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Conceptual Blends and Critical Awareness in Teaching Cultural Narratives

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Bringing conceptual blending into foreign language classroom discussions of cultural narratives can lead to critical language awareness and a deeper and broader understanding of cultural narratives, which the MLA promotes in its (2007) conceptualization of transcultural and translingual awareness. Using the fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification as example narratives, this paper seeks to show how political humor can unpack and illuminate complex, blended narratives that infuse everyday linguistic expressions and ways of making meaning. It will then offer suggestions for using conceptual blending to analyze cultural narratives in the classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

For months, teachers on the American Association of Teachers of German listserv had been discussing the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and wondering how they could celebrate in a meaningful way with their students. Participants suggested pairing with art departments to have students physically construct their own walls or talk about how walls affect their daily lives. However, some instructors questioned the effectiveness of connecting U.S. teenage social angst and the Berlin Wall, reminding the group to move beyond personal relevance and to contextualize the border historically and politically. The ensuing debate centered on how to strike a balance between fun activities and intellectual pursuits in the foreign language classroom and whether the two are mutually exclusive. Having students build structures to commemorate the fall of the Berlin Wall is a fine communicative activity and certainly makes the concept of division more understandable to the learners, but it neither addresses the fundamental cultural differences between German language students in the twenty-first century and East and West Germans in 1989 nor does it help learners develop the critical awareness and historical consciousness that the Report by the MLA AdHoc Committee on Foreign Languages advocated in 2007.

The Committee's report[1] laments the current "language deficit" in the United States and calls for not only a reconceptualization of the language / literature divide but also asks educators to produce "educated speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence" (3), a conceptualization that transcends the usual attempt to reproduce a native speaker, whoever or wherever that may be. A transculturally competent speaker must have the ability to reflect on her/his own culture and that of others, to "comprehend and analyze" the cultural narratives that surface in the target language, and "have a solid command as well as an analytic knowledge of specific

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[1] See Johnson and Kelly Hall (2007), Byrnes (2008), Wellmon (2008) for more on the MLA's report.

metaphors and key terms that inform culture" (4). A translingually competent speaker must be proficient enough to be able to converse with "educated native speakers on a level that allows both linguistic exchanges and metalinguistic exchanges" (4) and to "operate between languages" (3). Ultimately, the MLA's idealization of a language learner is built on a platform of intersubjectivity, linking the individual subject to subjects in other communities with other values and histories. And it is of these values and histories that students must become critically aware.

In this paper, I explore two ways of accessing and critiquing cultural narratives in foreign language study: political humor and conceptual blending. The term 'cultural narrative' refers to the coherent and systematic way in which members of a national community make sense of their 'culture'. According to the MLA Report, a cultural narrative includes "cultural and literary traditions, cognitive structures, and historical knowledge"; it gives meaning not only to "events, texts, buildings, artworks, cuisines, and many other artifacts, but also to language itself" (2). The MLA Report defines "transcultural understanding as the ability to comprehend and analyze the cultural narratives that appear in every kind of expressive form – from essays, fiction, poetry, drama, journalism, humor, advertising, political rhetoric and legal documents to performance, visual forms, and music" (4). Cultural narratives, however, are not unitary. They are contested sites of negotiation and power struggles among the dominant and minority voices. In the case of German cultural narratives, by using political humor specifically relating to the fall of the Berlin Wall and German unification, students will develop a sensitivity to and awareness of the different cultural assumptions in Germany beginning in 1989. After a brief discussion of conceptual blending theory and its application to humor study, this paper will use an excerpt from Thomas Brussig's *Helden wie wir* and a 1990 political cartoon from Cleo-Petra Kurze as examples to show how political humor can unpack and illuminate complex, blended narratives that infuse everyday German expressions and ways of making meaning.[2] It will then offer suggestions for using conceptual blending to analyze cultural narratives in the classroom.

I. What is Conceptual Blending?

Before students can make sense of these narratives, they must first understand the cognitive dimensions of how humans make meaning. For example, how do we understand overarching categories such as "German?" And how do we create these categories in the first place? In their (2002) book *The Way We Think*, Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner explain the notion of conceptual blending, or conceptual integration, as "finding correspondences that look as if they are objectively there [which requires] the construction of new imaginative meaning that is indisputably not 'there'" (20). From a western perspective, a typical "German" before 1989 generally referred to someone from the Federal Republic of Germany, or West Germany, while, from an eastern bloc perspective, a typical "German" generally referred to someone from the German Democratic Republic, or East Germany. But after 1990, someone who came from either the German Democratic Republic (old domain) or the Federal Republic of Germany (old domain) was a "German" (new meaning). The terminology remains the same but its meaning changes: only part of the old domains mapped onto the new ones, thus creating

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[2] Parts of this paper were adapted from the author's unpublished dissertation (Howell 2004).

a new mental space. When we say "German" now, we are unconsciously "running" the blend – automatically considering the old information and integrating it into the new to create new meaning, new spaces. These mental spaces, "constructed as we think and talk for purposes of local understanding and action"[3] (e.g. participating in a marriage ceremony in the U.S.), are linked to our long term culturally specific schematic knowledge (the bride walks down the aisle in a church to meet the expectant groom) as well as our long term specific knowledge (the first time one attends a wedding ceremony in India, for example, where the customs are different). These spaces can be dynamic and temporary, although some are somewhat static, such as one's understanding of the word "ring" (which can refer to a wedding ring, a circus ring, or a boxing ring). Regardless of their status, each space contributes to a vast and complex network of spaces, interconnecting and projecting themselves to re-categorize earlier information and map, sometimes selectively, the new information onto the old domain, such as was seen with the post-1989 "German" example.[4] These mappings form the basis of conceptual blending, which Fauconnier and Turner (1999) describe as being intrinsically connected to our everyday world and occurring so rapidly that we are often unaware that our minds are making such connections. In cross-space mapping (see Figure 1[5]), input space 1 and input space 2 share some information, or rather it is mapped across the spaces. The generic space "reflects some common, usually more abstract, structure and organization shared by the inputs and defines the core cross-space mapping between them" (Fauconnier 1997:149). The two input spaces then project select information to the blended space. The entire structure thus becomes an emergent structure, which conveys new meaning (Fauconnier 1997).
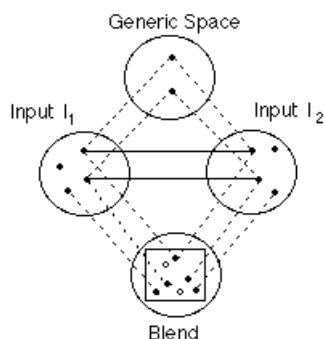

Figure 1

Conceptual blending and humor is a growing field of research (see Coulson 2001 and 2005, Howell 2007, Howell forthcoming, and Kihara 2005). Conceptual blending allows the researcher to identify the incongruous stimulus in humor from a sociolinguistic perspective, as opposed to merely studying the content. For example, in Fig.1, the phrase, *BeeRDigung der DDR* ("burial of the GDR," or East Germany, with the three capitalized letters in *BeeRDigung* spelling the initials of its western counterpart, "Bundesrepublik Deutschland" or BRD, the Federal Republic of Germany), is a good example of a humorous blend; it is also compelling evidence of Eastern Germans'

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[3] Fauconnier and Turner's work on conceptual blending (2002:40) is based in part on Fauconnier (1985).
[4] Fauconnier (1997) 9.
[5] Fauconnier 1997:151 and Fauconnier and Turner (1999).

perceptions regarding reunification and an interesting study in lexical creativity.[6] Indeed, the humor arises out of the incongruity between the associations of DDR / BRD and those of unification – language play as subversive and distortive, a prevalent cultural narrative encapsulated in three capitalized letters.
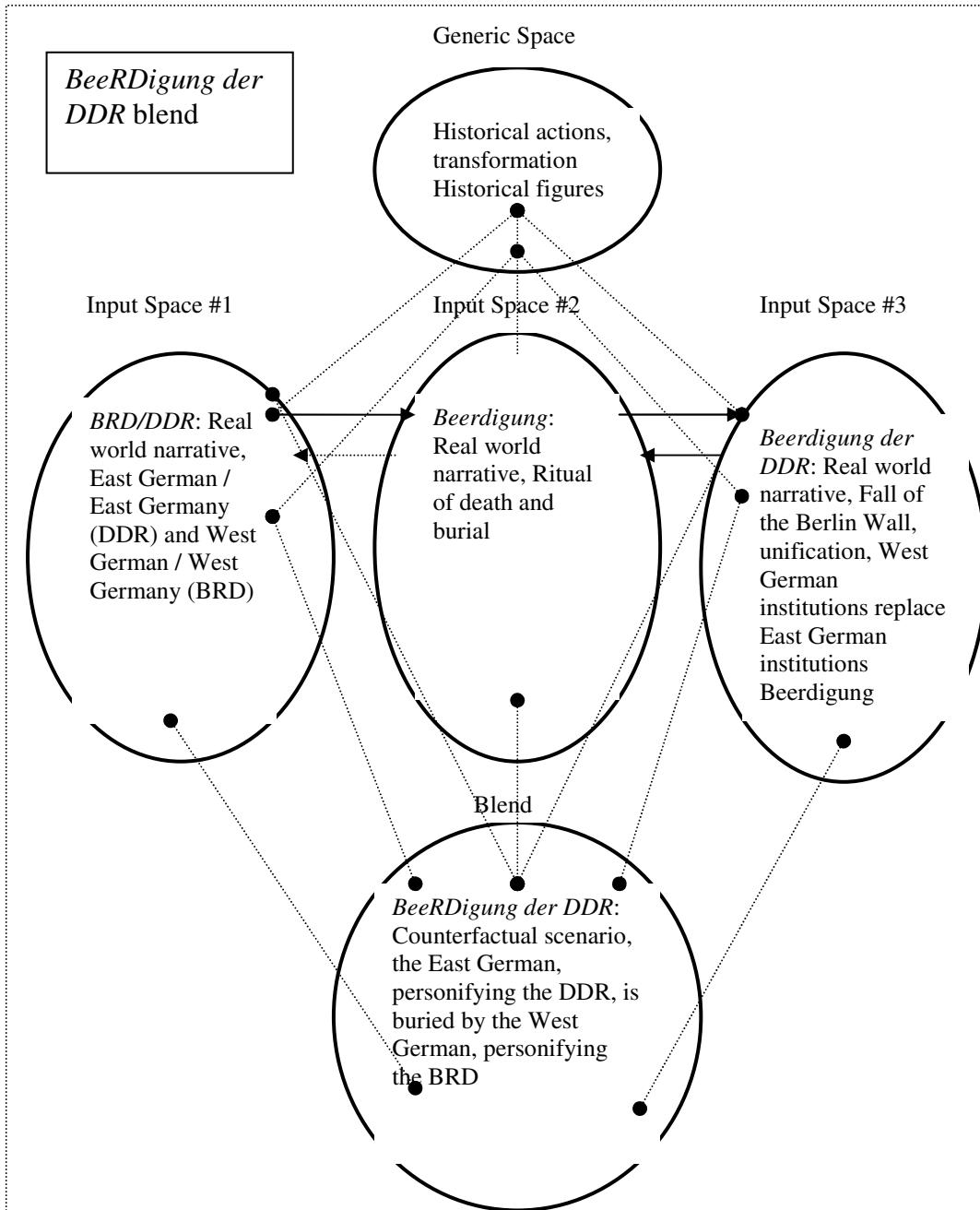

Figure 2

[6] I encountered this phrase in a student newspaper in Weimar, 1995.

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German/East Germany (DDR), and West German/West Germany (BRD). Input Space 2 involves the ritual of death and burial (autopsy of the body, determined cause of death, preparation of the body, the funeral ceremony, and the burial). The fall of the Berlin Wall and the unification process, during which West German institutions replaced (buried) East German ones inhabit Input Space 3. The three spaces share certain structural and abstract information: historical actions, the process of transformation. All three input spaces are real world entities that, only when combined, create a counterfactual world in which one country is buried by another. In the new space, the East German / DDR has been buried by the West German / BRD, an act that runs counter to the idea held by many American students and western Germans alike that DDR citizens toppled the government through peaceful protest and that still lingers and simmers in the national consciousness. In this space, the West German / BRD is solely responsible for the loss of the East German's / DDR's customs and cultures, as though none of its citizens ever expressed the desire to break free from them themselves. Blending the collapse of the DDR with death and burial - and all of its morbid connotations – is a brilliant juxtaposition of conceptual spaces, resulting in a blend that expresses the mourning of a nation (*Ostalgie*) that took place after the luster of unification wore away. This short satirical phrase expresses the incongruities between the fantasies of uniting two German nations and the subsequently harsh realities of unification.

Bringing conceptual blending and cultural narratives together in the foreign language classroom enables the instructor to implement the MLA's more integrative approach to language learning. By unpacking the blended spaces that make the phrase *BeeRDigung der DDR* possible, for example, the students can begin to understand the metaphors and cultural narratives that infuse discussions of what it means to be German in this particular time and space. Furthermore, by illuminating the enduring,[7] negotiated stereotypes of western Germans and eastern Germans, these spaces enrich classroom discourse in ways that a static textbook commentary on German culture cannot. Using these more complex texts, students and instructor can explore questions of identity construction, historical and cultural narratives, as well as the cognitive dimensions of making meaning.

II. Conceptual blending in a fictional narrative

After the German-German border collapsed in 1989, eastern German humorists used their medium to help construct a discursive eastern German identity. The humor had a strong social corrective element to it, which at times tried to correct western German attitudes toward eastern Germans, but other times, directed its message toward eastern Germans themselves, assuming what Bergson (1911) noted as society's role in holding an individual to a certain social standard: "[society] is confronted with something [i.e. difference] that makes it uneasy, but only as a symptom – scarcely a threat, at the very most a gesture. A gesture, therefore, will be its reply. Laughter must be something of this kind, a sort of social gesture. By the fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity" (73). Bergson adds that "for exaggeration to be comic, it must not appear as an aim, but rather a means that the artist is using in order to make manifest to our eyes

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[7] See for example the controversy surrounding a Saxon woman who went to court to protest what she felt was ethnic discrimination for being labelled an "Ossi" ("Im Ossi Nichts Neues").

the distortions which he sees in embryo" (77). In the case of unification, humorists sought to restrain the baser elements of greed, hypocrisy, and delusion inspired by the new opportunities in eastern Germany; by greatly exaggerating the conflicts eastern Germans and western Germans encountered as they got to know each other after forty years of separation, the result is a satirical perspective on the realities of unification. Brussig's distorted opening of the border scene in *Helden wie wir* and Cleo-Petra Kurze's political cartoon thematizing the injustices of unification in *Eulenspiegel* complicate and question the folkloric narratives that arose from the fall of the Berlin Wall and unification.

The jubilation of unification swept the unpleasant details of life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) under the proverbial rug, much as the jubilation of the anniversary of unification is now highlighting the positive aspects of what has grown together, while relegating the negative to the shadows. Thomas Brussig rejected the popular understanding that the GDR people – with their protests and collective anger – had brought down the Wall; indeed, his (1995) picaresque novel, *Helden wie wir* (*Heroes like us*), is a denunciation of what he considers revisionist history. Brussig notes that *Helden* is "not a book in which the causes and events of unification are described. This is a book that I wrote out of anger and disappointment about our collective refusal to come to terms with the past" (my transl.)[8] Eastern German psychoanalyst Hans-Joachim Maaz (1990/1991) confirms the incongruity of the People-as- Revolutionaries narrative: "there was a widely disseminated myth in the GDR: one could not change anything; protest was futile; one just had to play along and try to make the best out of the situation" (my transl., 94).[9] Brussig and Maaz are correct to a certain degree as there were other contributing factors the night the borders opened, most important of which being the East German government's bungled press release, which gave the impression that the borders would be opened and citizens suddenly free to travel. These competing narratives ultimately wove their way into the background reality of unification, with one (the People-as-Revolutionaries narrative) being more inspiring and, thus, more prominent.

Brussig offers an alternate theory on the fall of the Wall. The book follows a young man named Klaus Uhltzscht from birth in the late 1960s until the fall of the Berlin Wall through a series of taped interviews with a *New York Times* reporter. Against a backdrop of perverse sexual exploration, Klaus becomes a secret police agent, struggling to understand the register of bureaucracy and the lexical adventures of the secret police. His ultimate gift to the GDR is to give most of his blood to an ailing Erich Honecker in a secret police experiment. As a result of this experiment, Klaus becomes an abnormally well-endowed male. On the night of November 9th, 1989, Klaus is on his way to exact revenge on a former love interest who had mocked him for his previously small appendage when he encounters protesters at the Bornholmer Street border (the first border to be opened). As the protesters futilely attempt to persuade the guards to open the border, Klaus decides to help them with their cause. He flashes the guards, who are so shocked at his penis size that they open the gates and let everyone through without

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[8] "ist ja auch kein Wenderoman, in dem Ursachen und Verlauf der Wende beschrieben werden. Das ist ein Buch, das ich aus Wut und Enttäuschung über die nicht stattgefundene Vergangenheitsbewältigung geschrieben habe," as quoted in Neubauer and Schulze (1998).
[9] "Es gab einen weit verbreiteten Mythos in der DDR: Man könne doch nichts ändern, es habe alles keinen Zweck, man müsse eben mitmachen und das Beste daraus zu machen versuchen."

incident. No one else sees this act; therefore, no one knows that it was his penis that opened the borders. Klaus, the modern day fool and unconscious comic figure, is the unsung hero of this quiet revolution.

In order to make sense of the blend in Brussig's version of events [see Figure 3, adapted from Howell (2007)], the reader of this text must be able to compress the fictional world of the text with the real world events of that night to create a world in which Klaus' penis is the catalyst that opens the border. In this virtual, counterfactual world, Klaus is able to manipulate the actors and conditions in the real world spaces.
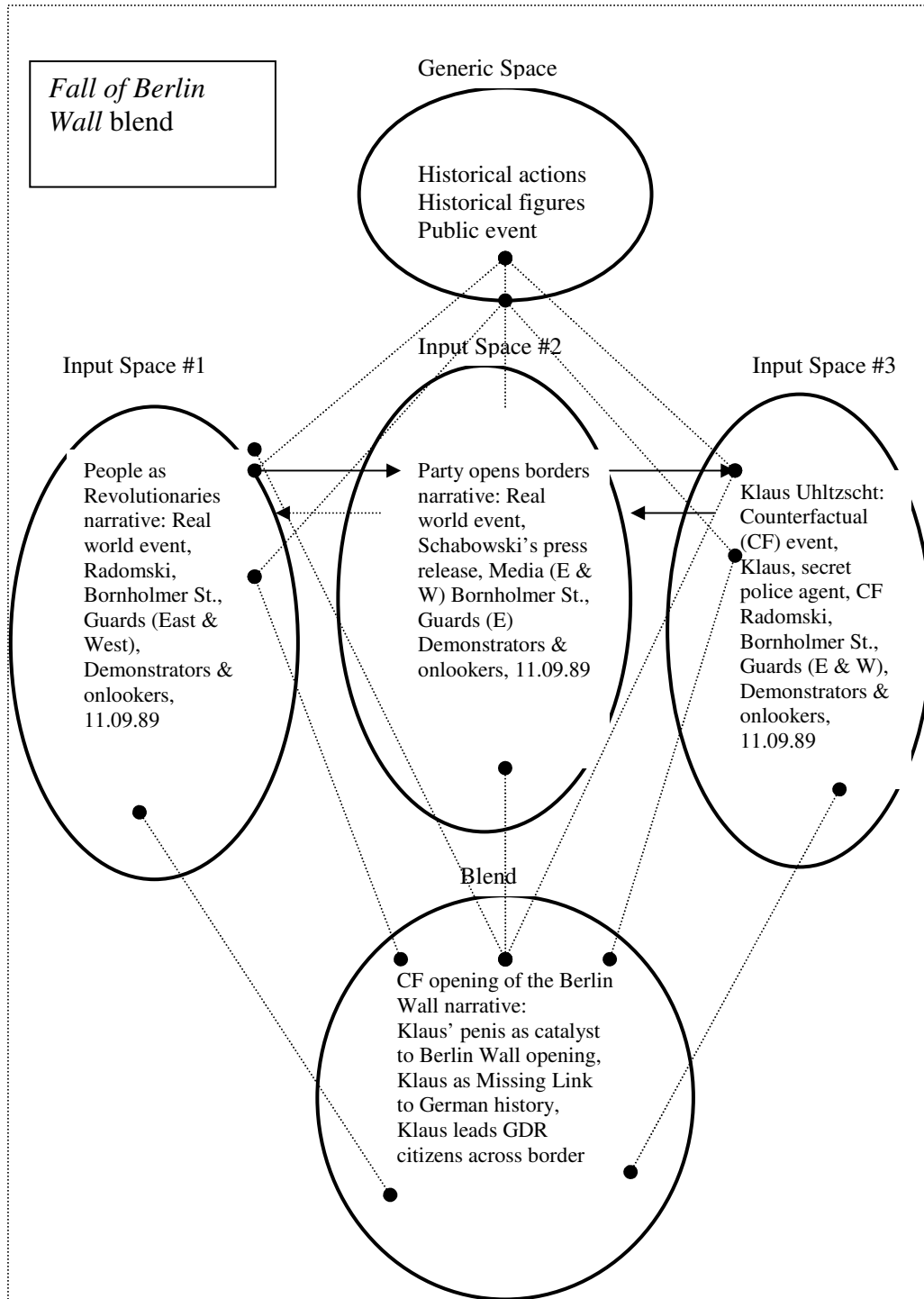
Fall of Berlin
Wall blend

Generic Space

Historical actions
Historical figures
Public event

Input Space #1

People as
Revolutionaries
narrative: Real
world event,
Radomski,
Bornholmer St.,
Guards (East &
West),
Demonstrators &
onlookers,
11.09.89

Input Space #2

Party opens borders
narrative: Real
world event,
Schabowski's press
release, Media (E &
W) Bornholmer St.,
Guards (E)
Demonstrators &
onlookers, 11.09.89

Input Space #3

Klaus Uhltzscht:
Counterfactual
(CF) event,
Klaus, secret
police agent, CF
Radomski,
Bornholmer St.,
Guards (E & W),
Demonstrators &
onlookers,
11.09.89

Blend

CF opening of the Berlin
Wall narrative:
Klaus' penis as catalyst
to Berlin Wall opening,
Klaus as Missing Link
to German history,
Klaus leads GDR
citizens across border

Figure 3

In Input Space 1, there is the real world narrative with the demonstrators (represented by Aram Radomski, a leader in the GDR's opposition movement), the onlookers, the guards, the location, and the time frame. In Input Space 2, there is the real world narrative with the Government representatives (represented by Günter

Schabowski and his confusing statement about the borders being opened), the location, the guards, the demonstrators and onlookers, and the time frame. Klaus and his chemically enlarged penis fill Input Space 3 along with the fictionalized guards, demonstrators, onlookers, a fictional version of Aram Radomski, the location, and the time frame. Brussig narrates the events as they unfold, interweaving the fictional and the real world seamlessly to give the appearance of legitimacy.

In the final blend, Klaus is able to do what Radomski and the other demonstrators (or the masses as he terms them) cannot accomplish. He becomes the "Missing Link" of German history, an important figure who is simultaneously a GDR citizen, a socially perverse outcast, and a secret police agent. It is an impossible compression of events and people that is made plausible by the mental blending of reality and fantasy. But what is the consequence of this critical reading of history? The blend, with its emergent meaning, compels the reader to rethink the dominant *People-as-Revolutionaries* narrative. Through the impossibility of Klaus' version of events, the reader must question the plausibility of the folkloric popular version as being the sole impetus for the fall of the Berlin Wall. The satirical nature of the narrative allows Brussig, channeling through Klaus the Fool, to be critical of a nearly sacred historical event in German history without repercussion. For the student of German, such a text exposes cultural narratives, such as Brussig's critique of the naïve, passive East German, that are not generally included in a textbook representation of unification.

III. Conceptual blending in a political cartoon

Brussig's critique of GDR citizens as weak and pitiful echoes similar sentiments from Cleo-Petra Kurze's (1990) political cartoon on unification. Political cartoons can reduce volumes of information to the most essential message; and they often do this in a clever and humorous manner. With the West German institutional and cultural colonization of

Cleo-Petra Kurze

Image 1

East Germany as a backdrop (Cooke 2005, Howell forthcoming), Kurze's cartoon (see Image 1) offers a pithy, sharp commentary on unification, in which German unification, or V*ereinigung*, East and West Germany, and the rituals of marriage are blended together. The term "Vereinigung" offers a range of meanings to denote a union: from the more negative annexation and incorporation to the more positive union and unification. Kurze plays upon these lexical possibilities. Wearing a sash of *Schwarz, Rot, Gold* (the colors of the German flat: black, red, gold), a heavy set, dapper, and smug-looking older West German man (the groom), with his right foot forward, left hand in pocket and right hand in his breast pocket, who looks as though he had stepped out of the 1940s (top hat, pocket watch, bow tie) standing next to and leering at a very thin bride. She is wearing an eye patch, a cast on her right leg, a wreath of wheat, a patched, soiled dress and veil. She is leaning on the hammer and sickle of the GDR and flanked by three poor looking young children, who are all looking up at him hopefully. This is the Hillbillies meeting Beverly

Hills, poverty meeting prosperity, East meeting West. One could speculate that, had there been speech bubbles above their heads, the West German man would have spoken eloquently about the impending union, while the woman's response would have made her sound uneducated, most likely written in pidgin German.

The incongruity of such a union is striking, and, yet, the German media's feminization of the GDR[10] allows readers to run the blend of the German Democratic Republic as bride and Federal Republic of Germany as groom in this cartoon. The GDR was often cast as a woman – poor, with bastard children, lame, half-blind, homely, thin and dressed in rags, while the FRG was generally a man – rich, fat, well-dressed, with a lascivious edge. The cartoon thus makes for a fascinating and complex blend (see Figure 4) between the wedding ritual, a corporate takeover, and the process of unification.

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[10] See Morrison's "The Feminization of the German Democratic Republic in Political Cartoons 1989-90" for more on media portrayals of the GDR as female and FRG as male. In addition to these outright female/male representations, caricatures also depicted the GDR as thin and the FRG as overweight.
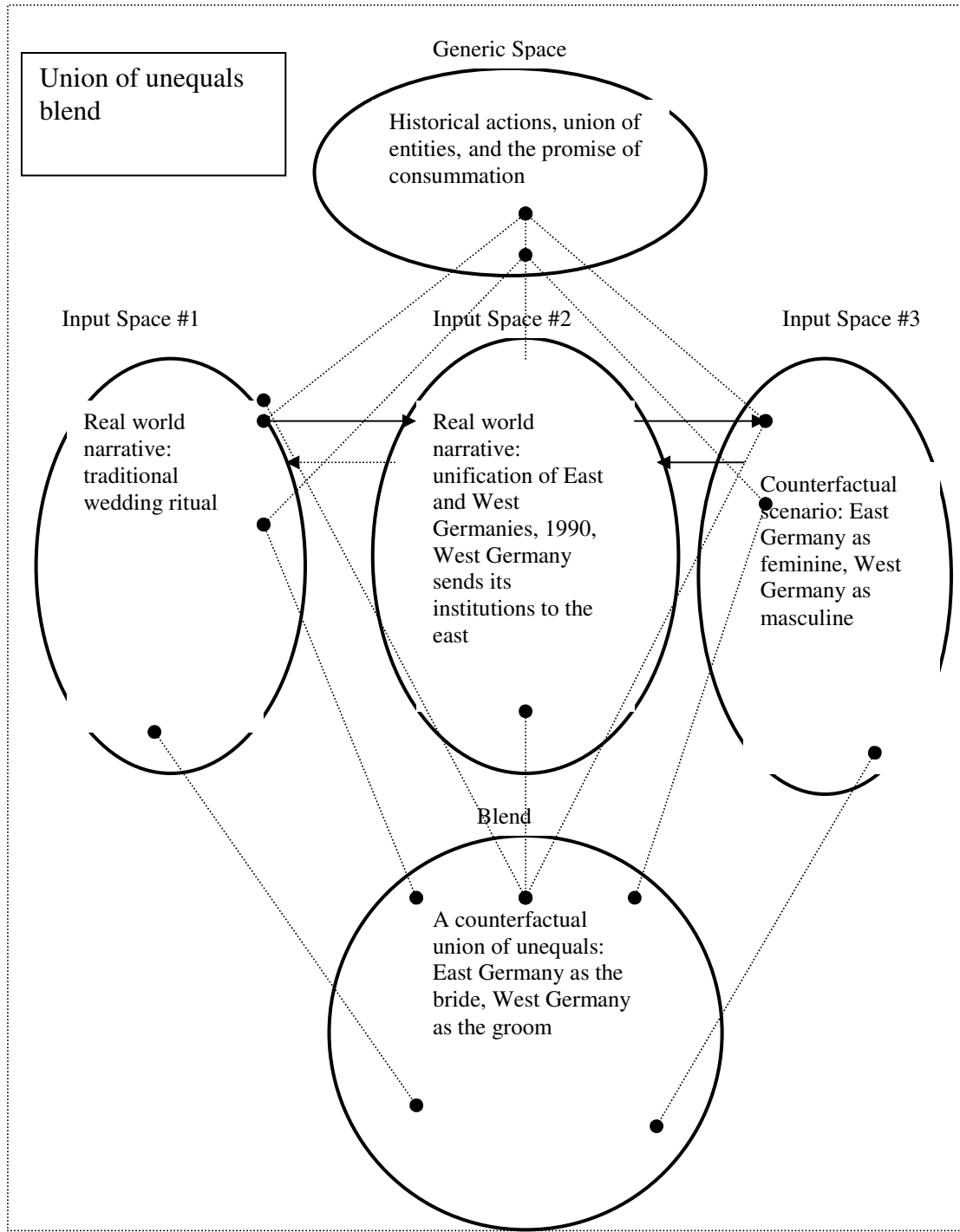
Union of unequals
blend

Generic Space

Historical actions, union of
entities, and the promise of
consummation

Input Space #1

Real world
narrative:
traditional
wedding ritual

Input Space #2

Real world
narrative:
unification of East
and West
Germanies, 1990,
West Germany
sends its
institutions to the
east

Input Space #3

Counterfactual
scenario: East
Germany as
feminine, West
Germany as
masculine

Blend

A counterfactual
union of unequals:
East Germany as the
bride, West Germany
as the groom

Figure 4

In the traditional wedding ritual space (Input Space 1), there is the union of man and woman, a childless couple, the woman dressed in veil and white dress, the man in top hat and tails, and the promise of consummation (foreshadowed by the leering look in the groom's eyes directed at the woman's sagging bust line). The man and woman are ready to join their financial interests, with one usually earning more than the other. In the

unification space (Input Space 2), there is the merging of the GDR into the existing FRG. Coming into this union, the FRG is prosperous, western, dominant and capitalistic, while the GDR is a debtor nation, in desperate need of massive capital investment, and in an inferior bargaining position. But the reader must make more connections before being able to interpret the cartoon. In Input Space 3, there is the personification of both countries as female (GDR) and male (FRG). The blend's generic space features historical actions, a union of two separate entities, and the promise of consummation. In the emergent blend, then, one sees a union of unequals. The FRG groom is powerful and robust, while the GDR bride is weak and sickly, much as Thomas Brussig depicted GDR citizens before and after the Berlin Wall fell.

The question is: what does the GDR, as the ailing, poor woman, have to offer the FRG, as the rich, well-dressed man? The lust in the groom's eyes implies an attraction to the bride's assets – in other words, the GDR's unexplored capital in the form of new markets and consumers for western goods. In the collective memory of unification, the "Ossis," or eastern Germans, are seen as pitiable and – to a certain degree – they were. But the East German government also actively sought unification, once the borders collapsed, and this cartoon, in the representation of the willing (and hopeful) bride, reminds us of that fact. Through the blend, the reader also understands Kurze's critique of unification: that the former GDR and FRG were exploiting each other economically but that the FRG was clearly in a superior bargaining position. This critique invokes the slogan *ohne eins zu eins wird nie eins* (without 1:1, we will never be one) from the currency exchange debate in 1990, which Kurze appears to mock. The illusion of 1:1 in the unification process, much like the optimistic slogan "Wir sind *ein* Volk" (we are *one* people), ultimately gave way to a reality that was much less heroic. Bringing such alternate realities into discussions of unification narratives contextualizes and complicates the typical learner's understanding of what it means to be German.

IV. Classroom implications

Kurze's cartoon and Brussig's *Helden wie wir* represent cultural narratives that are deeply embedded in contemporary German culture. Using conceptual blending to analyze these texts allows the instructor to explore and explicate these narrative threads and enables the students to reach a deeper understanding of German culture in a post-Wall context. For being able to separate the various input spaces and to show what they have in common serves as a rich platform upon which to discuss not only cultural phenomena in Germany but also the students' own background reality (can they imagine an American narrative other than the usual First Thanksgiving narrative or the usual American Civil War narrative?), thereby contributing to the students' ability "to comprehend speakers of the target language as members of foreign societies and to grasp themselves as Americans – that is, as members of a society that is foreign to others" (MLA 4). Political humor captures all the inconsistencies of national narratives in a form that is often more readily available to learners than an academic text.

When considering using political humor in the classroom, the instructor must first evaluate the text to ensure its relevance to the lesson at hand, its appropriateness, and its potential interest level for students [Stark (2003), Newkirk and McClure (1992), Pershey (1997), Tower (1998), and Torok et al (2004)]. The instructor may use the humorous text as the primary source, with more historically accurate texts as

supplements. This offers the advantage of approaching an event more critically, without a significant, culturally imposed framework already in place. (Brussig's *Helden wie Wir* would be an interesting example of such an approach to an historical narrative.) Using the humorous text as a companion piece, on the other hand, allows the instructor to complicate official narratives to which s/he has already exposed students, for humor distorts and subverts what we think of as Truth. These distortions and subversions are inseparable from the background reality that supports and sustains a language. They become givens but can be made visible through humor and a critical analysis of that humor.

A conceptual blending analysis of humorous texts, such as those discussed in this paper, need not be highly technical in order to be effective in the classroom. A sample lesson for the Kurze caricature, for example, could center around the term *Vereinigung*, since that is such an important word in German cultural history. The following is a suggested list of activities:

- What words do the students associate with *Vereinigung*? How much of that is conditioned by and grounded in their own cultural backgrounds? Separate out words and phrases that would be more typical of speakers from Germany. A (2008) German article reports on a survey of Germans asking for their associations with the term *Vereinigung*: most popular responses were freedom to travel, reunion of families, and higher unemployment.[11] A typical American student's response would almost certainly differ from these.
- Discuss the timeline of events surrounding unification. Include discussion of such commonly heard phrases as *Rausch* (the euphoria of reunification), *Wir sind EIN Volk* (we are one people), and *BeeRDigung der DDR*.
- Present Kurze's caricature. There is neither title nor commentary; the image speaks for itself. What are the students' first impressions? Solicit their interpretations.
- Split the class into two groups: one group analyzes the groom and the other studies the bride. What information can they collect about each character? What do they learn? What do the characters symbolize? Where is the humor in the image?
- Using German, categorize the students' findings into input space threads on the board. Among other possibilities, there will be a unification space, a wedding space, and a country as person space.
- How do all these spaces contribute to the image of unification that Kurze is presenting? What blend are they helping to construct? How does her depiction of *Vereinigung* distort and subvert the folkloric *Wir sind EIN Volk* narrative from 1990? How does it complicate the concept of *Vereinigung*?
- Going a step further, briefly discuss conditions in eastern and western Germany today: Does her representation find echoes in the contemporary cultural climate?

Taken together, such an analysis is a sophisticated exploration of the *Vereinigung* narrative and an opportunity for developing deep transcultural knowledge. Students may

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[11] "Deutsche haben die Mauer noch in den Köpfen." (08.13.2008) *Berliner Morgenpost*.

reconceptualize some of the givens in their own sociocultural and sociolinguistic understanding, placing themselves between both cultures and languages and forming a sort of translingual identity for themselves. The lesson plan's skeleton can also be adapted to other texts and other foreign languages: An instructor of French could adapt the lesson plan to a study of the phrase *liberté, egalité, fraternité* – a phrase that serves as a background ideal in French culture (see Kramsch 2003) and "connote[s] cultural dimensions that extend well beyond [its] immediate translation" (MLA, 2) and ESL teachers could use American cultural narratives surrounding the Puritans to examine the ideological underpinnings of American culture (see Fischer 1989 and Bunker 2010). Illuminating these dimensions is a task for which the foreign language instructor is well-suited.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the strengths of foreign language instructors is crucial to the future of foreign language departments. In this era of curriculum internationalization, with its apparent rejection of foreign language study and adoption of global perspectives-type courses, foreign language teachers must demonstrate that there can be no understanding of another culture without a proper understanding of the language that gives voice to it [Warner (in progress)]. Learners must be able to "operate between the languages" and stand outside of themselves if they are to understand other perspectives. Having U.S. foreign language students engage with cultural narratives from a conceptual blending perspective forces them to engage critically not only with the narratives inspiring and subverting the target language but also with the narratives of their own cultures. They will then be able to understand language, culture, and identity as organic structures that are rooted in historical moments but always evolving. The MLA report on foreign languages rightfully stresses the importance of critical awareness – of other cultural frameworks, other ways of making meaning, and of the interconnected networks of meaning behind our own identities. Conceptual blending and political humor make this awareness possible, for both instructor and learner, for, ultimately, answering the question "What is German?" (or French or Chinese) should not be merely a discussion about static representations of German culture and the words that give voice to it – firmly rooted and unchanging like items on a list to be memorized, but rather a critical analysis of the spaces that inspire and sustain that language.

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