through language and, therefore, may be said to include the generic space. The generic space incorporates the cognitive structure of both input spaces relevant for the conceptual construction in hand, or those elements which are shared by both inputs. The blended space also contains information from the two input spaces, source and target, but here the elements acquire new specific characteristics inherited from the co-occurring conceptual projections. It is in the blended space where the new structure corresponding to the current situation encountered in discourse emerges, where inferences originate, and where a complete interpretation of the facts or events described may be obtained. Blending theory and the conceptual integration network are not in contradiction with CMT or other close approaches (construction grammar, frame semantics, analogical mappings, etc.). Their aim is to build a general framework based on analytical and empirical data which explains all aspects of the procedure undergone in the construction of meaning. Within this framework, blending is seen as primary to any language event, and as part of it there are some essential cognitive operations, such as integration, compression, composition, completion, elaboration… (Fauconnier and Turner 1998, 2000, 2001; Coulson and Oakley 2000; Grady 2000). The theory of conceptual integration shows that blending is active in many mental processes, such as conceptualization, categorization, inferencing, etc. It also contends that projection between structures of different types, linguistic, counterfactual, analogical, pragmatic, etc. is crucial to human cognition. As Fauconnier and Turner say, "blending can be detected in everyday language, idioms, creative thought in mathematics, evolution of socio-cultural models, jokes, advertising, and other aspects of linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour" (1996: 2).

Finally, there is a third research proposal which opts for a middle position and sustains the complementarity of the approaches discussed above. In their article "Blending and Metaphor", Grady *et al.* (1999) analyze the similarities and differences between CMT and BT and consider that these theories are not modified versions of the same cognitive phenomenon, as may have seemed to be the case when blending theory was initially developed as an extension of the theory of metaphorical mappings. They claim that conceptual domains and mental spaces are co-existing cognitive structures each with its specific function in our cognitive system. They distinguish between the concept of domain as a stable cognitive structure existing in long-term memory and available for any operation performed by our cognitive system, and that of mental space as a short-term cognitive construction created on the spot to characterize the specific requirements of a given communicative situation. Grady *et al.* consider metaphorical mappings and

conceptual blending as different cognitive operations which may be used separately or in combination with extremely productive results. A rather similar view is in fact supported by Fauconnier and Turner (1998, 2001) when they present metaphorical mappings as one of the various types of cognitive projections which may function in the construction of conceptual integration; along the same line, they distinguish between the more stable notion of conceptual domain and the specific situation-bound mental spaces.

The work proposed here will benefit from the coincidences and peculiarities of all these approaches, and will also take the notion of projection as central to the analysis. Following Grady *et al.*, we will use these frameworks, CMT and BT and CIN, in our analysis and their corresponding central notions "domain" and "mental space" in the senses mentioned above, as well as their corresponding analytical tools as they apply to our object of study. It is important to note, however, that our consideration of grammar as a source of metaphorical mappings and conceptual blending will not be concerned with the cognitive-semantic role that cognitive linguistics assigns to grammar and grammatical categories (Langacker 1987, 1991, 1998. 2001; Fauconnier and Turner 1994, 1996; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Talmy 2000). Within this theoretical framework grammar and grammatical categories (including not only grammatical constructions but also overt-bound and overt-free grammatical forms such as inflections, derivations, determiners, prepositions, adverbs, particles, etc.) are considered essential for the process of conceptualization in language —they are seen as "the determinant of conceptual structure within our cognitive system"— in contrast with the lexical subsystem of the language which is seen as responsible for "the conceptual content" (Talmy 2000: 22, 33).

This investigation will not pursue this line of analysis; it will focus instead on the utilization of grammar in discourse as a conceptual area creatively exploited to endow matters of ordinary life with new forms of expression and new dimensions of meaning. As a side-effect, it will demonstrate from the data obtained that conceptual structure and conceptual content cannot always be easily isolated; they are also susceptible to mutual influences and shared roles and relations. The operations underlying Cumming's poetic composition draw on the same cognitive strategies fundamental to all types of conceptual integration: There is a transfer of properties from a source domain to a target domain which triggers new, richer, interrelated spaces. The originality of this poetic composition lies in the nature of one of the domains that has been selected for its conceptual construction. A thorough understanding of the poem requires different degrees of linguistic consciousness, from the identification of the extremely elaborate grammatical combinations which have been integrated into the poem to the actual knowledge (theoretical and/or intuitive) required for its interpretation. Cumming's *yes is a*

pleasant country provides an effective example of how grammar can be used to conceptualize general experience in a creative and highly aesthetic way.

3. The analysis of the poem

A superficial reading of E.E. Cummings' *yes is a pleasant country* evidences, at the very least, a series of unexpected grammatical choices, the most noticeable concerning the elements occupying the subject slot of the sentences around which the first two stanzas evolve. They seem to be the clue for much of the emotion conveyed, as well as being responsible for the originality of the poetic composition. Here they have been italicised:

> *yes* is a pleasant country:
> *if*'s wintry
> (my lovely)
> let's open the year
>
> *both* is the very weather
> (not *either*)
> my treasure,
> when violets appear

It is obvious that none of these elements belong to the noun category primarily associated with the syntactic function of subject. Nor are they typical candidates for nominalization, e.g. adjectives or non-finite forms of verbs, if we take into consideration that "yes" is an adverb, "if" is a conjunction, "both" is a determiner, and so is "either". All forms belong to the closed category of grammatical words, they are not fully lexical elements, and although "both" and "either" may function as pronominal forms it is not the case here as verbal agreement indicates ("both is …"). However, there seems to be no doubt about the essential communicative role the poet has selected for them. The reason why this is so may be sought in the cognitive operations which are automatically performed when the reading of the poem takes place. Through the creation of new mental spaces which combine grammatical and semantic pre-existing information, a more complex and less transparent sphere of meaning is constructed from which inferences and spreading activation processes are triggered (Fauconnier and Turner 1994, 1998, 2001).

Before we enter into a theoretical analysis of how this is accomplished, we wish to suggest that the complex conceptualization the poem presents becomes much easier to unfold if the emphasis is put on the subject function of the grammatical terms mentioned above and on the semantic content they bring into the composition. It is a fact that traditionally the elements belonging to the closed-class

of grammatical categories have been considered semantically empty, although recent research has demonstrated that this is far from being so (Langacker 1987, 1991; Lakoff 1987; Fauconnier and Sweetser 1996; Navarro 1999; Talmy 2000; Sánchez Palacios 2000). The reading of this poem brings new evidence to the meaning potential of this grammatical subset. When the first two verses of the first two stanzas are read with the syntactic values the poet has chosen for his selected words, the terms "yes" and "if" appear as full of meaning as their respective complements: "pleasant country" and "wintry". The first may be said to stand for all that is positive, and the second for that which is hypothetical or counterfactual. Furthermore, the copulative status of the sentence situates both ends of the structure, subject and complement, at the same level hierarchically and semantically, to the point that "yes" and "if" acquire through analogical projection the semantic qualities of their complements ("pleasant country" and "wintry"). The same happens with "both" and "either" in the second stanza: "both" actualizes the meaning of "together [as a couple: speaker and hearer ("my lovely", "my treasure")]", as opposed to "either" which stands for "each of them [alone, separate]". In this case, the semantic content of the complement "the very weather … when violets appear" also gives a hint of the positive meaning which, based on our own knowledge of the world, is attributed to "both" and denied to "either". Given the semantic content of all the elements involved, the implicature is that these statements refer to a "love relationship", all other elements associated and presented in square brackets are inferences drawn from the knowledge domains activated by the lexical items encountered. Thus, the [love relationship] acts as an organizing frame or frame network (Fauconnier and Turner 2001: 22), which gives significance to all elements in the mental spaces created specifically for the interpretation of the poem and serves to define the relations existing between them.

The most evident appreciation that results from the almost physical displacement of functions, meanings, and forms found in this poem is aesthetic: it is in fact a highly creative way of putting into words an invitation to love [and life] together as a pleasant experience. The originality of the wording of the poem, however, should not be interpreted exclusively as the individualistic work of a unique mind; the strategies used for the making of the poem are based on a set of cognitive operations which have been identified (Fauconnier and Turner 1998, 2001; Grady 2000) as basic constituents of our cognitive system and a common tool in our ordinary mental processes. These operations are composition, completion and elaboration. By means of composition, elements from the source and target domains and from the general middle space are brought together in the blended space where they acquire new meaning. Through completion these elements interact with previous background knowledge stored in the minds of the participants and their semantic potential is in that way increased. All these

operations are accomplished through fusion, integration, compression, etc. of the elements involved, and as a consequence new meanings are elaborated and new ways to express that meaning are obtained from the blend. However unusual the description of this process may sound, blending is in no way a phenomenon absent from everyday language; even the finding of a term such as "yes" acting as subject in a sentence is not that exceptional. We have, for example, a parallel case in the idiomatic sentence: "I will not take *no* for an answer", where "no" (here italicized) functions as a direct object and implicates a given amount of contextual meaning which is not explicitly stated. Lakoff and Turner (1989) demonstrated in their work *More than Cool Reason* that poetic metaphor is rooted in the same metaphorical mappings which are a part of our everyday language, and Fauconnier and Turner (1994, 1998, 2001) have shown that conceptual projections among different mental spaces pervade all types of human actions and expressions, including poetic work. E.E. Cummings' poem confirms these statements as it makes use of a highly intricate net of conceptual projections of various kinds, which we are able to interpret because they are not different from our own mental configuration.

To start the analysis we should consider the conceptual domains activated by the words in the poem: firstly, we have the grammatical domain discussed above, and related to it the love domain activated by the expressions "my lovely", "my treasure", and even more explicitly actualized in the third and last stanza where the term "love" appears, and also the expression "my sweet one". Secondly, we have the physical domains of nature: "pleasant country", "wintry", "weather … when violets appear", and time: "open the year", in the first stanza, and in the third, "season", "April".

The way in which the poem is syntactically distributed by means of a copulative structure establishes, at the same time, two differentiated, and highly involved, mental spaces (Fauconnier 1997) which become interconnected as the poem advances:
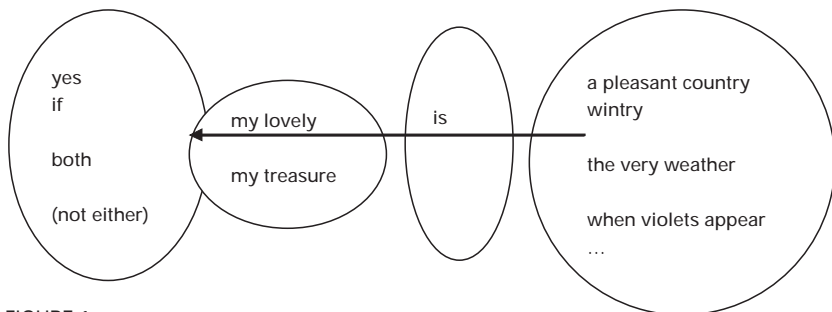

FIGURE 1

On the left hand side of the analogical construction the conceptual structure of the first two stanzas includes a blended mental space. There elements from the domain of grammatical words are made to represent unusual syntactic functions so as to produce information symbolizing a [love relationship]. This interpretation is supported at discourse level by the explicit presence in the poem of lexical elements from the specific domain of love (see fig. 2). The extremely complex and elaborate conceptual projections required to obtain these blended results become effective by means of two sets of cognitive operations which produce formal and semantic transformations. On the one hand, there is a metonymic correspondence (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Ruiz de Mendoza 1999; Barcelona 2000) acting between the grammatical and the love domains, the PART FOR THE WHOLE relation it establishes allows "yes" to stand for "acceptance of [life] together", "if" for "hypothetical [life] together", "both" for "[life] together", "either" for "[life] separate". This metonymic mapping is based not only on the coexistence of the grammatical terms and the love elements in the wording of the poem, but it is also founded on the conceptual structure which the readers bring into the poem through completion, using their presupposed knowledge of the world, more specifically their knowledge about love relationships, to assign lexical meaning to the grammatical terms through a set of necessary inferences. (Here, as above and elsewhere in this paper, inferences are presented in square brackets.) As part of this cognitive operation established between both domains, we have to identify the interaction of a generic middle space where the concepts of words and love relationship are fused, again through metonymy (words are in fact a part of a love relationship), and a blended mental space where the selected words are made to stand for that specific love relationship as can be seen in the following figure 2.

Parallel to the metonymic connection between the love and grammar domains, the domain of grammatical words also undergoes a series of transformations which require the on-line creation of specific mental spaces (generic and blended). Through a complex network of conceptual projections the sub-domains of subject-function lexical words and non-subject-function grammatical words are fused so as to allow for the conversion of the selected grammatical terms into subject category words (and what they represent from a semantic point of view). In that operation there are, once again, an abstract generic middle space and a richer blended middle space, besides the regular source and target domains traditionally considered. In the generic middle space differences are neutralized and the structures "grammatical subject function" and "closed category of grammatical words" belonging to the two interacting domains are integrated. Thus, in the generic space created for the purpose any word in a language is treated as a potential subject, while in the blended middle space, and through selective projection, the grammatical words encountered in the poem acquire a new, less
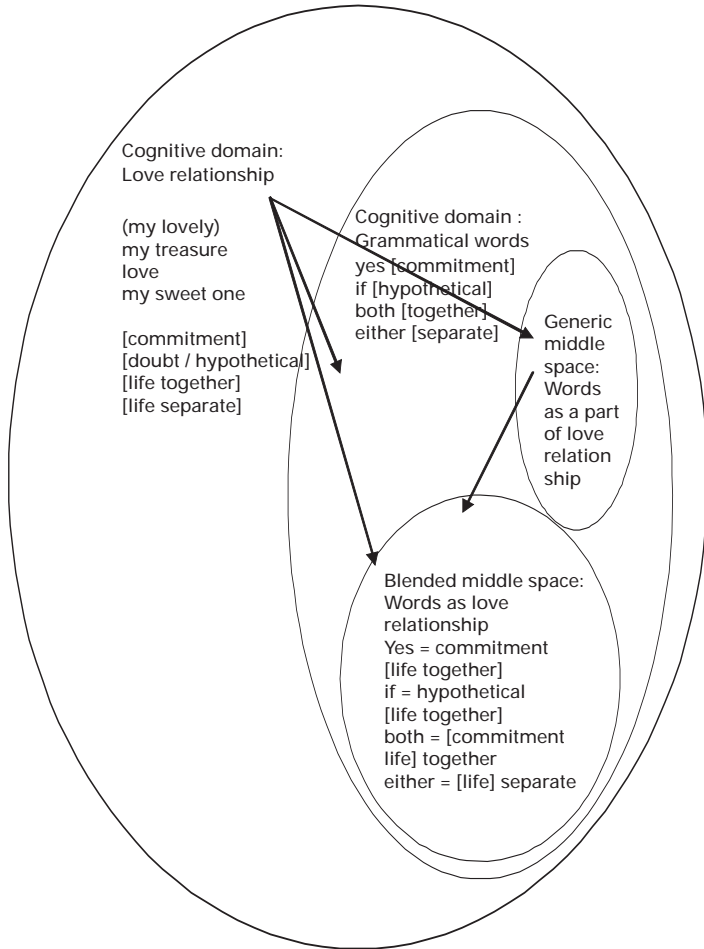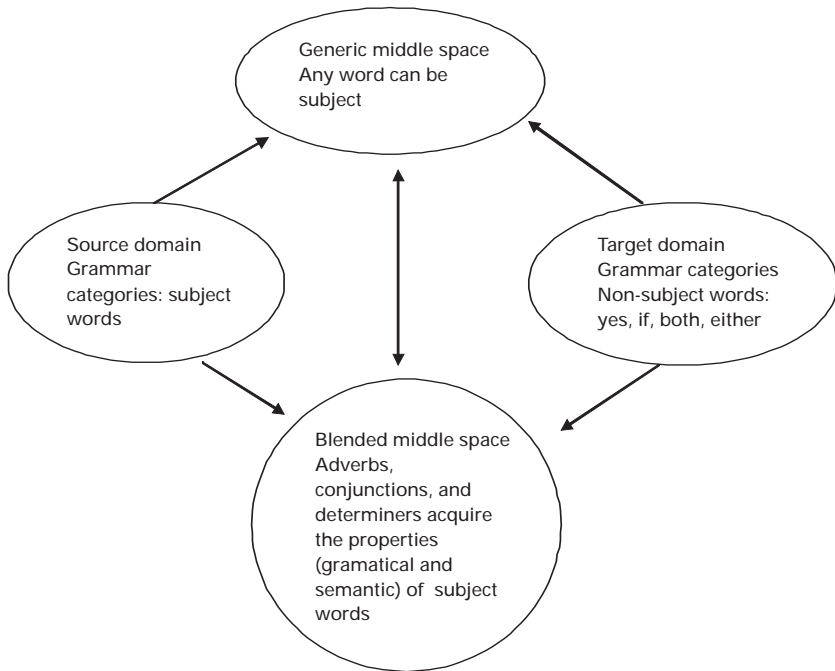
FIGURE 2

restrictive conceptual structure which includes the attributions characteristic of subject words including the abstract semantic structure associated with them. Therefore, the blended space integrates selected traits from the source domain, from the generic middle space, and from the target domain. The on-going projections existing among both domains and spaces allow members of the target

category, i.e. the specific terms which appear in the poem: "yes", "if", "both", and "either", to inherit the grammatical and conceptual structure of members from the source domain:

FIGURE 3

As has been repeatedly said (Fauconnier and Turner 1994, 1998, 2001), it is in the blended space where all the inferences built in the interpretation process originate; from there they are projected onto the target domain thus making it possible for the non-subject words encountered in the poem to acquire the qualities proper to subject words, i.e. nouns or other nominalized forms. This elaborate conceptual operation turns these words into semantically full-content words capable of provoking different emotional responses. At the same time, and of equal importance, their acquired role as subjects of the sentences converts them into arguments susceptible of being predicated on. This fact leads us to consider the type of relation which is established between the left-hand part of the poem

pictured in Fig.1, which we have just analyzed, and the right-hand part whose conceptual structure we will consider next.

If we concentrate on the elements which carry full lexical meaning in this poetic composition, the majority of them playing the role of complements of the subjects creatively built through blending, we are also able to identify a set of cognitive operations which produce a certain number of specific conceptualizations, this time based on more conventional transactions which are classic in, though not exclusive to, literary writing (Lakoff and Turner 1989). For example, the first verse "yes is a pleasant country" activates through analogy a universe of meaning which sets the path for the rest of the poem. We have already analyzed the new conceptual dimension acquired by the subject "yes" as positive [attitude/commitment towards love/life together], we will now consider the operation of meaning composition emerging from the selection of the phrase "a pleasant country" with which it is made to correspond. The fact that it is in no sense possible to interpret the totality of the verse literally, makes us investigate the cognitive move which lies behind the structure. The clue is found in the term "country".

There is a basic metaphorical mapping within the EVENT-STRUCTURE METAPHOR (Lakoff and Turner 1989; Lakoff 1993; Lakoff and Johnson 1999), which is described in the literature as STATES ARE LOCATIONS. Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 180) represent the directionality of the mapping as follows:

Locations → States

If we analyze the statement "yes is a pleasant country" from that perspective, the inference is that the semantic and pragmatic qualities associated in the mind of all participants with the local concept of "pleasant country" get mapped onto the concept embodied by the term "yes". Thus the [love relationship] is presented as a pleasant [emotional] state. The cognitive operation is a metaphorical mapping from the source domain, a physical location "country" characterized as "pleasant", to the target domain, the abstract state of [love] represented by the richly blended mental space built for the interpretation of the grammatical word "yes". The fusion of both cognitive processes —one more original, the other utterly traditional— is a first proof of the assumption maintained by Grady *et al.* (1999) that metaphorical mapping and blending are different and combinable mental operations. The coexistence of both in one single composition is at the same time a confirmation that all these complex projections constitute a highly intricate conceptual network (Fauconnier and Turner 1998, 2001).

The rest of the conceptual connections established in the other verses make use of the same combinatorial procedure. There is a set of direct metaphorical mappings at work in the poem: The terms "wintry", "(let's open the) year", "the very

weather … when violets appear", "deeper season", and "April" activate the conceptual domain of time and the changes implied in their progressive appearance refer more precisely to the different stages associated with the passing of time. Another basic metaphorical mapping widely used in literary works is A LIFETIME IS A YEAR where the properties of spring are mapped onto the concept of youth, those of summer onto maturity, and those of winter onto death (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 18). The representation of that mapping would be:

Year → Lifetime

In E.E. Cummings' poem the different possibilities which open up for the two lovers are described in terms of this metaphor: "if's wintry", i.e. [hypothetical, non-positive attitude is death of love], "both is the very weather (not either) … when violets appear", i.e. [being together is full blooming youth], "(and April's where we are)" which adapts the preceding generic metaphor to the specific situation of the lovers. As in the analysis of the first verse, the metaphorical construction profits from the blending operations performed on the grammatical words which act as subjects of the sentences ("if", "both", "not either"). The complex information they have incorporated into their own semantics serves to establish a network of inferential connections which are understood by the reader because they are tied to a set of metaphorical projections which are a part of our cultural tradition and one of the many options used to conceptualize this life experience.

From the analysis of this poem, we are in a position to confirm the distinction established by Grady *et al.* (1999) concerning the different temporality and function of mental domains and mental spaces in human cognition. Conventional metaphorical mappings between a source and a target domain are settled cognitive transactions which are deeply rooted in our cognitive system and therefore are effortlessly activated by language users when required (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Lakoff 1987, 1993; Lakoff and Turner 1989). They can be analyzed into mental spaces: input, output and middle, both generic and blended; but the fact that they are systematized and recognized as such by all participants in the communicative interaction, literary or non-literary, makes this practice unnecessary. Blended mental spaces and their construction processes are, however, a necessary step when conceptual networks are analyzed and the meaning they convey is bound to specific situations described through conventional and/or unconventional associations. Blending is primary in on-line meaning development (Fauconnier and Turner 1994, 1998, 2001; Coulson and Oakley 2000), and precisely because of that it may subsume other types of projections between domains when they become systematic. The role of blending analysis becomes essential when new resources are introduced or old resources are combined differently in the

conceptualization of a particular language event. In that sense it is right to associate blending with short term memory, instantaneous on-line mental representation and complex conceptual integration networks.

4. Conclusion

In *yes is a pleasant country*, Cummings makes use of grammatical conceptualization to create meaning in distant areas of knowledge and experience. The novelty and poetic effectiveness of this composition as well as its communicative efficiency does not reside in the expressions selected but in the type of conceptual projections they activate, which allows a common subject to be treated in an extraordinary, unexpected way. The case we have seen could be cited as a good example of how involved conceptual integration networks may become, if we consider the number of conceptual relations established between semantically unrelated domains and their complexity, as well as the number of elements brought together to create new routes for the construction and formulation of an alternative mental reality.

Evidently, the main purpose behind the utilization of these resources in this essentially artistic work is aesthetic, but the cognitive operations required both for the presentation of ideas in a unique way and for the elaborate process of assignment of meaning to the expressions are not exclusive to poetic creations, as may be proved by the fact that in our analysis we have used exactly the same tools as have been applied elsewhere to all sorts of text types (see for example Fauconnier and Turner 1994, 1998, 2001; Coulson 1995), and have identified in the course of our investigation a series of conceptual strategies similar to those they describe: blending, metaphoric and metonymic mappings, organizing frames, cognitive operations such as composition, completion, fusion, elaboration, integration, etc. The poem analyzed provides good evidence of the intensive way in which conceptual projections are rooted in our thinking processes, as we set them in motion instinctively as part of our understanding and interpretation routines. It also shows, and this is one of the specific contributions of this paper to this research area, the productivity of a theoretical field like grammar in the construction of [poetic] meaning, reinforcing the idea that meaning is pervasive and that grammar is symbolic; it is not only a system of elements, rules and formal relations. Another contribution is the compatibility we have found between close theoretical approaches such as CMT, BT, and CIN. Finally, we should also like to emphasize the important role played by the network model in the analysis of highly complex discourse as it sheds light on the unconscious and intricate mental processes which govern the numerous conceptual projections taking part in the course of meaning development; one of its main advantages is the usefulness of the model, as the

description of the elements and operations it integrates may activate the actual on-line reproduction of a given discourse in the participants' minds.

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