

## A COGNITIVE BLENDING ANALYSIS OF IDIOMS IN NTV'S SEGMENT: "BULL'S EYE"

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### Abstract

Idiomatic expressions are essentially based on conceptual mappings operating between source and target domains. As such, fundamental branches of Linguistics may fall short of the capacity to unwrap meaning where cognitive processes are involved. In fact, idioms, just like metaphor and metonymy, is a matter of thought requiring cognitive semantics in analysis. Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) postulation that the choreography of certain language data requires analysis beyond the boundaries of conventional provisions is the blast-off point in the studies investigating the correlation between cognition and language in idioms. However, delimited attention has hitherto been paid to the unlocking of blended idioms within the Cognitive Integration Perspective in the Kenyan locale. In this paper, therefore, we analyze the processes of perception and meaning of blended idioms vis-à-vis the canonized forms in *Bull's Eye* aired every Friday on NTV. The program is a hilarious satire summarizing weekly socio-political occurrences in a manner exhibiting a rarity of linguistic expression. In order to unlock both literal and figurative meanings, it is salient to explicate the mechanisms by which local context affects the process of idiom construction within the postulates of Cognitive Integration Theory (CIT) whose premise penetrates minds thus forming networks of mental spaces exploring human information integration. Using conventional content analysis, the chapter identifies, classifies and attempts a conceptual interpretation of new knowledge based on metaphorical mappings to illustrate the emergent structures. The general finding of the paper is that a striking feature of human communication is to create new meanings using blending which improves figurative competencies. We, therefore, recommend that for a better understanding of blended idiomatic expressions and other phraseological items, one should consider contexts expressed in language. This research concludes that idioms achieve creativity and novelty and should be explained using a cognitive linguistics approach. Further, blended idioms, when subjected to inadequacies of grammar alone, robs one of the ability to appreciate new interpretations.

**Keywords:** Idiom blending, Cognitive integration, Mental spaces, Cognitive linguistics.

### INTRODUCTION

#### The Nexus between Language and Cognition

The occurrence of certain experiences in communication beckons linguistic intervention which ultimately unearths perceptual orientation of the world around us in spontaneous and unconscious ways. Manifold linguistic phenomena require lenses over and above the basic branches of language in their interpretation (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002). The desire to break away and form an autonomous branch of linguistics going beyond the yardstick of fundamental branches of language (phonology, semantics, pragmatics, morphology and syntax) begot the concept "Cognitive Linguistics" which matured a perceptual apparatus defining the nexus between language and thought (Johnson and Lakoff, 2002). Verifiably, Cognitive Linguistics dates to scores of years in scholarship taking momentum in 1970's (Fillmore, 1975). Henceforth, intellectual efforts have considered Cognitive Linguistics a field that illuminates minds to retrieve mental processes and images as motivated by neural functions which are the basis for linguistic expression. Along these lines, Coulson and Oakley (2005) postulate that language is primarily a matter of thought and action and that the explication of any abstract concept leans on the

background of the utterance. The utility of Cognitive Linguistics was verified in the study of abstract imagery such as analogy, idiomatic expressions, metaphor, metonymy and counterfactual reasoning, all of which Formal Linguistics cannot unwrap for lack of principles of operation. The nexus between the mind and socio-cultural setting falls within Cognitive Linguistics which is an appliance exploited to make sense of experiences in contexts where provisions of grammar are not up to scratch (Evans, Bergen and Zinken, 2007). In a dry run to unmask the term *cognitive*<sup>1</sup>, Evans and Green (2006) explore the human mind and outline an imaginative process in which language gives way to well-ordered thought

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis of language as applied in descriptive and theoretical frameworks heavily relies on Cognitive Linguistics, a framework prescribed by many scholars as a new arrival that unravels meaning where formal branches of linguistics have dismally failed (Geeraerts, 2006). In this model, abstract concepts are considered a process of cognition of ideas. He adds that previous studies on applicability of Cognitive Linguistics in investigating abstruse concepts have not attained much assiduity among scholars. Thus, a coherent answer would be attained by immersing one's self in studious endeavors to unpack meaning using this apparatus.

processes. They add that human interaction with the environment coins new expressions that have to rely on sensory experiences and contextual information for decoding, a reality that neatly ascertains the relationship between language and cognition.

### **The Place of Modified Idiomatic Expressions in Communication**

Idioms, the burden of this paper, have been associated with metaphors, a truism, which places it within the domains of cognition. Gibbs (1980) defines an idiom as the kind of language used by particular people at a particular time or place and adds that idioms are composed of words whose meaning is different from individual elements. Commenting on the rampancy of idiomatic expressions in speech, Cacciarai and Tabosi (2014) observe that a striking feature of human communication is to create new meanings using either canonized forms of idioms or modified (blended) forms to improve figurative competencies. As supported by De Caro (2009), the creative use of idiomatic expressions achieves novel meanings and indirect reference to situations that conventional language may discuss with varied degrees of limitation. Etymologically, the word "idiom" is derived from the Greek word "idioma" which means "a peculiar phraseology of a people" (Bollas, 1989). He adds that it is against the background of the cultural orientation that we can comprehend the use of an idiom because it does not appeal to every reader. In light of the present study, idiom blending forms a fertile area to probe as it operates within the domains of cognitive linguistics which evokes our conceptual system and domains of experience to make sense of the world around us. In their study on Idioms of freedom in Kenya, Nyairo and Ogude (2005) underscore that peculiarity in meaning of idioms evokes universal acceptability and an attempt to restructure the choreography of the canonized forms leads to novel meanings that can be interpreted against geographical, political, social and economic backdrop. Commenting on the frequency of modified idioms in communication, Ogola (2006) observes that a popular culture has arisen where speakers and writers blend idiomatic expressions to create novel impressions against cultural understanding.

### **Rationale of the Study**

There is an apparent scanty documented empirical research on the role of Cognitive Linguistics in unwrapping meaning of non-phraseological elements of language especially idiom blending where grammatical functions cannot explain constructional operations. By way of example, Gathigia (2014), undertaking a Cognitive Linguistic Analysis of

metaphors of love in Gĩkũyũ, posits that provisions of grammar are deficient in unpacking meaning of metaphors, a concept applicable to idioms which are non-phraseological elements. This corroborates Zhang's (2009) observation that there is limited research on the role of Cognitive Linguistics in revealing modified forms of canonized expressions. Zhang (2009) underscores that rigorous efforts should concentrate on this area. The first motivation for this study is the sparsity of Cognitive Linguistics in the unearthing meaning of modified forms of non-phraseological items.

Secondly, our impetus to scrutinize idioms was due to a number of factors. To begin with, in the words of Simpson and Mendis' (2003, p.1), there is an observation that "the notion of idiom conjures up language that is thought to be entertaining, engaging, charming, colourful and memorable". This attracts a large audience that will appreciate utterances having idioms that are either pure or modified to achieve communicative brilliance. This is evident in the televised segment "Bull's Eye", a hilarious satire summarizing weekly socio-political unfolding in a manner exhibiting rarity of linguistic expression thus drawing millions of views (Nyabuga and Booker, 2013). Thus, television programs often have an allure to the viewers who are attracted to the brilliancy of language. Additionally, idiomatic expressions, whether pure or modified, are not only linguistic features but vital handiwork of varied cognition dependent on contexts (Coulson and Oakley, 2005). This makes them perform deeper discourse functions than superficial lenses can appreciate. Against this background, the skillful use of idioms may be pervasive as the viewers concentrate on the sarcasm thus ignoring the internal processes underlying the modifications and their effects.

NTV's *Bull's Eye* was studied based on a number of justifications. To begin with, NTV is the second most watched station in Kenya according to the latest survey conducted by IPSOS POLL (Maina, 2016). This means the station attracts millions of viewers across the country, sensitizing the larger public on various intricate social issues through its programmes. Additionally, Nyabuga and Booker (2013) note that NTV is an objective media house whose programmes are very open and free from manipulation by the political class. Therefore, NTV's programmes present unprejudiced information representing the national mandate in an objective way. Peck's (2013) scrutiny of *Bull's Eye* reveals that although satirical genre in the Kenyan media has been introduced on TV, limited efforts have been

dedicated to the study of their nature. Conducting a research on Bull's Eye as a satirical show on NTV, Karubiu (2014) notes that *Bull's Eye* show is peculiar and worthy of study because the academic and intellectual gap between the producer and the esteemed viewers is so wide that meaning is not on the surface. Also, as Karubiu (2014, p. 3) underscores, Bull's Eye as a satirical show is an interesting research area owing to "contextual constraints in terms of place and time" that require mental processes connected with pragmatic information. Based on these predominant lines, the paper selected Bull's Eye.

Consequently, this research was motivated by the fact that blended idiomatic expressions in speech or writing are often very pervasive. Steinel and Hulstijn (2007) contend that the brilliancy in certain communications sweep audiences to such a great degree that they do not even realize that some linguistic features have been modified in order to create novel meanings and interpretations. Finally, our motivation to use CIT<sup>2</sup> to study idiom blending in Bull's Eye is housed in Coulson and Oakley's (2005) contemplation that contemporary researchers on idiom blending should "give more serious consideration to the precise nature of the role of contextual information in background cognition." Along these lines of thought, we chew over Idiom blending in NTV's Segment *Bull's Eye*.

### Theoretical Framework

The present study is guided by two theories; *Conceptual Integration Theory* (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002) and *Relevance Theory* (Sperber and Wilson, 1985) *Conceptual Integration Theory* was later modified by Coulson and Oakley in 2005. This appliance is a conduit for investigating the vital relations underlying cognitive operations of both phraseological and non-phraseological features of language. This theory is also called *Blending Theory* (BT) and it seeps into our minds and establishes connections "between our understanding of language and the way we comprehend human thought and activity in general" (Džanić, 2007). This theory found its departure point in the seminal work of Fauconnier

(1997) entitled *Mappings in thought and language*. Cognitive Integration Theory constructs mental spaces that unfold the internal choreography and meaning of linguistic and non-linguistic features above hyper-literal thinking.

In this apparatus, there is a construction of cognitive domains that are connected through Conceptual Integration Networks. Coulson and Oakley (2000) propose that the network consists of four intertwined spaces: *input spaces, a generic space, the blended space and the emergent structure*. The interconnectedness of the mental spaces in various contexts gives rise to the novel meaning ((Džanić, 2007). In the process of modifying or blending canonized forms, the theory proposes three processes: *composition, completion and elaboration*" all of which are the tenets of the theory. With these three tenets, the theory gives an insight into our mind to provide local understanding. The connective threads of the theory include cognitive blending networks, blending processes, optimality principles and Vital Relations which help in the elaboration of meaning. The modification or blending of an idiom occurs in such a way that certain relations as *identity, time, space, cause-effect, uniqueness, part/whole, representation, similarity, analogy, disanalogy, category, intentionality and role* are maintained between the original and blended form ((Džanić, 2007). The vital relations refer to mental spaces that form a connection in the inner and outer space using the solid lines. Optimality Principles on the other hand, are descriptions that further clarify or elaborate "the relations within the conceptual integration network" (Gibbs, 2000). The spaces can be diagrammatically presented as shown below.

To analyze a blending occurrence, the theory goes through a number of stages: the hypothetical blend is introduced, followed by description of the conceptual structure in the spaces; as such, mappings are established between the elements in the input spaces; finally, the structure of the blended space is described depending on which aspects originate from the input spaces. The emergent structure which sustains reasoning arises from contextual accommodation of one domain applied to different domains (Coulson and Oakley, 2000). After the description, there is completion which occurs when information in the long term memory is matched with the blend, a process which spreads activation of semantic networks. Lastly, Fauconnier and Turner (2002, p.44) explain that elaboration involves preserving the links in the input spaces so that connections can pop out automatically to yield novel comprehension.

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<sup>2</sup> Conceptual Blending Theory is an apparatus that adopts a more scientific approach to account abstract notions in language in terms of mental spaces which give rise to novel inferences motivated by contextual orientation. Delibegović (2007) notes that blending falls under Cognitive Semantics which comes in handy to decode heavily coded meanings so that speakers avoid hyper literal reasoning by creating spaces that are not grounded on the superficial structures of the messages.

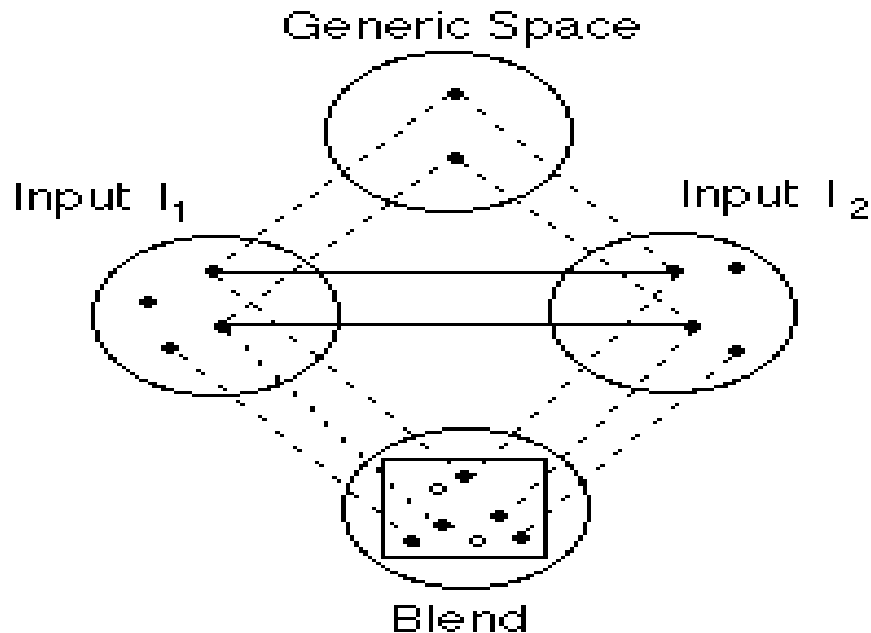


Figure 1: Blended space (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002)

Relevance theory on the other hand, is a Cognitive Psychological theory relying on inferential pragmatics in which a speaker's utterances create relevance in the audience who pick mental stimuli from the environment and relates with what is said. According to Sperber and Wilson (1985), this theory deals with architecture of the mind and recognition of the intentions of the speaker using evidence provided. Developed from Grice's (1989) maxim of relevance, this theory deals with implied meaning rather than truth conditional content. As such an utterance leads a listener to implied meaning when expectations are precise, predictable and revealing intentions (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). The relationship between the speaker and the interpreter is such that certain phenomena, thoughts, memories and inferences held by the speaker are matched by the new information, a process that makes the new meaning pop out automatically. Any information becomes relevant when we retrieve background information (production of cognitive effect), map it on contextual information thus yielding relevant interpretation. (Sperber and Wilson, 1998) cushion that Relevance Theory is a mind reading intuitive process enriched with the most immediate environmental stimulus that connects with the communicative intention of the speaker to focus on the intended meaning. These two theories will be useful in the interpretation of the blended idioms in *Bull's Eye*.

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted a qualitative research design. This is a precursory system explaining how things are by informing the reader of phenomena as experienced by investigators and interpreted in relevant contexts (Bryman, 2006). Particularly, the study used descriptive survey design since it focused on collection of blended idioms in NTV's Segment *Bull's Eye* aired Emmanuel Juma every Friday. *Bull's Eye* was purposively sampled due to the following reasons; to begin with, satirical program employs blended idiomatic expressions in very subtle ways that meaning often eludes the viewers who only concentrate on the humorous sections; political occurrences sway many viewers as these form a good way to summarize the happenings at the end of the week (Nyabuga and Booker, 2013). Fifteen episodes of *Bull's Eye* were purposively sampled. Content analysis, a component of qualitative research paradigm proposed by (Creswell, 2012) guided the analysis of idioms because the researchers are conversant with the English idiomatic expressions. The justification to use content analysis was based on the fact that it is highly analytical and describes varied approaches including but not limited to impressionistic, intuitive, and interpretive analyses. As echoed by Rosengren (1981), any thorough undertaking and strict textual analysis requires content analysis for complete immersion into the text. Further, content analysis was premised on the fact

that it does not deal with haphazard extraction of content to make meaning but rather a deeper analysis involving relational themes (Patton, 2002). Scores of researchers find content analysis as a flexible method for analyzing text data (Patton, 2002). Thus, the researchers watched the episodes and presented findings as guided by CIT.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Having purposively sampled fifteen *Bull's Eye* episodes, the researchers identified 10 blended

idiomatic expressions with different types of modification. The reason for including such a limited data was because certain expressions were not properly represented and the connections were therefore unclear, making the researchers unable to account for them. The summary of the data is as presented in the table below. Because diagrammatic representations consume much space, the researchers chose to illustrate just five blends as the rest would take a similar structure.

**Table 1: Blended idioms in sampled episodes**

Canonized idiom	Blended form	Category of blend
Love triangle	Slap ( boxing) triangle	Substitution
Go bananas	Go popcorns	Substitution
Take to task	Take to the movies	Substitution
Washing dirty linen in public	Dirtying washing linen in school	Permutation and substitution
Cup of tea	Hot cups of (coffee) kofi*	Addition
Burn bridges	Burn mattresses	Substitution
All work and no play makes jack a dull boy	All work and no swim and massage makes MCAs dull boys and girls	Addition and substitution
New sheriff in town	New jogoo in town	substitution
Play cards right	Play many cats	Addition and substitution
Suffer the same fate	Share the same gizzard	Substitution

### *Love triangle (Boxing triangle)*

This blended idiom has undergone substitution of the words boxing and slap for love. In the episode where politicians' tempers have flared and they are going for each other's jugulars, the canonized idiom (*love triangle*) which means "two people vying for the affection of a third" is modified to accommodate the Kenyan context in which politicians, depending on their inclination, gang up against each other and physically go for their throats. Since there is no one to one mapping between love and slap or boxing, the Vital Relation here can be considered as that of dysanalogy. It is closely integrated and manipulated as a single unit. The diagrammatic representation using mental spaces is as shown below.

### *Go bananas-Go popcorns)*

This substituted idiomatic expression was collected from an episode entitled "*Week of Political Discovery*" in which members of the Senate went mad when a senator was infuriated after certain members were allegedly bribed to de-emphasize a case requiring financial accountability. In this case when everyone goes bananas (*mad*), others are said to have gone popcorns. The Vital Relation between bananas and popcorns is that of *category* because both bananas and popcorn are foodstuffs. However, considering the nature of popcorns and how its alleviation of hunger is short-lived, it would be

imperative to borrow the political happenings in which certain hot tempers do not take eternity to calm down. The blend is connected by the vital relation of category because both banana and popcorn are foodstuffs. The banana republic is therefore compared to popcorn Republic. Popcorn would refer to a situation that is explosive but is short-lived. The mental spaces can account for this as shown below.

### **Take to Task: Take to the Movies**

The canonical form "take to task" means to berate or make somebody accountable for their actions. Blended in this form, the idiom *take to the movies* ignores the tensed atmosphere as a movie is an occasion or relaxation. In the input space 1, we have *take to task* while in space 2, we have *take to the movies*. Using the background of political cases in Kenya evoking little concern from the affected parties, the episode likens the indifference to that of a movie viewer who does all in utmost relaxation and in full cognizant of the fact that the episodes in a movie are purely fictitious and only meant for merriment. As discussed by Zang (2009), the most likely Vital Relation connecting spaces 1 and 2 would be that of intentionality where one's actions are motivated by desire, fear, memory and hope among others. Political grilling is therefore a moment of relaxation because members come out entertained by the culprits. The mappings would be as shown.

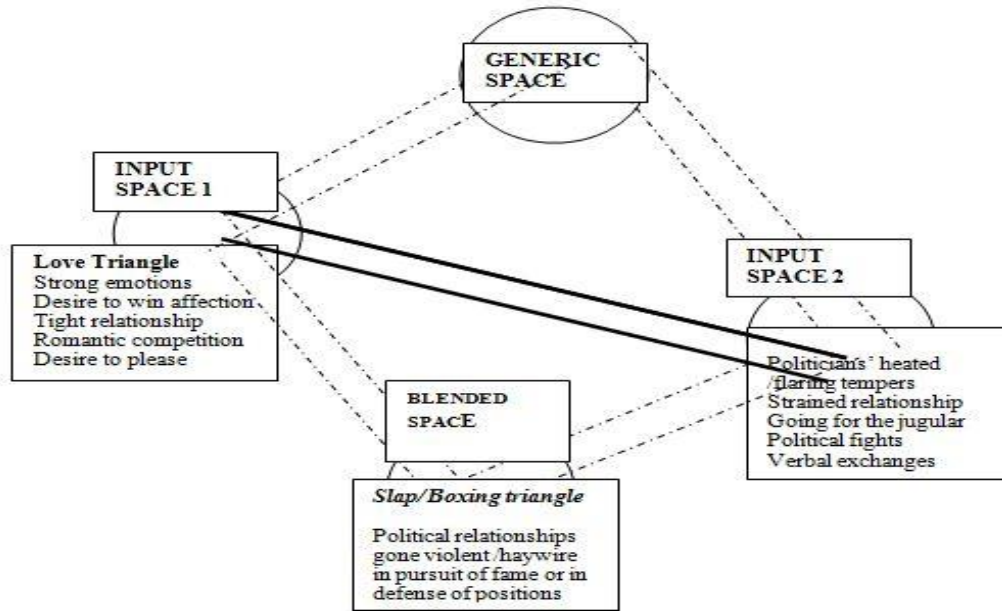


Figure 2: Conceptual integration network for *slap triangle / boxing triangle*

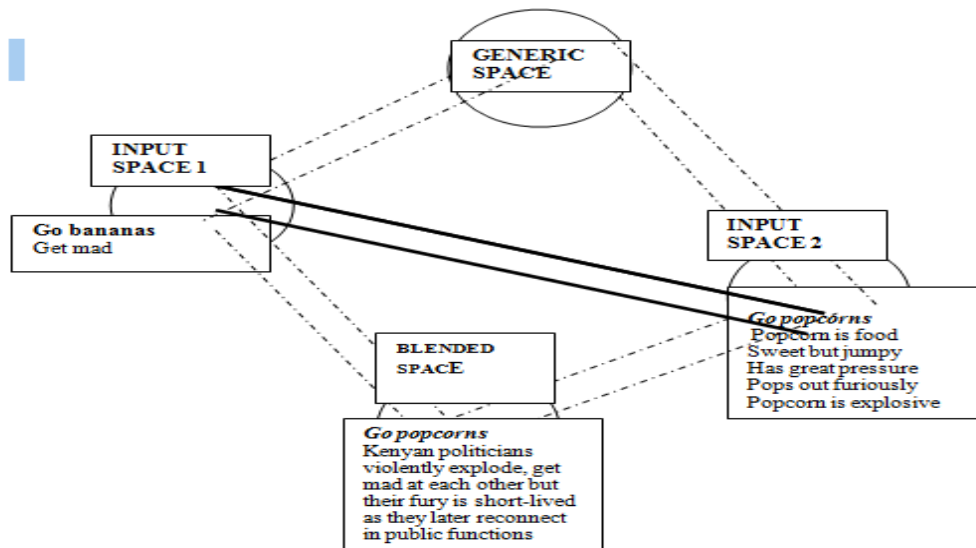


Figure 3: Conceptual integration network for *go bananas / go popcorns*

**Cup of tea (hotter cups of kofi)**

This idiomatic expression that has undergone addition was collected from the episode "Confusion on the Dance Floor" featuring a woman giving a man serious blows. Against the background of being thwacked by Kenyan women-especially those from Nyeri (whom the commentator cites), the idiom acquires the new meaning. Tea and coffee are related by category. The Vital Relation is therefore that of

Category. However, the commentator must have used the word *kofi*\* (a Kiswahili word for slap) which is a homophone of the word coffee. Citing instances like the Kidero's slap and Nyeri beatings, the reader settles for *Kofi* instead of *coffee*. The blended meaning will therefore mean a woman's wrath in disciplining men in Kenya. The diagram is therefore as represented below.

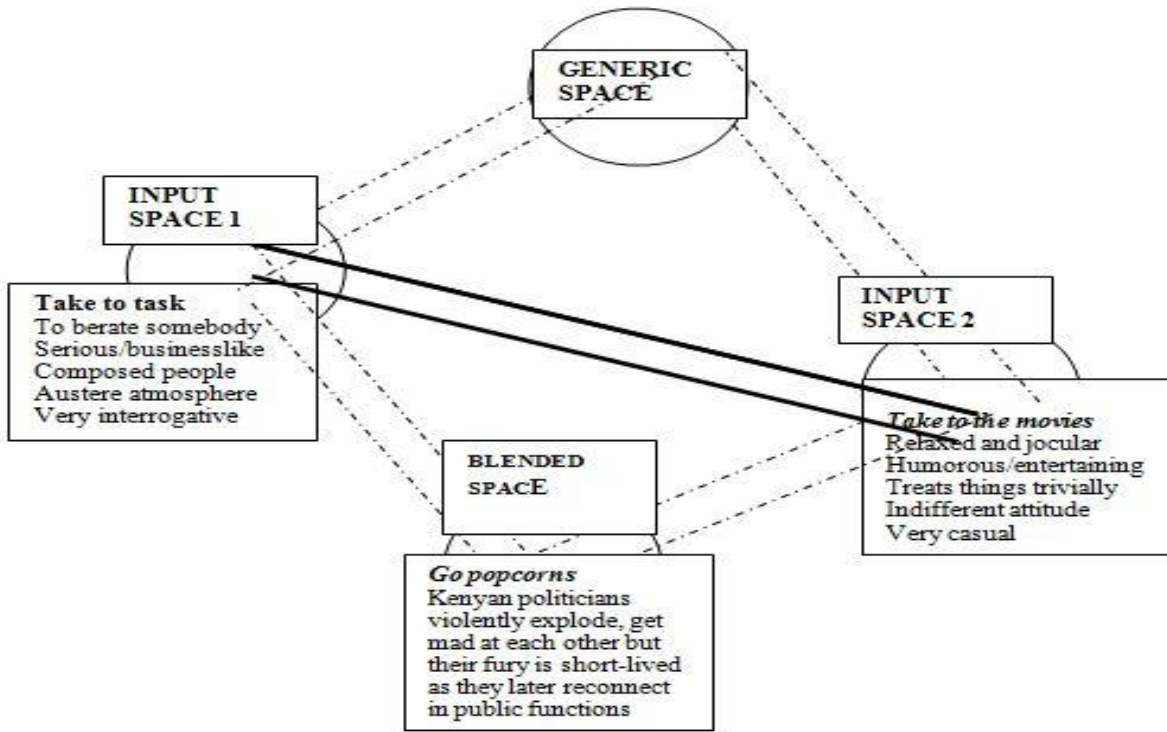


Figure 3. Conceptual integration network for *take-to-task* (*take-to-the-movies*.)

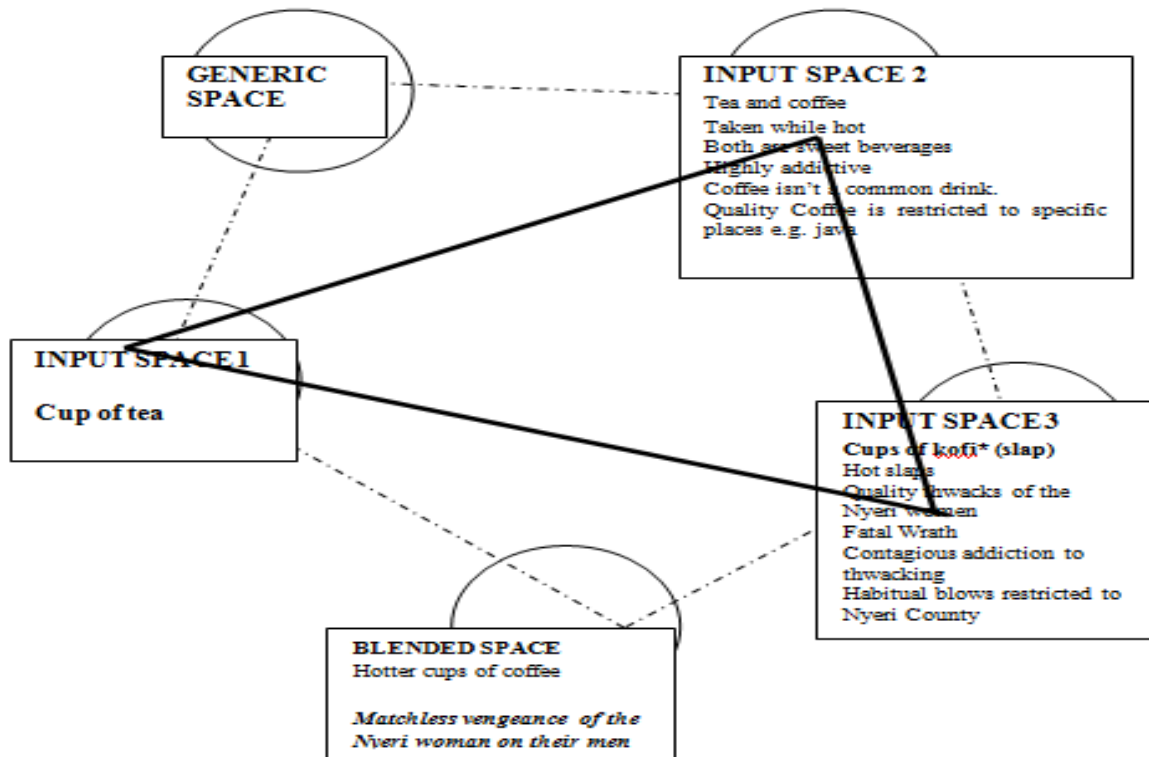


Figure 4. Conceptual integration network for *Cup of tea* (*hotter cups of kofi*)  
*Play cards (I have many cats to play)*

This idiom was collected from the episode "A new Jogoo in Town" in which the title is a substituted idiomatic expression. Originally, the idiom *play cards right* means to behave in a manner that is likely to make you succeed. However, the blended idiom which involves both addition and substitution occurs in an environment of political violence in the assembly where people are fighting for accountability of financial resources. Considering the nature of a cat and a card, the Vital Relation in this process would be that of similarity in behavior. Politicians would therefore be portrayed as those with nine lives just like cats which shove, push, manipulate and sweat out in the name of accountability yet they just pursue their filthy lucre. The meaning of the blend is illustrated below.

expressions. It can be argued that certain canonical forms of idioms form the frames of thought and assist in the structuring of mental spaces that lead to novel meanings or interpretations. It is important to observe that the analysis in this research has heavily relied on context of situation, grammatical modification and the cognitive domains. Therefore, a general feature of human nature is to create new meanings using blending which leads to figurative competencies.

The present study recommends that the meaning of modified idiomatic expressions should be explained using the postulates of Cognitive Linguistic Approach. The inadequacies of grammar rob a reader of the ability to appreciate blended information, a condition that necessitates the borrowing of a cognitive linguist's lenses.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This research has established that there are certain principles governing the modification of idiomatic

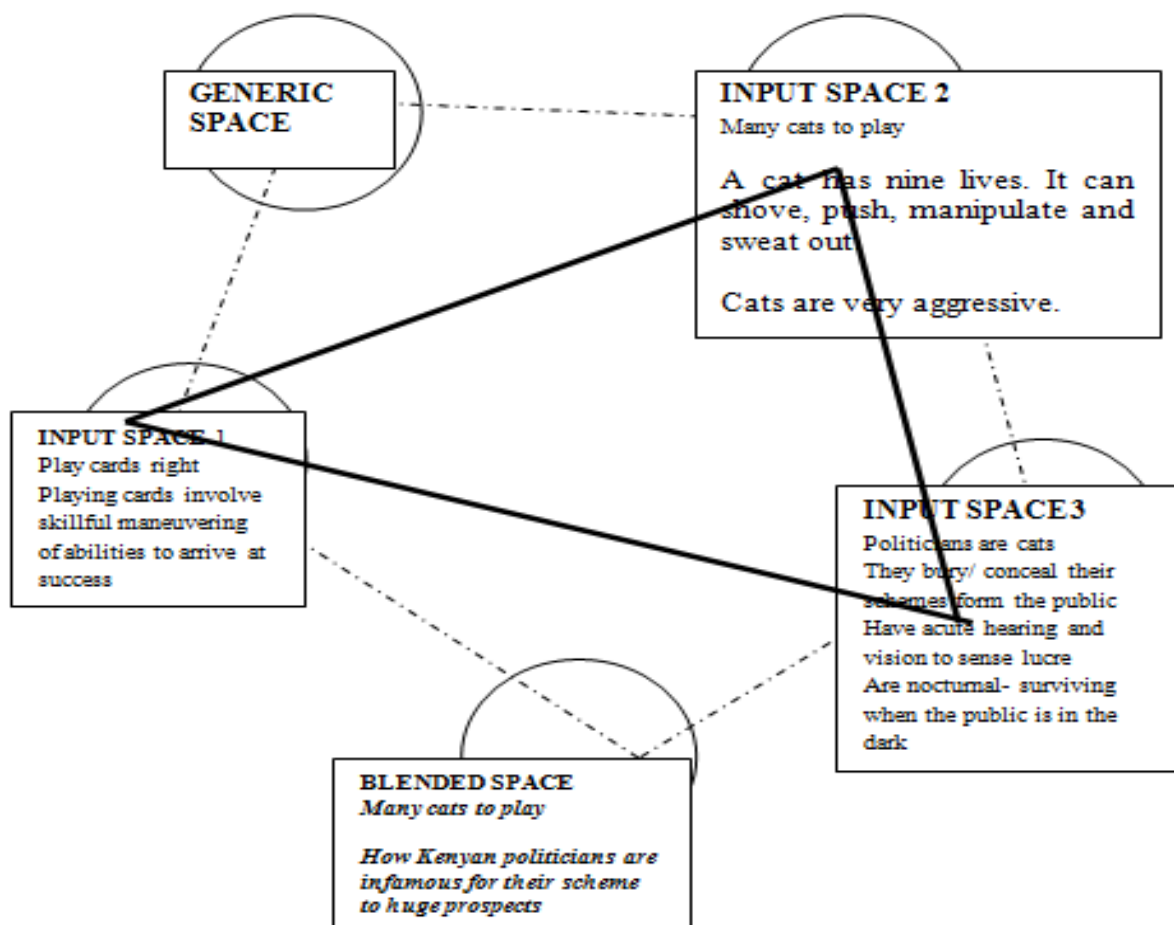


Figure 5. Conceptual integration network for *play cards right (many cats to play)*



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