



## Double-Scope Conceptual Blending in Iranian Economic Cartoons

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### ABSTRACT

Economic press cartoons constitute a prominent multimodal genre for representing and critiquing economic realities in the public sphere. Drawing on Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) theory of conceptual blending, this study aims to examine the cognitive mechanisms underlying meaning construction and visual humor in Iranian economic press cartoons. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the research analyzed a corpus of 300 cartoons selected through random sampling, among which 70 cartoons were identified as containing conceptual blending structures. In the quantitative phase, the types of blends were classified, while the qualitative phase focused on an in-depth analysis of three representative economic cartoons using the four-space blending model. The findings revealed that both single-scope and double-scope blends were employed; however, double-scope blends played a more significant role in producing critical meanings and representing economic instability. In addition, vital relations—particularly causality, identity, role, and power—were central to organizing the blended space and guiding interpretation. Discursively, the theme of currency rate increase showed the highest frequency, reflecting its symbolic role as a marker of economic insecurity in everyday experience. Overall, the study demonstrates the analytical value of conceptual blending for understanding visual humor and economic critique in press cartoons.

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## **1. Introduction**

Press cartoons, as a prominent form of visual discourse, play a crucial role in representing, interpreting, and critically engaging with social and economic issues (Conners, 2005; Medhurst & DeSousa, 1981). Through the strategic use of humor, exaggeration, and visual condensation, these cartoons communicate complex and abstract ideas through images that appear simple but are in fact highly layered and cognitively rich (El Refaie, 2009, pp. 181–183; Forceville, 2005; Morreall, 2009). Economic press cartoons serve as an effective medium for articulating social dissatisfaction and conveying indirect yet powerful criticism, particularly in contexts where economic challenges such as inflation, rising prices, declining purchasing power, and currency fluctuations shape everyday life (Conners, 2005; El Refaie, 2009).

Despite their importance, much of the existing research has examined press cartoons primarily from semiotic, critical discourse, and media studies perspectives, with comparatively limited attention to the cognitive mechanisms underlying meaning construction and humor (Edwards, 1997; El Refaie, 2009; Forceville, 2005). In this regard, Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT) provides a cognitively grounded framework for explaining how meanings emerge in such visual texts through the integration of multiple mental spaces (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, pp. 48–50). Emergent meanings cannot be reduced to any single input space; instead, they arise from selective projection and integration processes (Coulson, 2001, pp. 163–165).

Economic press cartoons constitute a particularly suitable domain for the application of conceptual blending, as abstract economic concepts are frequently represented through their integration with more concrete, experiential domains such as the body, violence, illness, or material objects (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). Such cross-domain integrations facilitate the comprehension of complex phenomena while simultaneously intensifying humor and critical force (El Refaie, 2009; Forceville, 2005). Consequently, a cognitive approach offers deeper insight into how economic discourse is visually constructed and experienced within specific socio-cultural contexts, such as that of Iranian society (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009; Kövecses, 2010, p. 23). Accordingly, this study aims to analyze Iranian economic press cartoons through the framework of Conceptual Blending Theory, with a focus on the cognitive mechanisms underlying the construction of humor and critical meaning. To this end, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What types of conceptual blending, single-scope vs. double-scope, are primarily used in Iranian economic cartoons?
2. How do vital relations contribute to emergent meaning and critique?
3. What economic themes dominate, and why?

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: first, previous research related to press cartoons and conceptual blending is reviewed. Next, the theoretical framework of the study is presented, with a detailed explanation of the key concepts of conceptual blending, mental spaces, and blending networks. The subsequent section outlines the data collection procedures and the criteria used for sample selection. In the fourth section, which focuses on data analysis, the mechanisms of conceptual blending in the economic genre of press cartoons are examined. The next section discusses the findings. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the theoretical and practical contributions of the study.

## **2. Literature Review**

The study of editorial cartoons as multimodal texts has attracted increasing scholarly attention since the late twentieth century, particularly within the fields of semiotics, discourse analysis, and cognitive linguistics. One of the most influential theoretical frameworks for

analyzing meaning construction in visual-verbal texts is the theory of Mental Spaces and Conceptual Blending, first systematically proposed by Fauconnier (1994). This theory was later further developed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002). It posits that meaning does not arise through simple one-to-one mappings between conceptual domains, but rather through dynamic and creative integration of multiple mental spaces.

Building on this framework, scholars such as Turner (2007) and Oakley (2009) emphasized the role of conceptual blending in meaning construction in literary and visual texts. They demonstrated that blended structures, particularly in creative genres, gave rise to emergent meanings that were not present in any of the input spaces alone. This perspective paved the way for applying conceptual blending theory to the analysis of humor and indirect forms of discourse. In humor studies, researchers such as Attardo (2001) and Veale (2012) highlighted the importance of cognitive mechanisms in humor comprehension. Although these studies primarily focused on incongruity-based theories of humor, subsequent research has suggested that conceptual blending provides a more comprehensive analytical tool for explaining humor in multimodal texts, including editorial cartoons.

Regarding editorial cartoons, studies by El Refaie (2003, 2009) examined metaphor and meaning-making in political cartoons, demonstrating how image and text interacted to activate complex conceptual networks. Similarly, Forceville (2008, 2017), focusing on pictorial and multimodal metaphors, emphasized the role of cultural and contextual knowledge in cartoon interpretation. However, much of this research has remained centered on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and has paid limited attention to the intricate mechanisms of conceptual blending.

In the domain of economic discourse, Charteris-Black (2004, 2011) showed that economic concepts were frequently conceptualized through metaphors of the body, illness, war, and natural disasters. While these studies successfully illuminated the metaphorical framing of economic phenomena, they largely overlooked the multi-domain integration and emergent meaning that were particularly salient in economic editorial cartoons.

Within Iranian scholarship, a number of studies have examined editorial cartoons primarily through semiotic and critical discourse analysis frameworks. For instance, Shafiei Kadkani (2009) emphasized the aesthetic and rhetorical functions of imagery in Persian literary and visual texts, highlighting how symbolic representation contributed to meaning-making in socio-cultural contexts. Similarly, Sojoudi (2012) adopted a semiotic approach to visual communication, demonstrating how signs and visual codes in media texts including cartoons, operated within culturally shared systems of meaning. While these studies provided valuable insights into symbolism, representation, and ideological encoding, they largely remained within descriptive and interpretive paradigms and did not address the underlying cognitive mechanisms through which meaning was constructed.

Furthermore, a limited number of cognitively oriented studies have explored figurative meaning in Persian visual discourse. For example, Rezaei et al. (2016) investigated conceptual metaphors in Persian media texts and showed how abstract domains were structured through more concrete experiential mappings. Likewise, Kazemi (2019) examined metaphorical patterns in visual representations and pointed to the role of embodied cognition in meaning construction. However, these studies were primarily grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory and tended to focus on static source-target mappings, without accounting for the dynamic, multi-space integration processes emphasized in Conceptual Blending Theory.

Despite these contributions, systematic analyses of economic cartoons within the framework of Conceptual Blending Theory remain scarce in Persian-language research. In particular, no previous study has applied the full four-space blending model to Iranian economic press cartoons. Furthermore, existing research has failed to systematically analyze the role of vital

relations, such as cause–effect, identity, time, and space, within this genre. Finally, there has been a lack of comparative examinations regarding different types of blends, such as single-scope versus double-scope networks, on a systematic or quantitative basis.

Overall, the literature review indicates that while editorial cartoons and economic discourse have each been studied independently, comprehensive research that explicitly investigates the cognitive mechanisms of conceptual blending in Iranian economic cartoons is still limited. The present study seeks to address this gap by employing the conceptual blending framework to analyze the types of blends used in economic cartoons, the vital relations they activate, and the emergent meanings they generate. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced cognitive understanding of how economic discourse is visually constructed and experienced within the Iranian socio-cultural context.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The aim of this section is to delineate the theoretical framework of the study by drawing on key approaches in cognitive linguistics, with particular emphasis on Conceptual Blending Theory. While Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Mental Spaces Theory (MST) provide essential foundations for understanding conceptual mapping and dynamic meaning construction, Conceptual Blending Theory offers a more comprehensive account of how complex and emergent meanings are generated through integration processes.

The emergence of cognitive linguistics in the late twentieth century marked a paradigm shift, viewing the human mind as an active constructor of meaning rather than a passive processor of information (Evans & Green, 2006, p. 48). Within this paradigm, Conceptual Blending Theory conceptualizes metaphor as a fundamental mechanism of thought through which abstract domains are structured in terms of more concrete experiential domains (Kövecses, 2010, p. 23; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5). Complementing this, Mental Spaces Theory explains how meaning is dynamically constructed through the activation of multiple mental spaces that are connected via cross-space mappings (Evans & Green, 2006, p. 400; Fauconnier, 1994).

Building upon these foundations, Conceptual Blending Theory elucidates how new and emergent meanings arise through the integration of multiple input spaces. The standard blending model consists of four mental spaces: two input spaces, a generic space that captures shared structure, and a blended space in which selected elements are projected and combined (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, pp. 40–44). Crucially, the blended space is not a simple combination of inputs; rather, it involves processes of selective projection, composition, completion, and elaboration, resulting in emergent structure that is not present in either input independently (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, p. 131).

A central aspect of Conceptual Blending Theory is the role of vital relations, such as cause–effect, identity, role, time, space, and power, which are compressed in the blending process to produce cognitively efficient and meaningful representations (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, pp. 92–95). These relations organize the blended space and guide inference, enabling complex and abstract domains to be understood in more immediate and experiential terms. Another key distinction concerns types of blending networks, particularly single-scope and double-scope blends. In single-scope networks, the organizing frame is derived primarily from one input space, whereas in double-scope networks, both inputs contribute competing structures, often resulting in higher degrees of incongruity, creativity, and humor (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, pp. 126–130).

In the analysis of press cartoons, these cognitive mechanisms are particularly significant. As a multimodal genre combining visual and linguistic elements, press cartoons rely on the interaction of distinct conceptual domains to produce humor, irony, and critique (El Refaie, 2009, pp. 181–183; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009). Humor, in this context, emerges from

the integration of incongruent conceptual structures and their resolution within the blended space (Coulson, 2001, pp. 163–165; Gibbs, 1994, p. 95). For instance, representing rising bread prices as a luxury commodity involves blending the domains of necessity and wealth, producing an emergent meaning that is both critical and humorous (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, p. 131).

To illustrate the explanatory power of Conceptual Blending Theory, the present study draws on a canonical example widely discussed in the literature, namely the expression “This surgeon is a butcher” (Coulson, 2001, pp. 166–168; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, pp. 58–60). This classical example allows for a clear presentation of the theory’s core mechanisms, independent of the empirical data analyzed in this study. This example constitutes a double-scope blending network that integrates two distinct conceptual domains: surgery and butchery. The first input space, “surgery,” includes elements such as a trained surgeon, a patient, surgical instruments, and the goal of healing, and is structured by precision, care, and professional responsibility. The second input space, “butchery,” involves a butcher, animal carcasses, cutting tools, and the goal of dismemberment, and is structured by force and lack of concern for the subject.

The generic space captures shared structure at a more abstract level, including an agent performing actions on a body using instruments. In the blended space, elements from both inputs are selectively projected and integrated, whereby the surgeon is conceptualized as a butcher, and the surgical act is interpreted as careless and destructive cutting. Furthermore, through cross-space mappings (e.g., surgeon/butcher, patient/carcass, surgery/dismemberment), and the compression of vital relations such as identity, role, and causality a novel emergent meaning arises. This emergent structure, namely that the surgeon is incompetent, unskilled, or harmful, cannot be derived from either input space independently; rather, it is a product of their integration (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, p. 131).

The example “This surgeon is a butcher” demonstrates how conceptual blending produces meaning through the interaction of incompatible frames and the creation of emergent structure. While Conceptual Metaphor Theory accounts for cross-domain mappings and Mental Spaces Theory explains the activation of conceptual structures, neither fully captures the emergence of such integrated meanings. Conceptual Blending Theory, by contrast, provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing how meaning arises through integration processes (Coulson, 2001; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). For this reason, the present study adopts Conceptual Blending Theory as its primary analytical framework, with particular emphasis on the four-space model, vital relations, and the distinction between single-scope and double-scope networks. The application of this framework to press cartoons will be presented in the section related to the findings.

#### **4. Method**

The present study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining descriptive quantitative analysis with qualitative cognitive analysis. The quantitative dimension of the study was descriptive and frequency-based, aiming to identify distributional patterns rather than to test statistical significance. Conceptual Blending Theory design enables the study not only to identify general patterns of conceptual blending in Iranian press cartoons but also to provide an in-depth examination of the cognitive mechanisms underlying meaning construction and humor production.

The corpus of the present study consisted of 300 Iranian press cartoons, which were collected through a stratified random sampling procedure from a range of sources, including Iranian news and analytical websites, covering the period from 2016 to 2024. To ensure consistency and analytical relevance, a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was applied during the data collection process. Only cartoons that addressed economic themes (e.g.,

inflation, currency fluctuations, unemployment, and cost of living) and were published in Persian-language media were included. From the corpus of economic cartoons identified in the earlier stages, three representative cartoons were selected for in-depth analysis. Due to space limitations, only three representative cartoons were analyzed in detail. Each cartoon was analyzed independently and accompanied by a schematic representation of the four-space blending network, enabling a transparent visualization of the cognitive processes involved. Cartoons that were purely decorative, unrelated to socio-economic issues, or duplicated across multiple platforms were excluded from the dataset. Both color and black-and-white cartoons were considered, as visual style was not treated as a determining factor in the identification of conceptual blending. Additionally, cartoons containing verbal elements (e.g., captions and speech bubbles) were included, provided that the primary meaning construction relied on the interaction between visual and conceptual elements rather than purely textual explanation.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. In the first stage of analysis, all 300 cartoons were systematically examined to identify instances of conceptual blending. The coding process was conducted by the researchers based on the criteria derived from Conceptual Blending Theory (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002), including the presence of at least two identifiable input spaces, cross-space mappings, and the emergence of a blended structure. To enhance reliability, a subset of the data (20%) was independently reviewed by a second coder trained in cognitive linguistics, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

In the second stage, the 70 cartoons identified as containing conceptual blending were systematically classified according to the type of blending network they employed. This classification was grounded in the framework proposed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002), and clear operational definitions were established prior to the coding process. Specifically, single-scope blends were defined as cases in which the organizing frame was primarily derived from one input space, whereas double-scope blends involved contributions from both input spaces in shaping the blended structure, resulting in a more complex and emergent configuration. Furthermore, the coding process was conducted by the researcher, and to enhance analytical consistency, a subset of the data was reviewed by a second researcher with a background in cognitive linguistics. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and mutual agreement. The purpose of this procedure was to ensure interpretive consistency rather than to establish statistical generalizability. It was noted that this stage of the study was primarily descriptive in nature and aimed to provide an overall picture of patterns within the dataset, rather than to support statistically generalizable conclusions.

In the third stage, three economic cartoons were purposively selected from the 70 cartoons that had been identified as containing conceptual blending. The selection was guided by the principle of maximum variation, with the aim of capturing diversity in both blending structures and thematic focus. Specifically, the selected cartoons represented different types of blending networks (e.g., single-scope and double-scope) and encompassed a range of key economic themes, including livelihood issues, inflation, currency fluctuations, class disparity, and purchasing power. In addition, selection criteria included the clarity of the blending structure and the salience of visual elements, which ensured that the cognitive mechanisms of conceptual blending could be analyzed in a transparent and interpretable manner. Accordingly, these cartoons were not intended to be statistically representative of the entire corpus; rather, they served as analytically informative cases that illustrated how conceptual blending operated across different economic contexts.

Moreover, the qualitative analysis was conducted within the framework of Conceptual Blending Theory proposed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002). For each cartoon, the input spaces, generic space, cross-space mappings, vital relations, and the three-stage processes of composition, completion, and elaboration were systematically identified and analyzed. This study also focused on the cognitive interpretation of meaning and the mechanisms through

which humor and social critique emerged via conceptual blending. Each selected cartoon was analyzed independently and accompanied by a schematic representation of the four-space blending network, enabling a transparent visualization of the cognitive processes involved.

Each selected cartoon was analyzed according to the following analytical steps derived from Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) model:

- identification of the input spaces, including their core elements and internal relations,
- specification of the generic space, capturing shared abstract structure between the inputs,
- description of cross-space mappings between corresponding elements,
- identification of vital relations (e.g., identity, cause–effect, role–value, time, space, intentionality),
- analysis of the blended space, including emergent structure and meaning, and
- explanation of the three-stage blending processes of composition, completion, and elaboration.

This step-by-step procedure ensured analytical consistency across all samples and allowed for comparative interpretation of blending patterns within the economic genre.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Frequency of Conceptual Blending Types in the Corpus

This section presents the qualitative cognitive analysis of selected Iranian economic press cartoons within the framework of Conceptual Blending Theory. Drawing on the methodological procedures outlined in the previous section, the analysis focuses on uncovering the cognitive mechanisms through which meaning, humor, and social critique are constructed in economic cartoons. While the quantitative stage of the study identifies the distribution of blending types across the corpus, the present section adopts a qualitative analytical perspective to examine how specific instances of conceptual blending operate in detail. The analysis concentrates on a set of representative economic cartoons that clearly instantiate blending networks and allows for systematic examination of their cognitive structure.

The analysis sought to illustrate that economic cartoons do not merely reflect economic realities but actively reconceptualize economic experience through blended structures. By integrating domains such as everyday life, bodily experience, religion, violence, or consumption with abstract economic concepts, these cartoons generated emergent meanings that invited both laughter and critical reflection. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of blend types across the cartoon corpus.

**Table 1. Frequency of Conceptual Blending Types in the Cartoon Corpus**

| Type of Conceptual Blend   | Mirror | Simple | Single-Scope | Double-Scope | Total |
|----------------------------|--------|--------|--------------|--------------|-------|
| Number of Sample           | 0      | 0      | 30           | 40           | 70    |
| Percentage of total blends | 0%     | 0%     | 43%          | 57%          | 100%  |

Based on a mixed descriptive–qualitative approach, the study compiled a corpus of 300 Iranian press cartoons (2016–2024), of which 70 cartoons were identified as containing conceptual blending structures. These were subsequently classified into single-scope (30 cases) and double-scope (40 cases) blends. The quantitative findings, detailed in Table 1, indicated that double-scope blending (57%) constituted the dominant pattern, providing a descriptive basis for the selection of cases for qualitative analysis. It should be noted that these figures are intended to offer an overview of distributional tendencies rather than to support statistical generalization. A closer examination of three selected cartoons follows, offering detailed insights into the operationalization of these blending patterns.

### 5.2 Security Escort as a Blend of Inflation and Protected Cargo

As illustrated in Figure 1, the central mechanism of meaning construction in this cartoon was based on a structurally organized double-scope blend. The interpretation of the image

emerged from the integration of two independent domains with distinct conceptual organizations: the domain of security and armed escort for highly valuable assets, and the domain of everyday food distribution. In ordinary circumstances, the transportation of meat as a common consumer commodity followed routine market regulations and standard supply chains.

In contrast, motorcycle escorts and armed protection belonged to a different conceptual frame associated with high-value individuals, strategic assets, or sensitive security operations. By juxtaposing these heterogeneous frames and establishing structural correspondences between them, the cartoon produced a meaning that did not exist independently in either domain. Within the blended space, “meat” was projected from the domain of everyday consumption into the security frame and acquired the status of a strategic cargo requiring protection. Conversely, armed escort officers were mapped into a context conventionally reserved for ordinary goods distribution.



**Figure 1. Police-Escorted Meat Truck**

*Note.* The cartoon depicts the meat distribution process. From *Imported Meat Escort to Stores*, by Behdasht News, 2019 (<https://behdasht.news/news/107769>). Copyright 2019 by Behdasht News.

Gradual economic processes, namely price inflation and declining purchasing power, were compressed into a single visual configuration of armed protection.

The cognitive force of this blend lay in the compression of vital relations. Gradual economic processes, namely price inflation and declining purchasing power, were compressed into a single visual configuration of armed protection. The abstract relation of “increased market value” was condensed into visible “security-level importance.” Moreover, the evaluative shift from “ordinary commodity” to “exceptional asset” compressed social perception and economic hierarchy into a tangible scene. These compressions made systemic economic pressure immediately intelligible and emotionally salient. During composition, elements from both domains were aligned along functional and evaluative axes (valuable cargo = overpriced essential food; security escort = necessity of protection). Completion activated background knowledge regarding economic crisis, scarcity, and the rising cost of living, allowing viewers to infer the implicit premise that meat had become economically inaccessible. Through elaboration, the blend expanded into a broader socio-economic narrative in which essential goods were transformed into luxury items, symbolically removed from everyday accessibility.

The rhetorical impact arose from the ironic exaggeration embedded in the blend. By framing meat as a high-security asset, the cartoon evoked feelings of frustration, irony, and socio-economic anxiety. The scene subtly exposed the distortion of everyday values under conditions of inflation, suggesting that basic necessities had become objects of privilege and protection. The emergent meaning thus pointed to the abnormal normalization of economic crisis: what should have been ordinary now appeared exceptional.

Because both domains actively contributed organizing structure to the blended space, this example constituted a prototypical double-scope blending network. Figure 2 illustrates the blending network of this cartoon.

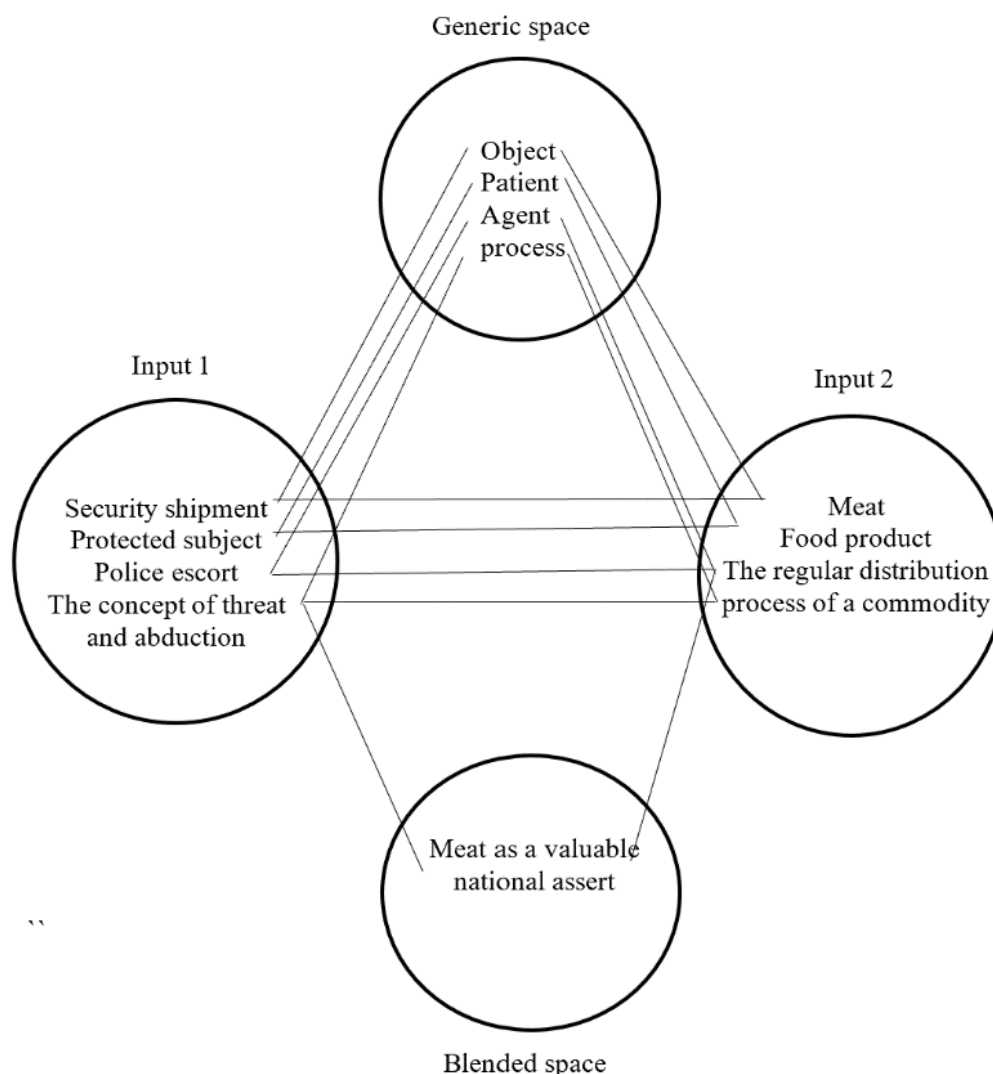


Figure 2. Double-Scope Blending Network of the Cartoon *Police-Escorted Meat Truck*

### 5.3 Currency Instability as Execution

As shown in Figure 3, the image brought together two distinct meaning domains by depicting a guillotine blade constructed from U.S. dollar banknotes positioned above a human figure trapped beneath it. The first input was associated with execution and physical violence, while the second input related to economic processes and currency fluctuation. By placing these elements within a single visual configuration, the cartoon prompted the viewer to establish structural correspondences based on shared functional roles. In the execution domain, the guillotine was an instrument of irreversible elimination; in the economic domain, the dollar assumed a parallel role by symbolizing sudden monetary pressure and the destructive consequences of extreme exchange-rate volatility.



**Figure 3. The Guillotine of Exchange Rates**

*Note.* The cartoon depicts the disaster the dollar is bringing upon the people and the working class. From *The Disaster the Dollar Is Bringing Upon the People and the Working Class*, by M. Tahani, 2020, Bartarinha (<https://www.bartarinha.ir/> (بخش-اخبار-روز-۱۰۹۰۵۵/۲۰-شرح-بلائی-که-دلار-بر-مردم)). Copyright 2020 by Bartarinha.

The individual positioned beneath the blade represented the ordinary citizen, who was characterized by limited control over macroeconomic forces. Similar to a condemned person awaiting execution, the citizen appeared exposed and powerless in the face of abrupt currency shifts. The hand pulling the rope reinforced this interpretation by implying the presence of agents or decision-making centers capable of triggering immediate economic shocks that directly affected public livelihood.

The cognitive effectiveness of this blend lay in its compression of vital relations. A gradual and complex economic process was compressed into a single, dramatic moment of execution. Abstract financial mechanisms were reduced to a visible act of physical force. The causal chain of inflation, devaluation, and purchasing power decline was condensed into the downward movement of the blade. Through this compression, systemic economic instability became cognitively manageable and emotionally intensified.

Moreover, meaning construction unfolded through the three blending processes. During composition, the dollar was visually reconfigured as a lethal blade while retaining its monetary identity. Completion activated background knowledge about inflation, economic anxiety, and social vulnerability. Through elaboration, the scene expanded beyond the moment of impact, inviting reflection on long-term psychological and material consequences.

Furthermore, the rhetorical impact emerged from this embodied dramatization of economic suffering. By framing currency instability as an execution, the cartoon transformed financial fluctuation into an experience of fear, vulnerability, and imposed violence. The blend evoked emotional responses such as anxiety, injustice, and powerlessness, thereby strengthening its critical force. The emergent meaning suggested that extreme currency instability operated as a form of social execution imposed upon ordinary citizens.

Because both domains, execution and economy, contributed organizing structure to the blended space, this example constituted a prototypical double-scope blending network. Figure 4 illustrates the four-space conceptual blending network of this cartoon.

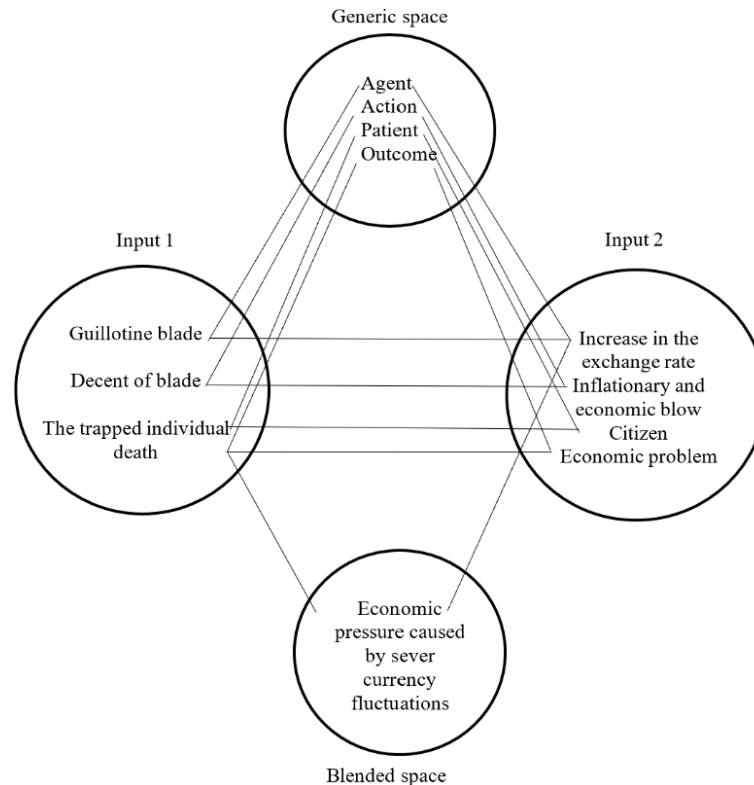


Figure 4. Double-Scope Blending Network of the Cartoon *The Guillotine of Exchange Rates*

#### 5.4 Currency Depreciation as Boxing Defeat

As illustrated in Figure 5, the cartoon depicted the decline of the Iranian rial against the U.S. dollar through a visually simple yet cognitively powerful conceptual configuration. Banknotes of the rial and the dollar were portrayed as two boxers inside a boxing ring. The rial was shown collapsed in a corner of the ring, while the dollar appeared dominant and victorious. By drawing on the familiar scene of a boxing match, the cartoon transformed an abstract economic process into a concrete and emotionally accessible visual narrative. This familiarity enhanced the cognitive effectiveness of the blend, as viewers could immediately map the logic of physical defeat onto economic decline.



Figure 5. One-on-One Fight Between the U.S. Dollar and the Iranian Rial

Note. The cartoon depicts the fight between the U.S. dollar and the Iranian Rial. From *Fight Between the U.S. Dollar and the Iranian Rial*, by Sarpoosh, 2018 (<https://www.sarpoosh.com/caricature/political-society/fight-dollar-rial970121-cartoons.html>). Copyright 2018 by Sarpoosh.

The main organizing framework of the image (see Figure 5) came from the domain of boxing. Elements such as the ring, physical struggle, victory and defeat, and competitive intensity provided the structure through which meaning was constructed. Economic entities were projected into this frame as human-like opponents, which enabled the compression of vital relations. Specifically, the abstract relation of economic imbalance was compressed into a visible bodily defeat; prolonged currency depreciation was compressed into a single knockout moment; and fluctuations in exchange rates were reduced to a direct face-to-face confrontation. These compressions made complex financial processes cognitively manageable.

At a more general level, the image relied on the shared schema of competition between opposing forces. Within the blended space, the banknotes acquired agency and physical vulnerability, which allowed the viewer to interpret devaluation as a tangible loss of strength. The boxing ring became a metaphorical arena in which national economic struggle was dramatized. The collapse of the rial visually communicated not only weakness but humiliation, which intensified the rhetorical force of the image.

Furthermore, the emotional and rhetorical impact arose from this embodied representation of defeat. Rather than presenting statistical data, the cartoon evoked feelings of anxiety, frustration, and national vulnerability. By staging currency depreciation as an unequal fight, the image invited the audience to experience economic decline as a personal and collective loss. The emergent meaning suggested that the national currency had been overwhelmed in an unfair contest, which offered a concise yet powerful critique of the current economic situation. Such emergent structure arose from the integration of competing input spaces and could not be reduced to either input independently, which reflected the core mechanism of conceptual blending (Coulson, 2001, pp. 163–165; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, p. 131). Figure 6 presents the conceptual blending network underlying this cartoon.

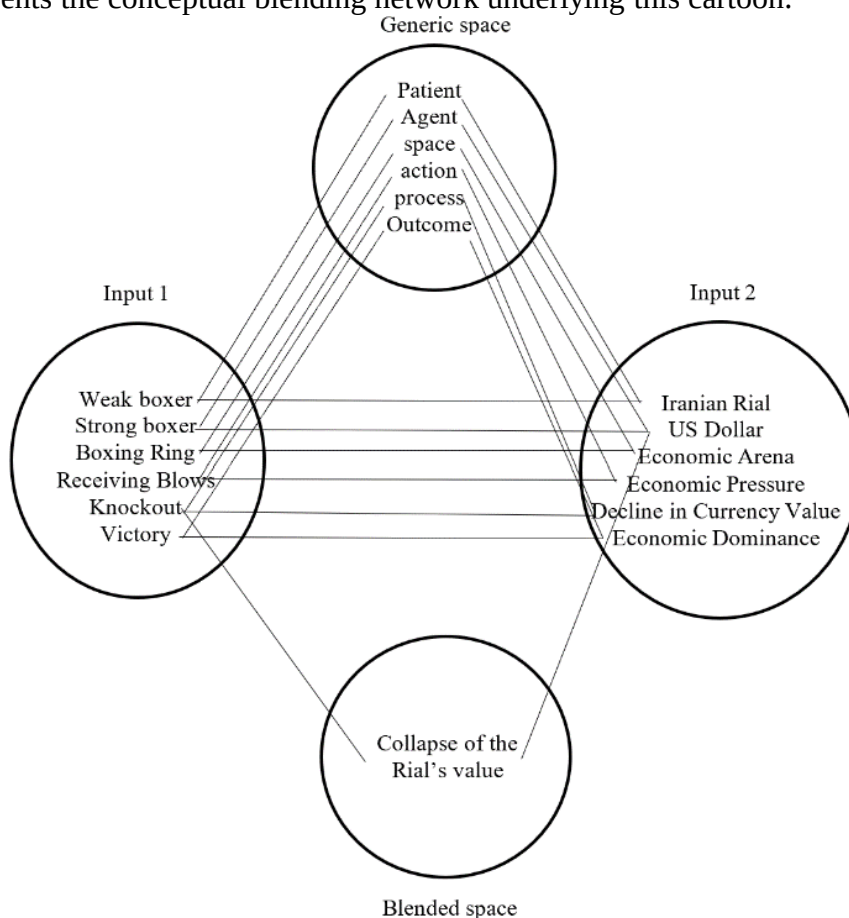


Figure 6. Single-Scope Blending Network of the Cartoon *Dollar-Rial Rivalry in Boxing Ring*

### 5.5 Synthesis of Cognitive Strategies

Taken together, the three cartoons demonstrated a shared cognitive strategy in socio-economic critique. In each case, an abstract economic process was integrated with a domain of physical force or structured confrontation (e.g., security escort, execution, boxing), which resulted in the compression of complex financial mechanisms into embodied and visually dramatic scenes. Gradual inflation became armed protection, currency instability became execution, and prolonged depreciation became knockout defeat. This recurring pattern indicated that double-scope blending functioned as a systematic cognitive mechanism that enhanced both conceptual accessibility and rhetorical intensity by transforming structural economic pressures into tangible, emotionally resonant experiences.

## 6. Discussion

The aim of this section is to interpret the analytical findings of the study and situate them within the framework of the research questions and the theoretical literature of cognitive linguistics. The analysis of three economic press cartoons demonstrates that conceptual blending plays a central role in the production of meaning, humor, and social critique in this genre (Coulson, 2001, pp. 163–165; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, pp. 48–50). Contrary to simplistic assumptions that regard visual humor as merely relying on exaggeration or superficial resemblance, the findings suggest that complex cognitive mechanisms underlie these images mechanisms that are systematically accounted for within the framework of conceptual blending theory (El Refaie, 2009; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, p. 131; Forceville, 2005).

### 6.1 The Role of Conceptual Blending in the Construction of Economic Humor

The first research question addresses how conceptual blending operates in the creation of humor in Iranian economic cartoons. The findings indicate that humor does not arise from the elimination of one conceptual space, but rather from the simultaneous activation of two or more incongruent spaces and the compression of vital relations between them. In all examined cartoons, meaning emerges through the placement of an economic phenomenon within an unexpected frame, such as security, physical violence, or sport. This conceptual incongruity compels the viewer to activate the processes of composition, completion, and elaboration in order to infer the humorous and critical meaning.

In particular, humor is intensified when an abstract and numerical concept such as “currency fluctuation” or “price inflation” is represented through a bodily, physical, and tangible scenario. This transformation is not merely metaphorical; rather, it results from a blend that generates a new narrative, causal, and action-oriented structure. From this perspective, economic humor in press cartoons is less a linguistic phenomenon and more a cognitive–visual process.

### 6.2 Dominant Types of Blending in the Economic Genre

Addressing the first research question, the analysis reveals that both single-scope and double-scope blends are present in this genre, serving distinct functions. Single-scope blends, such as the example depicting the rial and the dollar as boxers, are primarily used to simplify and render complex economic concepts more accessible. In such cases, a familiar and dynamic frame (e.g., sport) provides the organizing structure, while the economic domain participates mainly through role assignment.

In contrast, double-scope blends, observed in examples such as the “escorted meat” and the “dollar guillotine,” possess a much stronger critical potential. These blends do not merely simplify meaning; instead, by preserving the tension between two independent conceptual systems, they generate a form of cognitive shock. It is precisely this tension that enables a structural critique of economic conditions. Accordingly, in the economic genre, double-scope

blending functions as a primary tool for expressing crisis, pressure, and instability, whereas single-scope blending tends to serve a more explanatory and illustrative role.

### **6.3 The Role of Vital Relations in the Organization of Meaning**

The findings further demonstrate that vital relations play a central role in organizing meaning and foregrounding economic critique in Iranian press cartoons, directly addressing the second research question concerning their cognitive function. Rather than merely linking visual elements, vital relations operate as mechanisms of meaning compression, transforming abstract economic processes into concrete and interpretable scenarios (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, pp. 92–95).

Among these, a limited set of relations particularly cause–effect, identity, role, power, and time emerges as most prominent in structuring the blended space. Causal relations compress complex macroeconomic processes, such as inflation or currency fluctuations, into immediate and observable consequences, enabling viewers to perceive economic hardship as the result of identifiable actions. The identity relation maps abstract entities, such as “currency” or “price,” onto human or material agents, thereby rendering economic forces as active and potentially harmful actors. Furthermore, role and power relations highlight structural asymmetries, frequently positioning ordinary people as passive or vulnerable agents in contrast to dominant economic forces. Temporal compression reinforces this effect by representing gradual economic processes as sudden and forceful events, thereby intensifying the sense of urgency and threat.

Overall, these findings suggest that the effectiveness of economic cartoons depends not only on the selection of source domains but, more importantly, on how vital relations function as cognitive bridges between economic discourse and everyday experience, enabling the communication of social critique in a condensed and impactful form.

### **6.4 Discursive and Cultural Implications of the Findings**

Addressing the third research question, these cognitive mechanisms, a salient finding of this study is the dominance of the theme of currency appreciation among the economic subtopics represented in press cartoons. Among a wide range of economic issues such as rising prices of essential goods, class disparity, declining purchasing power, and livelihood insecurity currency fluctuation and appreciation exhibit the highest frequency. This discursive concentration is not merely a product of individual preferences of cartoonists; rather, it reflects the central position of currency in the lived economic experience of society.

From a cognitive and discursive perspective, the exchange rate in the Iranian economy functions beyond a financial indicator and operates as a form of “economic super-signifier,” in that its increase becomes chain-linked to multiple aspects of everyday life. Currency fluctuation not only affects the prices of goods and services, but is also experienced as a sign of instability, insecurity, and collective lack of control. This characteristic makes it particularly suitable material for powerful and multilayered conceptual blends. Within the framework of conceptual blending theory, currency appreciation due to its abstract, invisible, yet deeply consequential nature requires bodily, spatial, and action-based representations to become cognitively accessible.

Furthermore, press cartoons meet this cognitive demand by blending the economic domain with domains such as physical violence, sports competition, or securitization. In other words, the high frequency of currency-related cartoons can be understood reflecting the concept’s high potential for conceptual blending, as it readily connects with bodily and dramatic scenarios to produce powerful critical meanings.

From a cultural perspective, the focus on currency reflects a shift in the locus of collective anxiety from abstract macroeconomic concepts to a concrete and everyday sign. In this discourse, the dollar is no longer merely a monetary unit, but a symbol of power, threat, and livelihood

destiny. This symbolization enables the representation of the economy as an intrusive and even violent force, one that shapes social life profoundly without requiring physical presence.

## 7. Conclusion

The present study investigates how meaning, humor, and social critique are constructed in Iranian economic press cartoons, with particular focus on the cognitive mechanisms underlying these processes. Specifically, it addresses the role of conceptual blending and vital relations in shaping the interpretation of economic discourse within this visual genre.

The qualitative analysis of three purposively selected cartoons demonstrates that conceptual blending plays a central role in the construction of meaning and humor in economic cartoons. Meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple input spaces and the compression of vital relations, which enables abstract economic processes to be represented in concrete, embodied, and emotionally salient forms. Among these vital relations, causality, identity, role, power, and time are particularly significant in structuring the blended space and guiding audience interpretation. These relations transform complex macroeconomic processes into immediate and perceptible experiences, often highlighting economic pressure, power asymmetries, and the vulnerability of ordinary citizens.

Extending from this qualitative insight to the broader corpus, the initial screening of 300 cartoons reveals that 70 cartoons exhibit clear and analyzable conceptual blending structures. In contrast, the remaining samples rely either on simple visual representations or on direct metaphorical mappings without forming full blending networks. Within this identified group of 70 cartoons, the classification results indicate that 30 are categorized as single-scope blends, where the organizing frame derives primarily from one input, while 40 are identified as double-scope blends, which involve contributions from both inputs and result in more complex, emergent configurations. No significant instances of other blending types are present.

From a discursive perspective, these findings indicate that economic cartoons in the Iranian context center strongly on themes of instability and economic insecurity. The high frequency of representations related to currency fluctuations suggests that the exchange rate functions as a dominant symbolic element, facilitating the construction of blends that integrate economic discourse with domains such as conflict, control, and physical experience. Consequently, conceptual blending operates not only as a source of humor but also as a cognitive mechanism for articulating and mediating collective socio-economic concerns.

Overall, this study demonstrates that conceptual blending provides a robust analytical framework for examining how economic cartoons produce meaning through the integration of visual and cognitive structures. By linking abstract economic concepts to everyday embodied experience, these cartoons function as a form of cognitive mediation between macroeconomic processes and lived reality. Future research may extend this approach by expanding the dataset, incorporating cross-cultural comparisons, or exploring the interaction between conceptual blending and other multimodal strategies in visual discourse.

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Not applicable

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## Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this research.

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