Conceptual blending in Supyire healing and protection spells

Robert Carlson
Africa International University

This paper examines Supyire (Senufo, Gur, Niger-Congo) spells (*kulushî*) which accompany healing (*wempyii*) and protecting (*sárágá*) rituals performed by ordinary people (as opposed to herbalist specialists). As in many African cultures (cf. for example Azande spells, described in Evans-Pritchard 1937: 450ff), Supyire spells use ordinary language. They do not contain archaic or incomprehensible words or out-of-the-ordinary syntax, nor is the exact wording important.

Like Sørensen (2007), this paper analyses the rituals using conceptual blending theory, though the approach differs in some respects from Sørensen's. For example, Sørensen (p. 74ff) claims that all magic rituals involve the blending of "profane" and "sacred" input spaces, but the latter is not a useful category in the rituals examined here. In fact, the category of "magic" is not a useful category for understanding insiders' conceptualizations of the activities investigated here.

Supyire medicine, like much folk medicine, is analogical. As one man explained, *Wyɛ̀re ɲɛ yasumaga*. 'Medicine is an analogical thing (lit. a thing measured (against something else)).' The success of the healing or protection depends at least to some extent on the aptness of the analogy between the *materia* or the manipulation of the *materia*, and the thing or situation to be altered. The spells accompanying healing and protection rites normally mention the analogy involved. The following (translated literally), uttered while pouring cold water on live coals in the presence of an ill person, is typical:

> These coals are hot.
> This cold water is cold.
> The heat of these coals, the cold water will remove it.
> Like the cold water has removed the heat from these coals,
> may the heat (=disease) go out of [patient's name]'s body.

The healing depends on bringing together a domain of directly manipulable items (cold water and live coals) and a domain in which direct manipulation is impossible (removing a disease from a patient). Change in the "effecting" (manipulable) domain is meant to effect a change in the non-manipulable but analogous "affected" domain, and this is referred to explicitly in the spell.

More interesting, as well as more common, are spells which, in addition to prompting for the construction of the effecting and affected mental spaces, explicitly mention in parallel a counterfactual (or extremely unlikely) space and the actual, but unwanted, situation in a fourth space. Following is a typical example, uttered while inserting a small object representing a person who has been losing weight into an incision made in a baobab tree:

> If the baobab has become thin,
> may [name] become thin.
> The baobab has not become thin,
> may [name] not become thin.

Such spells may be analysed as prompting a network of four spaces, arranged in two parallel pairs: a counterfactual situation in the effecting domain (the baobab has become thin) is linked conditionally to an actual but undesirable situation in the affected domain (the person being treated has in fact become thin). This parallels a factual statement in the effecting domain (the baobab has not become thin) which is linked to an unreal but desired situation in the affected domain (may the patient not grow thin). Although not explicitly encoded, an interpretation of contrast emerges from this network.

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1937. *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Sørensen, Jesper. 2007. *A cognitive theory of magic*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.