



Conceptual Integration In The Formation Of Contemporary Spanish Slang: A Cognitive-Linguistic Approach

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Abstract. This study examines the cognitive mechanisms underlying contemporary Spanish slang formation through Conceptual Integration Theory (Blending Theory). Drawing on a corpus of 350 youth slang expressions from social media, online forums, and music lyrics (2015-2024), this research analyzes the types of conceptual blends structuring Spanish slang. The investigation reveals that Spanish slang creation predominantly employs double-scope (43%) and single-scope (35%) blending networks, with metaphorical and metonymic extensions as foundational operations. The analysis demonstrates how speakers compress complex conceptual relationships through blend formation, creating emergent meanings reflecting both universal cognitive patterns and culture-specific conceptualizations. Domains examined include corporeality, technological culture, emotional states, and social relationships. This research extends Conceptual Integration Theory to an understudied domain and offers applications for lexicography, language pedagogy, and translation studies.

Keywords: Conceptual integration, blending, Spanish slang, cognitive linguistics, mental spaces, neologisms, youth language.

Introduction. The dynamic evolution of contemporary Spanish slang presents a compelling case study for investigating cognitive mechanisms of language innovation. Traditional sociolinguistic approaches examine how informal lexical items function as markers of group identity and generational belonging, yet fail to adequately explain the cognitive processes enabling speakers to create and comprehend novel expressions with remarkable consistency. Digital communication platforms have accelerated slang formation in Spanish-speaking communities, with neologisms spreading rapidly across geographical boundaries. This linguistic creativity demands theoretical frameworks capable of accounting for the mental operations underlying meaning construction.

Conceptual Integration Theory, developed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, offers a powerful explanatory model for understanding how speakers generate novel meanings by selectively combining elements from multiple conceptual domains (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). Unlike earlier approaches emphasizing unidirectional mappings, Conceptual Integration Theory posits that meaning construction involves dynamic integration of at least four mental spaces: two or more input spaces, a generic space abstracting common elements, and a blended space where emergent structure arises through composition, completion, and elaboration. Spanish slang exemplifies this process: expressions like "flipar" (to freak out, from English "flip"), "molar" (to be cool, from Caló), and "estar cañón" (to be attractive, literally "to be cannon") blend conceptual content from diverse domains to produce meanings transcending literal interpretations.

This research addresses a significant gap by systematically applying Conceptual Integration Theory to contemporary Spanish slang. While extensive work has documented Spanish neologisms from sociolinguistic perspectives (Bernal et al., 2022), and while Conceptual Integration Theory has been applied to literary language (Coulson, 2001), their intersection remains unexplored. This study pursues three objectives: identify and categorize



conceptual blending networks structuring Spanish slang; analyze cognitive operations compressing complex relationships into compact expressions; and examine how culture-specific knowledge shapes blending in Spanish-speaking communities. Understanding slang's cognitive mechanisms has practical implications for language teaching, lexicography, and translation studies.

Literature Review. Conceptual Integration Theory emerged in the 1990s as Fauconnier and Turner developed a comprehensive account of meaning construction. In "The Way We Think" (2002), they demonstrate how conceptual integration operates across diverse cognitive domains. The theory's central insight is that human cognition routinely involves blending—online construction of partial mappings across mental spaces, resulting in emergent conceptual structures existing in neither input alone. Mental spaces (Fauconnier, 1985) are small conceptual packets constructed for local understanding, containing partial information structured by frames organizing our knowledge and experience.

Fauconnier and Turner identify four integration network types. Simplex networks involve a frame in one input with values from another filling its roles. Mirror networks maintain a single frame across spaces, with elements differing only in values. Single-scope networks project one input's organizing frame while selectively projecting elements from another. Double-scope networks, the most creative type, involve inputs with different organizing frames, creating emergent structure irreducible to either source. Emergence occurs through composition (combining elements establishing new relations), completion (recruiting background knowledge), and elaboration (mental simulation developing the blend).

Gibbs (2000) argues that while the theory provides useful descriptive terminology, it lacks predictive power because it doesn't specify constraints on possible blends. Nevertheless, the theory's descriptive richness has sustained its influence. Research on Spanish slang has primarily focused on sociolinguistic functions rather than cognitive mechanisms. Recent work on COVID-19 neologisms like "covidiota" demonstrates rapid lexical innovation, yet analysis has focused on documentation rather than cognitive processes. The intersection of Conceptual Integration Theory and slang formation represents fertile ground for investigation.

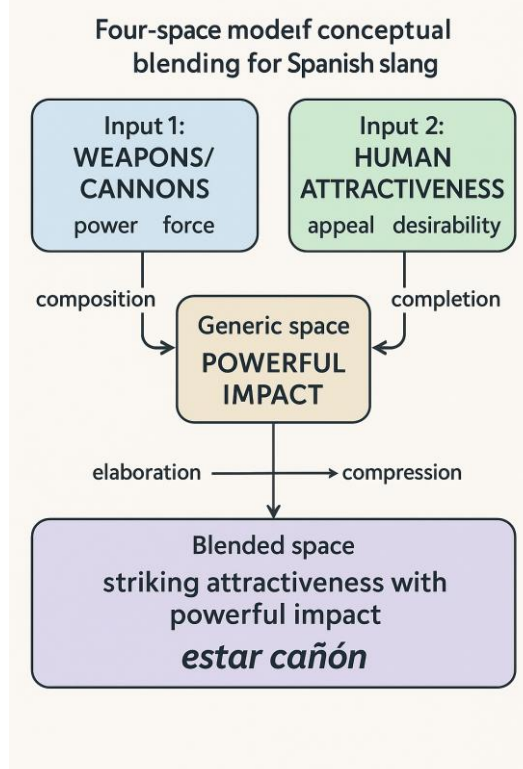


Fig. 1. Four-space model of conceptual integration in Spanish slang formation

Methodology. This investigation employs mixed methods combining corpus analysis with cognitive semantic analysis to identify conceptual integration patterns in contemporary Spanish slang. The corpus comprises 350 Spanish slang expressions collected from Twitter/X conversations, Reddit forums (r/Spanish, r/es), YouTube comments, and reggaeton/trap lyrics between 2015-2024. Geographical scope encompasses Peninsular Spanish (Madrid, Barcelona) and Latin American varieties (Mexican, Argentine, Colombian usage).

Analytical procedure involved multiple stages: initial categorization identified source domains; mental space reconstruction inferred conceptual content and structure; network type classification determined simplex, mirror, single-scope, or double-scope integration; analysis of cognitive operations examined composition, completion, and elaboration; compression analysis identified compressed vital relations. Reliability was enhanced through inter-rater agreement (78% for network type, 85% for source domains) and consultations with ten native Spanish speakers from different regions.

Results and analysis. Corpus analysis reveals systematic patterns in how conceptual integration structures Spanish slang formation. Distribution shows double-scope networks (43%) and single-scope networks (35%) predominate, while simplex (15%) and mirror networks (7%) occur less frequently, suggesting Spanish slang favors creative integration of disparate conceptual domains over simpler mapping operations.

Double-scope networks generate striking expressions. "Estar de miedo" (literally "to be of fear," meaning "to be awesome") integrates Input 1 (FEAR domain: danger, threat, intense emotion) with Input 2 (POSITIVE EVALUATION: desirability, approval). The generic space contains INTENSE EMOTIONAL IMPACT. The blended space transforms fear's negative valence through counterfactual integration: something so impressive it would inspire fear is evaluated positively, yielding extreme excellence. Another case, "estar cañón" (to be highly attractive, literally "to be cannon"), integrates WEAPONS/ARTILLERY (power, explosive force, striking capacity) with PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS (visual appeal, desirability,



observer effect). The blend creates emergent conceptualization wherein attractiveness strikes observers with powerful, immediate impact comparable to artillery fire.

Single-scope networks occur when abstract concepts are understood through concrete domains. "Flipar" (to freak out) projects PHYSICAL OVERTURNING frames (objects flipping, losing orientation, directional reversal) onto psychological states (surprise, amazement, cognitive disruption). The blend inherits kinetic frames, conceptualizing mental disruption as physical destabilization. "Molar" (to be cool) demonstrates integration relating molars' substantiality and reliability to positive evaluation, generating a blend where liking is conceptualized as essential positive functioning.

TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL CULTURE domains show English borrowings undergoing blending. "Stalkear" blends traditional stalking (physical following with threats) and social media observation (digital information gathering). The blended space retains obsessive, boundary-violating aspects while incorporating digital mediation's features. EMOTIONAL STATES domain includes "estar rayado/a" (literally "to be scratched," meaning worried/obsessed), integrating SCRATCHED SURFACES (persistent damage, repeated marking) with MENTAL RUMINATION (repetitive thoughts, inability to move past concerns). The blend compresses cause-effect relations (repetitive disturbing thoughts cause psychological damage) with analogy relations (mental state similar to physical damage pattern).

Table 1. Conceptual integration patterns in spanish slang by semantic domain

Domain	Expression	Literal Meaning	Actual Meaning	Network Type	Primary Source Domains	Compressed Relations
Physical Attributes	estar buenorro/a	to be very good	to be very attractive	Single-scope	QUALITY + INTENSIFIER	Identity, degree
Physical Attributes	estar como un tren	to be like a train	to be very attractive	Single-scope	VEHICLES + POWER	Analogy, force
Technology	stalkear	to stalk (Eng.)	obsessively check social media	Simple x	DIGITAL BEHAVIOR	Cause-effect
Technology	troleear	to troll	to provoke online	Simple x	INTERNET CULTURE	Intention, effect
Emotions	estar rayado/a	to be scratched	to be worried/obsessed	Single-scope	PHYSICAL DAMAGE	Change, repetition
Emotions	petarlo	to break it	to be wildly successful	Single-scope	DESTRUCTION + SUCCESS	Change, intensity
Social Relations	tío/tía	uncle/aunt	dude/friend	Mirror	FAMILY RELATIONS	Identity, role
Social Relations	colega	colleague	friend	Mirror	PROFESSIONAL RELATIONS	Identity, role



Evaluation	ser la leche	to be the milk	to be awesome/terrible	Double-scope	NUTRITION + EVALUATION	Quality, uniqueness
Evaluation	ser un pibón	to be a bellpepper	to be very attractive	Single-scope	FOOD + APPEARANCE	Analogy, appeal

Discussion. The predominance of double-scope and single-scope networks in Spanish slang reveals important patterns in linguistic creativity within informal registers. Unlike conservative domains where simpler networks predominate, slang favors creative integration generating emergent meaning through combining disparate conceptual domains. This reflects slang's sociolinguistic functions: expressions merely filling semantic gaps lack distinctive creativity marking generational identity, while innovative double-scope blends become memorable markers of linguistic inventiveness.

The systematic use of conceptual metaphor and metonymy as inputs demonstrates hierarchical organization of cognitive mechanisms. Primary metaphors like PSYCHOLOGICAL STATES ARE PHYSICAL SENSATIONS provide stable source domains recruited into diverse blending operations. "Estar rayado/a" relies on PSYCHOLOGICAL HARM IS PHYSICAL DAMAGE but extends it through blending specifying scratching's character (repetitive, superficial, persistent) as structuring rumination and obsession. This suggests conceptual integration builds upon rather than replaces earlier cognitive mechanisms.

Cultural specificity manifests in completion operations recruiting background knowledge. "Estar cañón" would fail in cultures where cannons lack associations with impressive power. Yet basic integration patterns—using physical force to conceptualize attractiveness—represent cognitive strategies with broader currency. This tension between universal cognitive operations and culture-specific content aligns with debates regarding universality and specificity in conceptual systems.

Compression operations emerge as central to slang's functionality. By packaging complex conceptual content into compact forms, compression enables efficient communication while maintaining informativeness. "Flipar" compresses entire frames of psychological disruption, cause-effect relations linking stimulus to response, and evaluative implications within a single verb. This cognitive economy parallels computational complexity reduction, suggesting conceptual integration serves optimization functions beyond creativity.

Conclusion. This investigation demonstrates that Conceptual Integration Theory provides a powerful explanatory framework for understanding contemporary Spanish slang formation. Through systematic analysis of 350 expressions, the research identified predominant patterns of double-scope and single-scope blending, revealed consistent compression operations targeting intensity, identity, and change relations, and showed how cultural knowledge provides essential scaffolding through completion processes. The findings confirm that slang generation constitutes a domain of linguistic creativity where cognitive mechanisms operate with particular freedom from conservative pressures constraining formal registers.

Theoretical contributions include extending Conceptual Integration Theory to an understudied domain, demonstrating how conceptual metaphor and blending interact hierarchically, and revealing systematic preferences in network type selection driven by pragmatic and sociolinguistic functions. Practical applications emerge for language pedagogy (understanding cognitive mechanisms enables effective teaching strategies), lexicography



(integration analysis informs decisions about neologism inclusion), and translation studies (recognizing culture-specific completion suggests creating analogous blends in target languages rather than seeking direct equivalents).

Future research directions include comparative analysis examining blending patterns across multiple languages to illuminate universal versus language-specific tendencies; experimental studies using psycholinguistic methods to test predictions about processing differences between network types; longitudinal investigation tracking how expressions diffuse through speech communities and conventionalize; and neurolinguistic research investigating neural correlates of blend comprehension. This research demonstrates that contemporary Spanish slang exemplifies systematic cognitive operations revealing fundamental capacities of human meaning-making, ensuring languages remain vibrant, expressive, and responsive to changing communicative needs.

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