The Language of Memes

Patterns of Meaning Across Image and Text

Barbara Dancygier and Lieven Vandelanotte

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Internet memes have been studied widely for their role in establishing and maintaining social relationships, and shaping public opinion, online. However, they are also a prominent and fast evolving multimodal genre, one which calls for an in-depth linguistic analysis. This book, the first of its kind, develops the analytical tools necessary to describe and understand contemporary 'image-plus-text' communication. It demonstrates how memes achieve meaning as multimodal artefacts, how they are governed by specific rules of composition and interpretation, and how such processes are driven by stance networks. It also defines a family of multimodal constructions in which images become structural components, while making language forms adjust to the emerging multimodal rules. Through analysis of several meme types, this approach defines the specificity of the memetic genre, describing established types, but also accounting for creative forms. In describing the 'grammar of memes', it provides a new model to approach multimodal genres.

BARBARA DANCYGIER is Professor and Distinguished University Scholar at the University of British Columbia.

LIEVEN VANDELANOTTE is Francqui Research Professor at the University of Namur and a Research Fellow in linguistics at KU Leuven.

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Barbara Dancygier
University of British Columbia

Lieven Vandelanotte
University of Namur

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To Jacek and Szymek
To Ruben, who already reads images and (Dutch) text

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Acknowledgements

This book – like many others, we're sure – has been longer in the making than we had initially planned. 'Because pandemic', of course, but not just because of that: our initial project was going to look at a broad range of multimodal discourse types, but increasingly we became convinced we needed to put internet memes centre stage. They are, in our view, now the prime testing case for anyone working on text and image from a linguistic perspective. While memes have been the focus of several books already, these mainly look at rhetorical and ideological aspects; we wanted to focus on the linguistics of memes from the perspective of construction grammar. We were very fortunate in having a publisher who was willing to accept and support this change in focus.

One of the main contexts from which this project eventually grew is a theme session we were lucky to convene at the 13th International Cognitive Linguistics Conference at Northumbria University in Newcastle, in July 2015. We had a dream team of presenters in our session on viewpoint in and across multimodal artefacts, and were fortunate in including further colleagues in two special issues edited out of this session, which were published in 2017, in *Cognitive Linguistics* and *Journal of Pragmatics*. To all these colleagues we say *thank you* for confirming our impression that this area was ripe for exploration, and for adding so much to our understanding. We'd like to offer special thanks for their friendship and support to colleagues in the Multimodality, Interaction & Discource (MIDI) research group in Leuven, including Geert Brône, Kurt Feyaerts, Bert Oben, and Paul Sambre, as well as to the exceptional scholars we've always admired, and the invaluable friends we've always found, in Terry Janzen, Adrian Lou, Irene Mittelberg, José Sanders, and Eve Sweetser. Finally, we want to thank Aidan Walker, for unexpected and much appreciated support and understanding.

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Abbreviations

BT	Bottom Text
CMT	Conceptual Metaphor Theory
DBM	*Distracted Boyfriend* meme
DHF	*Drowning High Five* meme
GGG	*Good Girl Gina* meme family
IM	Image Macro
MC	Meme Character
MM	Meme Maker
MV	Meme Viewer
NEI	Non-Entrenched Image
ODNS	*One Does Not Simply* meme
SNOE	*Said No One Ever* meme
SS	Scumbag Steve
TT	Top Text

1 Why Study Memes from the Linguistic Perspective?

It's difficult to imagine the internet today – and social media platforms especially – without internet memes. These ubiquitous image-text combinations pair recognizable but modifiable forms with consistent meanings and contexts of use, allowing communicators to bring across viewpoints and elicit responses quickly. Memes can be very easily made and adapted thanks to meme-generating platforms, so using internet memes to provide a comment on some situation need not be unduly complicated – in fact, we often see people online responding with amazing speed to some news item. We should add that summarizing in words what memes communicate across the interlocking attitudes they incorporate is much more complicated, and much less appealing, than using the conventionalizing, 'construction'-like combinations of text and image memes typically deploy (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017b). Indeed, internet memes seem tailor-made to express opinions which they do not literally or straightforwardly state, but which instead emerge from the viewpoint structure the meme builds up. Building on humorous forms of indirectness or incongruity, they parcel up often emotional messages in more attractive, playful, and therefore more impactful ways than just words.

From marginal beginnings, internet memes thus have become part of the fabric of everyday communication online, even becoming a kind of 'second language' communicators can have different degrees of proficiency in. Scholars of communication and rhetoric have proposed ways of dealing with what memes are, how they emerge, and how they contribute to public discourse (e.g. Jenkins 2014, Shifman 2014, Wiggins & Bowers 2015, Milner 2016, Wiggins 2019). In the process, they have clarified differences with the original conception of memes as coined by Dawkins (1976) – where he had memes in mind as a unit of cultural replication, as a counterpart to genes, with examples including, for example, catchphrases, tunes, fashions, architectural styles, and so on (see also Blackmore 1999). The emerging scholarship on internet memes has stressed the active human agency and creativity in deliberately devising modifications and remixes to existing 'spreadable' cultural artefacts. Any idea of passive transmission combined with random mutations from the 'gene'

source frame is clearly not an appropriate model with which to understand the frenetic energy with which meme users exploit internet memes' meaning potential by adding their own textual and visual tweaks.

Much scholarly work has focused on the social and political meanings and ramifications of meme usage (e.g. Huntington 2016, Milner 2016, Ross & Rivers 2017, Denisova 2019, Paz et al. 2021), and interdisciplinary work is trying to address the vexed question of what determines a meme's success and longevity (e.g. Johann & Bülow 2019), where sometimes brief memetic moments can nevertheless have a 'long tail' (Smith & Copland 2021). In discourse studies of various persuasions, pragmatic aspects of internet memes, touching on questions such as common ground, intertextuality, and humorous incongruity, take centre stage (e.g. Yus 2018, Xie 2022, Attardo 2023).

While book-length studies like those of Shifman (2014), Milner (2016), and Wiggins (2019) investigate and elucidate a broad range of questions, we felt that a fuller analysis from a linguistic perspective was missing. In line with our earlier work (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017b), we take an approach inspired by construction grammar and cognitive linguistics, which we share with analyses proposed by, among others, Lou (2017), Zenner & Geeraerts (2018), and Bülow et al. (2018).

The variety of internet memes and meme types is considerable, and we will not attempt an exhaustive classification or typology of internet memes. We are more interested in the meaning-making mechanisms involved, which rely on, expand on, and add to existing linguistic mechanisms and patterns, in major image-text memes such as so-called Image Macro memes, labelling memes, or grid memes. In general, our goal is to describe how memetic forms create a rich and cohesive system serving the needs of meaning construction.

We also want to comment on the issue of the inherent datedness of memes which are older than a week. One might argue that memetic communication, in terms of both meaning and form, is so fleeting and time-sensitive that any interpretive or theorizing efforts, such as ours in this book, are bound to produce something outdated. Indeed, we are aware that some meme formulae go out of common use (e.g. it might be hard to find very recent uses of the *Said No One Ever* meme). But the emergence and subsequent disappearance or evolution of meme forms is a process which is inherently interesting and important. We might refer here to the work done by Lou (2017) which traces the evolution of the so-called *when*-meme, from more wordy forms (e.g. *That Awkward Moment When*) to the simplest, current one, which remains popular and useful. Memes are still coming into their own as a communicative genre, and they evolve at lightning speed, but the process is important and instructive. It was observing this 'living lab' of multimodal 'grammaticalization' that convinced us that memes are a topic worthy of a book-length analysis, not only because of what they do day-to-day – such as, providing the until-recently

unavailable tools for immediate and interactive exchange of opinions – but, perhaps primarily, because of the vast possibilities that memes open by using minimal form to evoke and express complex opinions. The 'minimalist' side of memes allows them to connect internet users without any spatial or personal barriers. Understanding the mechanisms that make this possible is one of the goals of this book.

Because of the vast (and growing) variety of forms in use, memes are very difficult to define as a coherent communicative genre. A commonly used definition of internet memes is that proposed by Shifman, who understands an internet meme as 'a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users' (Shifman 2014: 41). This definition rightly stresses the active, creative participation of communicators. It also makes the point that internet memes do not exist in isolation but form part of identifiable, structured groups of items; not every one-off joke or comment that happens to be shared on the internet is automatically a meme (for discussion, see Vandelanotte 2021: 160–4). To categorize something as an internet meme requires some formulation of what 'group of digital items sharing common characteristics' it belongs to. Throughout this book, we will be considering a range of such characteristics, with a goal of explaining the major formal choices Meme Makers face in terms of primary meaning-making strategies.

Before delving into a description in further chapters of how various memetic formulae use language and images to express opinions and portray experiences, we would like to comment more broadly on several aspects of memetic discourse. We start (in Section 1.1) by clarifying our approach to the concept of 'multimodality' and presenting memes as a specific genre of multimodal (image-plus-text) artefacts. Next, in Section 1.2, we preview the formal and interpretive parameters which provide a broad frame to the analyses throughout the book. Finally, in Section 1.3, we outline the subsequent chapters in broad strokes.

1.1 Memes as Multimodal Artefacts

The overwhelming majority of memes we discuss in this book rely on a combination of text and image – thus they fall naturally into the category of multimodal artefacts. However, we argue that memes represent 'multimodality' in a rather unique way.

There are two main ways in which 'multimodality' has been studied: the semiotic approach considers artefacts using various semiotic modes (such as sound, image, colour, light), often combining them with text, while the embodied interaction approach studies communicative channels such as

gesture and eye-gaze and the ways they co-align with spoken discourse. In past work, we have suggested that these different traditions can be drawn on without contradiction, recognizing that multimodality is 'a varied, but nevertheless cohesive phenomenon' (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017a: 372).

The embodied interaction approach studies multimodality 'in interaction', where the context is spoken or signed discourse, and embodied behaviour supports the linguistic forms chosen. The correlation between embodied aspects of communication is the primary interest in such studies (for an overview, see Feyaerts et al. 2017), and so we are finally beginning to understand the phenomenon of face-to-face communication as it typically happens. And we are learning even more from seeing how the co-alignment of linguistic and embodied resources speakers bring into communication creates complex, and inherently, or even inescapably, multifaceted behaviour. The main point of the approach is not just to parcel out meanings by assigning them to different interactive modalities, but to also demonstrate the necessary integration of speech, gesture, eye-gaze, facial expression, and so on. Our treatment of memes follows in the footsteps of this line of research, by stressing the ways in which memetic text-and-image participate in an integrative process, rather than parcelling meaning out to different expressive modes.

The proper understanding of the importance of the interaction paradigm is further complicated by mimetic aspects of communicative behaviour that Clark (2016) has described as 'depictive' – including depictive gestures, but also tone of voice, imitation of music, enactive use of the body, and many other contexts. What Clark's work makes us realize is that the interactive resources we build on in spontaneous communication are used for much more than the current communicative context. The gesture or the facial expression used may be aligned with what the speaker him/herself wants to communicate to the hearer, but it can alternately be aligned with a represented subjectivity (speaker, singer, writer, Meme Maker, painter, fictional character in a story, and so on). What such situations suggest is that none of the embodied modalities themselves (gesture, tone of voice, or body posture) tell us all we need to know about the act of communication developing before us. We would like to return here to the example we discussed in earlier work (2017a), where a stand-up comedian uses his body, face, voice, and gestures to tell a story in which he represents himself (the former-participant-plus-current-narrator), but also a character, and an imagined stand-in for that character (whose behaviour he needs to act out in a depictive way to make it clear why he finds the character's behaviour offensive). Depiction is the core of this comedy act, all the communicative resources are used, but we would be rather hard-pressed to explain how the specific communicative modes are being used, even though listing them would be easy – because none of them exists separately from the multiple levels of the story being told. Re-enacting another participant in a story being told is often

necessary in spoken storytelling, but such a communicative act cannot be satisfactorily described solely by reference to the independent modalities. If there were a term in multimodality studies such as 'spoken performative humorous multi-voice narrative mode', that would be a satisfactory term perhaps, but it would have the huge disadvantage of being just one of many such options. In the context of memes, which can also, to a degree, rely on representing depictive modalities, we attempt to trace specific patterns which combine visual and textual elements, but not as random combinations. On the contrary, we track regularities of form which target specific patterns of meaning emergence.

As we show, depictive uses of embodied modalities play an important role, so that (often exaggerated) facial expressions, gestures, or body postures are common in memetic images as signals of emotional or experiential content. But complex artefacts such as a stand-up comedy act are hard to compare to the formal simplicity and mostly static nature of memes. Memes build on aspects of communication that 'multimodality in interaction' research studies in detail, and they can represent bodies and facial expressions as tokens of experiences, but they can also evoke experiences and emotions without representing experiencers as such, and choosing other visual 'stand-ins' instead (as we show in Chapter 2). Our project thus builds on the 'multimodality in interaction' approach, but our proposed analysis is not strictly dependent on the affordances of the human body.

The semiotic approach to multimodality, for comparison, focuses mainly on artefacts representing more than one expressive mode (e.g. image, sound, colour, etc.), rather than spontaneous interaction (see, e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen 2001, Bateman 2008, Kress 2010, Bateman 2014, Jewitt 2014, Nørgaard 2019, Hart 2025). Our proposed theoretical stance uses the insights from such approaches, but we are looking at memes as artefacts which primarily rely on images and text, though we will make occasional reference to the more dynamic, video-based genre of TikTok memes, as and when appropriate. While we are theorizing the ways in which image and text create meaning in memes, we are going beyond seeing image and text as independent modes of expression.

1.2 Memes as Multimodal Constructions

We argue throughout the book that memetic use of images and words does not use independent expressions from independent communicative modes to put them in a semiotic or figurative correlation. More importantly, perhaps, we are cautious about treating words as a 'communicative mode' on a par with image or sound. Rather, we want to treat them as tokens of language use structured by the formal features which languages rely on – we usually call them 'grammars'.

Language is not just a 'mode' – it is a complex system of concepts, lexical as well as structural, which can also structure newer uses in a variety of internet discourses and digital media. What memes do, we argue, is use linguistic forms in combination with images, while fully relying on the linguistic systems of form-meaning correlations. This reliance does not have to yield typical language use – on the contrary, it creates new uses, which may alter some standard formal rules, but which are not random or just clipped to fit in the memetic image.

For example, in a series of Image Macro memes known jointly as *Good Girl Gina* memes, one sees an image of a very pleasant-looking young woman (we will return to the example in Chapter 3, Figure 3.2). The woman's memetic name is Gina, and she functions as an epitome of a perfect girlfriend. In the top part of the meme there is a line of text, such as *Gets mad at you*; another line of text occupies the bottom of the image – *tells you why*. The lines of text do not specifically complement or figuratively reconstrue the image. The relation between image and text in such memes is not about two modes representing the same thing or using an image as an illustration of the text. The image is not uniquely associated with the text included, as it is the standard image for all *Good Girl Gina* memes – you recognize those memes because of the image. Also, the true identity of the girl is not under consideration – she just stands for the idea of a perfect girlfriend, very much in the way in which the expression *a perfect girlfriend* refers to a category of female human beings who look and behave in generally pleasant ways.

Now, the text in this meme (*Gets mad at you . . . tells you why*) does several linguistically interesting things. First of all, it suppresses the need for an expression of the subject argument – contrary to the ordinary grammar of English – and does so, we argue, because the identity of the subject is sufficiently represented by the image. The image is not seen as a photo of a specific girl, but as a compositional part of any *Good Girl Gina* meme. Also, the text, while consisting of two clauses, cannot be read as a fully expressed construction. It relies on generic predictive constructions (*If she gets mad at you, she tells you why*; *When she gets mad at you, she tells you why*; *She gets mad at you and tells you why*; etc.), and so it is evocative of a language structure expressing a specific causative/predictive meaning (Dancygier 1998, Dancygier & Sweetser 2005). Even if the construction is structurally simplified – not requiring the subject noun phrase (NP) or a conjunction – the linguistic pattern is still fully upheld. The clauses cannot be used in a different sequence, and the top clause cannot be completed with another construction (such as *told everyone why*). The image and text participate in a tightly correlated pattern, a construction, even if the construction is not solely reliant on language – it prompts a new, multimodal construction (complete with pre-filled parts, such as the image), grammatical restrictions (subject suppression, allocation of the adverbial clause to the top of

the meme and the main clause to the bottom of the meme). In terms of its meaning, the meme specifies a behaviour any perfect girlfriend should consider natural, while also intersubjectively expressing some mocking criticism of some women, who presumably refuse to discuss the cause of their anger when they get upset, and/or perhaps prompting awareness in Meme Viewers of their own complicity in sexist attitudes. We are not looking at a 'combination of two modes, image and text', each contributing separately and only being combined in a final interpretive step. Rather, we are looking at a multimodal construction, a form-meaning pair, with specified categorial meaning and intersubjective grounding.

We argue for such an approach to memes throughout the book. We will discuss a number of types of memes to propose generalizable observations about the specific formal and meaning parameters involved. We will consider a range of formal questions: the constructional use of the entire space of the meme, the specific constructional role of images, the constructional emergence of expressive stances, the roles of token snippets of direct discourse in such constructions, the use of pronouns, and, generally, the linguistic adjustments memes rely on in the emergence of multimodal memetic constructions.

In this book we will develop ideas anticipated in our earlier publications, where we already argued that memes can be seen as multimodal constructions (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017b) – in parallel to linguistic constructions, as described in Construction Grammar. We will continue to rely on the simplest definition of a construction as a form-meaning pair. In construction grammars, linguistic form can be a type of syntactic structure, such as a Ditransitive Construction (e.g. *Bob gave Alice a book*) or a comparative expression *The X-er the Y-er* (e.g. *The sooner the better*). Such a broad approach to constructions has yielded several more specific frameworks (Hoffmann 2017b), offering descriptions of form and meaning in one coherent analytical approach. We now propose to extend the approach to an analysis of internet memes, showing how they express stable meanings on the basis of formal configurations containing text and image. As we will show throughout the book, memetic constructions range from very open-ended patterns to highly restricted formal ones.

1.3 The Structure of This Book

In the next chapter, Chapter 2, we first consider some correlations between memetic constructions and select figurative meanings, showing how our approach differs from existing multimodal metaphor approaches. As a case in point, the chapter presents an analysis of *when*-memes as relying on similative patterns of meaning, and also extends this discussion to include the family of *If 2020 Was X* memes.

Chapters 3 to 5 then focus on major structuring strategies across a large number of memes: the role of the image (as an entrenched 'macro', or more ad hoc and 'non-entrenched') and its combinations with text (Chapter 3); the use of labels on top of parts of an image (Chapter 4); and the use of various kinds of grids as a particularly popular presentational template (Chapter 5). These are not necessarily distinct 'types' of memes, since these strategies happily combine, so that for instance an Image Macro may itself be a four-way grid and be labelled up, as we'll see. Based on the many examples we've looked at, we do think these three types of structure capture a lot of the fundamental formal variety of memes.

Chapter 3 introduces the distinction between entrenched images or Image Macros (IMs) and Non-Entrenched Images (NEIs), and focuses most of its discussion on examples involving IMs that feature the characteristic Top Text (TT) and Bottom Text (BT), such as the *One Does Not Simply* and *Good Girl Gina* memes (ODNS and GGG). It shows how these IM memes allow Meme Makers to categorize experiences very quickly, efficiently, and (if successful) humorously, adding further examples to such categories as 'futile undertakings that are impossible to achieve' (ODNS) or 'virtuous behaviour of highly considerate women' (GGG), thanks in large part to the frames evoked visually. It also discusses aspects of the construction grammar approach to language, as applicable to these meme constructions, including specific constructional properties of GGG memes and the constructional networks they fit into.

Chapter 4 turns to labelling memes, where again some images may develop into full-blown IMs, while others remain non-entrenched. Here, the textual component is different from both *when*-memes (discussed in Chapter 2) and from the typical IM memes with TT and BT. Instead, in typical cases of labelling, parts of a visually depicted scene are labelled with words or phrases which do not describe anything in the image, but instead collectively call up an entirely different frame. Well-known examples the chapter discusses include the *Is This a Pigeon?* meme, and the celebrated *Distracted Boyfriend* meme (DBM), showing a man turning over to admire an attractive passing woman (dressed in red), while the woman (in blue) whose hand he's holding looks on indignantly. This scene of a change in attention and preference – a choice for a new and attractive opportunity – gets to be applied to unrelated choices and new preferences. Labelling itself, as we show, can sometimes be visual again. Overall, we stress the constructional properties of DBM – with strong argument structure-like properties – alongside the role of embodied features (emotions and attentions expressed in facial expressions and posture) and the figurative, similative meaning often arrived at compositionally.

Chapter 5 discusses a variety of presentation formats involving grids, which we tend to scan left to right, top to bottom. Some grids are scalar, structuring a graded sequence of experiences (for instance, formality of language, in

Tuxedo Winnie the Pooh memes), or even correlating two scales as in the *Political Compass* meme we discuss. Others involve contrasts (as in *Drake* vertical grids), or structure discourse exchanges and narrative sequences in grids (among our examples here is the *Anakin and Padmé* meme). These different uses of grids allow Meme Makers to present and confront different behaviours, stances, and attitudes which Meme Viewers take as prompts from which to construe a coherent, typically ironic, viewpoint.

The next series of chapters turns to issues which relate less to the overall presentational formats of memes, but to sub-forms like pronouns (Chapter 6) and (apparent) quotation and dialogue (Chapters 7 and 8) appearing in them, and to formal play and experimentation itself (Chapter 9).

Chapter 6 considers the use of pronouns, and how they relate to such roles as Meme Maker, Meme Character (depicted in a meme's image), and Meme Viewer (i.e. the intended 'reader' of a given meme). One illustration of how odd pronouns actually behave in memes is to consider the use of *I*, which does not refer to the Meme Maker, but is used to represent embedded discourses attributed to a depicted Meme Character. Just as curious is the use of *me*, in patterns such as *Me* Verb-*ing*, or *Me/Also Me*, which apparently instruct us to look for Meme Maker in the meme's image, which in fact shows an unrelated Meme Character (possibly non-human, like an animal), such that the depicted character represents the experience of the Meme Maker. Such examples show that deixis is used in unusual ways in memetic discourse, to support the expression of viewpoint and stance targeted in the meme, rather than to identify specific referents.

Chapters 7 and 8 home in on uses of memetic quotation – cases where (apparent) Direct Discourse, and even (fictive) dialogic exchanges, are featured in memes. Chapter 7 first surveys such usage in cases that are closer to recognizable existing linguistic constructions involving verbs such as *say, tell*, and *be like*, but adding further constructional specifications in their memetic applications, thereby yielding very specific meanings. Forms analysed include *Said No One Eve*r, *It'll Be Fun They Said*, *And Then He Said*, *What If I Told You*, and *Be Like*; the latter in particular sometimes combines with very complex content being 'quoted' or demonstrated, as we illustrate. Chapter 8 expands the discussion to quotations and what we call 'dialogue labelling' in other memes, not featuring explicit reporting verbs, but relying on depiction of interlocutors, interpretation of embodied behaviour, and sometimes quotation marks to signal the embedded Discourse Spaces, and viewpoints exchanged, in them. We also analyse a range of discourse patterns building on the basic *Me/Also Me* introduced in Chapter 6, and round off with the *Repeat after Me* meme.

Having surveyed many elements that determine the typical forms and meanings of memes, Chapter 9 turns to memetic experimentation. Meme blends,

metamemes, or cases of 'memeception' (or recursivity in memes) all manipulate aspects of form to create new meaning effects. Antimemes, on the other hand, do not alter the form, but change the viewpoint structure and so, the meaning. Some memes, finally, appear to enjoy memetic form for form's sake, and border on art forms; the so-called *Loss* meme is our main example here.

Chapters 10 and 11 both look 'outwards', to broader contexts of use where memes and meme-like forms circulate: social media platforms (Chapter 10) and advertising (Chapter 11). If, in earlier chapters, we mainly studied memes in a 'platform-neutral' kind of way, in Chapter 10 we consider more platform-specific forms exploiting possibilities such as the ready integration of emoji on X/Twitter or the integration with audio and video on TikTok. We also pay attention to the co-construction of memetic discourse by multiple discourse participants in online exchanges. Overall, we suggest that the easy transfer across platforms and modes reveals a kind of memetic mindset in which discourse takes shape online, even where this does not necessarily involve fully formed or identifiable memes in a strict sense.

A similar observation pertains to the advertisements we study in Chapter 11, where our most interesting examples don't so much directly borrow a fully formed, recognizable meme to reuse it in an ad (though this, too, is sometimes done). Instead, really successful memetically inspired ads partly borrow from existing meme codes, such as *when*-memes or the *Sections of* meme, and adapt these creatively to suit the persuasive goals identified. This again suggests to us that aspects of the grammar of memes are affecting other forms of communication.

We tie together and reflect on this emerging grammar of memes in the closing Chapter 12, where we also revisit some of the questions first asked in this opening chapter, about why linguists should study memes, or how the specific kind of multimodality in the memes we studied differs from other multimodal genres.

Colour versions of all the figures featured in this book are available under the 'Resources' section of the website [www.cambridge.org/languageofmemes]. We will occasionally draw attention to aspects of colour and composition that may be hard to discern in the black and white print version, but we hope the availability of this online counterpart will make such points easier to follow.

2 Memes and Multimodal Figuration

In Chapter 1, we presented a brief argument for a constructional approach to memes, highlighting our understanding of memetic form and meaning as constituting an interwoven pair. In other words, there is a formal pattern which correlates with meaning. Our example in Chapter 1, of the *Good Girl Gina* meme, suggests that image and text *both* belong to the formal template correlated with a range of meanings regarding behaviours expected of 'perfect girlfriends'. Our approach stands in contrast to a range of analyses of multimodal artefacts (though, admittedly, not memes) where the meaning represented is analysed as metaphorical. We thus consider it important to clarify our understanding of multimodal figuration, as it applies to memes. This chapter will first briefly consider the concept of 'multimodal metaphor', to then move on to show how a specific class of memes, known as *when*-memes, prompts a figurative meaning in a multimodal context.

2.1 Metaphors and Blends in Multimodal Artefacts

The framework of 'multimodal metaphor' (see, e.g., Forceville 1996, Forceville & Urios-Aparisi 2009, Forceville 2009, 2013, 2020) builds on some of the assumptions underlying the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), initiated by Lakoff & Johnson (1980, 1999). CMT de-focuses specific linguistic expressions to propose an understanding of metaphor as a configuration of two conceptual domains (the Source and the Target). Such a mapping allows us to see an expression, such as *We have to move forward*, which suggests achieving PROGRESS by continued involvement in the activity in question, as reliant on the conceptual domain of GOAL ORIENTED (FORWARD) MOTION THROUGH SPACE.[1] Such a mapping licenses a number of expressions, while remaining as the basic underlying pattern. Since the idea of conceptual metaphor assumes a relationship between two domains (e.g. motion forward

[1] We adopt the convention of presenting conceptual metaphors in small capitals, while we use initial capitalization for domains and frames (i.e. small structured packets of knowledge, such as Commercial Transaction, which involves buyer, seller, goods transacted, money exchanged; cf. Fillmore 1982, 1985).

and progress) and puts no restrictions on the range of expressions available to represent the mapping, it was only a matter of time before someone suggested that CMT applies to forms of expression other than language – for example gesture or visual artefacts.

The original formulation of multimodal metaphor assumed that the artefact would signal the relevant source and target domains through different expressive modalities. Further work, however, capitalized on the fact that the target domain (the actual meaning) can be deduced rather than seen in some form or other, and thus extended into the interest in visual artefacts. The overlap between 'multimodal' and 'visual' is now the norm – for example, El Refaie (2013, 2019) talks about visual metaphors when studying graphic narratives combining image and text, while not consistently addressing the interaction between words and images. For comparison, the analyses offered by, for example, Pérez-Sobrino (2017) and Pérez-Sobrino, Littlemore & Ford (2021), look at the problem more broadly.

When Fauconnier and Turner (1996, 1998, 2002) proposed the concept of a blend, they in a sense relegated conceptual metaphor to the rank of one type of a blend (single-scope blend). Multimodal metaphor theorists could now choose to focus on figurations of two kinds, especially since, as was shown in Dancygier & Sweetser (2014), blends and metaphors as analytical tools can co-exist, as they capture different facts about patterns of figuration. What is the difference, then? Dancygier and Sweetser argue that metaphors (of all kinds) are not ad hoc figurative patterns, because they license experientially based patterns which can yield an unpredictable number of either colloquial or creative expressions. Blends do not have to have this broad reach, and they are often ad hoc solutions to meaning construction problems. A good example to compare the two analytical tools is the frame of Debate, or Argument. The ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphorical mapping has been proposed as early as in *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), as an example of a mapping which yields a number of colloquial expressions – the mapping explains why *attack, defend*, *strategy*, *defeat*, and so on are all terms that can be used to describe combat or, metaphorically, a debate. For comparison, blending analysts discuss the *Debate with Kant* blend (Fauconnier & Turner 2002), as when a philosophy lecturer frames his critical discussion of Kant's ideas by using verbs such as *say*, *agree*, *disagree*, *reply*, and so on. Such discourse is a lively way to describe the difference of opinion between two philosophers who cannot meet and discuss their views, but it requires blending the contexts in which the disagreeing philosophers belong. In the case of the War metaphor, the vocabulary used captures the concepts shared by the Competition family of metaphors – there being opponents and a series of actions meant to win over the opponent, until one admits defeat. Nothing like that happens in the *Debate with Kant* – the conversation takes place only in the blend, and the meanings of

words used (*disagree* or *reply*) have not become metaphorical – there is a fictive event of verbal exchange of views, referred to as fictive interaction by Pascual (Pascual 2014, Pascual and Sandler 2016), but outside of being fictive the event is the same as if it were real. One of the crucial differences between metaphors and blends in this case is the choice of verbs – verbs of combat in the metaphor and verbs of communication in the blend.

It is important to note how the treatment of figurative forms, especially metaphors and blends, affects our understanding of multimodal artefacts (especially advertisements, posters, etc.). In an example used to introduce the multimodal metaphor framework, Forceville discusses an ad for a coffee machine, in which the machine (of the Philips Senseo brand) appears to be bending down in a gesture of offering you two perfect cups of coffee situated on a tray (Forceville et al. 2006: 99–100, Forceville 2008: 468). Forceville suggests that the ad can be described by proposing conceptual metaphors such as COFFEE MACHINE IS SERVANT or COFFEE MACHINE IS BUTLER. Both formulations, in terms of the proposals advocated by Lakoff & Johnson (1980, 1999), would suggest that we have, can access, or can create a conceptual link between the domain of Coffee Machines and the domain of Servants or Butlers. The conceptual salience of such a mapping is likely to be very low, if only because of a low experiential salience of such a mapping: not many consumers looking to buy a coffee machine have servants or butlers serving them coffee. Conceptual metaphors are stable conceptual patterns, rooted in image-schematic concepts and in primary experience, while visual creations such as the one in the ad are better described as blends, thus allowing us to talk about inferences, meaning emergence, and creativity, while not overextending the applicability of conceptual metaphor. In the case of COFFEE MACHINE IS SERVANT/BUTLER, the proposed metaphoricity is vague. It is not clear to us why the coffee machine in the ad would be a 'servant' just because it appears to be 'serving' coffee. If any metaphorical mapping needs to be posited here (we're not convinced), a lower level of schematicity would be appropriate, and so a familiar metaphor such as MACHINES ARE PEOPLE would work better. While there might be much to say here about how we read body postures, and how the image of a coffee machine (which is upright, like a human body) can be made to look expressive, we would then focus on the process that underlies the emergence of the image and its meaning – and that is the domain of blending analyses.

Thus, there seems to be no settled understanding of the relationship between multimodal artefacts and figuration. Many researchers consider multimodal and/or visual artefacts to be metaphorical, even when the postulated metaphoricity seems to be construed quite vaguely. At the same time, the concept of a blend, which often appears to be useful, is not always explored. There are two points which are important from our perspective. One, the figuration

discussions have left internet memes essentially untouched and ripe for exploration. And two, the expectation, in multimodal metaphor work, that all multimodal artefacts will surely in some ways be metaphorical, and the shunning of blending tools in their analyses, have kept us hesitant for a while as to the degree or form figuration can take in memes. As we show in later chapters, metaphoricity and blending have important roles to play in memes, but not as genre-defining patterns consistently connecting image and text – which might put our proposals at odds with the dominant trend in the multimodal metaphor framework. However, as we show below, simile may be the type of figuration which has the more prominent role to play in memes. We will introduce our view of simile in Section 2.2, to then show its role in so-called *when*-memes.

2.2 Perception, Experience, and Similative Meaning

The trope of simile covers a wide range of examples (see, e.g., Israel et al. 2004, Moder 2008, Dancygier & Sweetser 2014, Harding 2017, Lou 2021), some of which rely on visual or other sensory similarity, while many appeal to broadly construed correlations in experience. We would like to start with just two examples. The first concerns a tweet. On the evening of the dramatic US election day in 2020, Jimmy Kimmel (the host of one of the late night shows) tweeted *This is like being awake during your own surgery* (@jimmykimmel on X/Twitter, 4 November 2020),[2] comparing the experience of waiting for the election results to the imagined painful and gory event of being operated on while being conscious. The simile is quite typical in that it compares the experience of a new and yet undescribed event to the imaginary experience which appears to be similar in its experiential aspects – in this case, pain and trauma. Thus, it uses a (rather dramatically) embodied event to render an emotional experience of the long election night. In other words, such commonly used similes do not rely just on a perceived similarity, though basic similes of the *her lips are like red roses* type often do. Rather, they create experiential similarity by evoking a (possibly never experienced) event which provides an exaggerated and vivid representation of how the speaker/writer feels while experiencing a real event. We also need to note that the subject of the sentence (*This*) uses a proximal demonstrative to point at the anxiety Kimmel is going through when he is writing his tweet.

Our second example is a notice from the government of Texas, instructing people about proper hand-washing in the context of COVID-19 (@roundrocktexas on Instagram, 3 March 2020). The main text of the notice, headed

[2] Since Twitter's takeover, in late 2022, by Elon Musk, the platform has undergone a series of changes, including a name change to a single-letter name, 'X'. To improve readability, we will use 'X/Twitter' instead.

Texas coronavirus prevention, reads as follows: *Wash your hands like you just got done slicing jalapeños for a batch of nachos and you need to take your contacts out*. It is followed by much smaller print, in brackets, adding *(That's like 20 seconds of scrubbing, y'all.)*. The simile used describes pandemic hygiene by evoking another situation where cleaning your hands well saves you a lot of pain. The situation described (slicing hot peppers and then touching your eyes) is, again, vivid and exaggerated. Importantly, washing your hands in this case prevents immediate and acute pain, while washing your hands to prevent COVID-19 infection is a long-term health strategy. The comparison is thus only related to the thoroughness of hand-washing and the potential rewards of such diligence – avoidance of pain. The second use of *like* (*That is like 20 seconds of scrubbing, y'all*) is relying further on the hedging function of *like* (cf. D'Arcy 2017).

Thinking beyond these two examples, but relying on them as good supporting evidence, we want to join the researchers of figuration who have shown that simile is useful not only in constructing basic visual comparisons. On the contrary, it is more effective in comparing experiential construals and matching situations on the basis of the kind of experience they prompt.

This common observation about simile is not a part of how 'multimodal' or 'visual' metaphor analysts refer to simile. Within the multimodal metaphor framework, simile is talked about specifically as 'pictorial simile' (see, for example, the analysis of graphic narratives in El Refaie 2019). The defining feature of such a visual trope is that both objects construed as similar are present in the image, and are literally shown side by side. While this kind of highlighting of similarity in visual artefacts suggests processes such as matching images in visual terms in order to show aspects of conceptualization or perception, linguistic uses of simile span a much broader range of cases. Indeed, linguistic uses of simile can cover a very broad spectrum of experiential meanings (as in the hand-washing ad) and descriptions of emotions (as in *This is like being awake during your own surgery*). The range of possible similative construals, visual, experiential, and emotional, has been fully described in Lou (2021). While going into the details of Lou's description (2021) would be beyond the limits of this project, we need to point out that Lou discusses a range of multimodal artefacts (memes and internet art), where there is no overt signal of simile (that is, a word such as *like* or *as*), and yet the meaning expressed is readily understood as describing what one *feels like* by providing an image which profiles an appropriate situation.

2.3 *When*-Memes and the 'Feel Like' Simile

As Lou shows, one of the examples of a genre of multimodal artefacts which consistently profile the 'feel like' meaning is the so-called *when*-meme. One

Figure 2.1 The *Tin with Two Lids when*-meme.

such example which Lou (2021: 140) describes starts with the *when*-clause *When people say they are open-minded* and is completed by an image of a can that has two lids (Figure 2.1). For a full colour version of this example, and of all other figures featured in this book, we refer to the 'Resources' section on the website [www.cambridge.org/languageofmemes].

After you have pulled one layer away (thinking that the can is now open), you see another lid (and so the can remains closed and its content remains inaccessible). In the context of people who claim they are open-minded, it can only mean that they are in fact still closed off and not 'opening up' emotionally. In other words, *when*-memes such as this one can be paraphrased as complex situations: *When people say they are open minded, it feels like you are trying to open a can with a double lid – once you have removed the outer lid, you see another one underneath and the content of the can remains inaccessible/the content of the person's mind remains inaccessible*. The meme is apparently simple and easy to interpret, but the paraphrase is quite convoluted, because it tries to describe a rather complex feeling of disappointment about an unfulfilled promise. The crucial part is the need to refer to *feeling like X*, where X is a situation that evokes an emotional reaction Y similar to the one described by the *when*-clause.

Examples of *when*-memes discussed by Lou (2017, 2021) are multimodal artefacts which can prompt similative figurative meaning as a matter of their standard communicative goal. They can juxtapose two situations or their visual representations not because these situations are 'pictorially similar', but because they are 'experientially similar'. In the *when*-memes studied by Lou,

the text and the image seem to be related by the similative 'feel like' reading, such that being in a situation A feels like being in a situation B, but the correlation between the situations is a part of the meaning of the *when*-meme as a meme genre, not just the juxtaposition of A and B. As our discussion throughout the book will show, memetic meanings rely on similative correlations quite often, but not in the way suggested by multimodal metaphor theorists. In other words, the so-called domains are not allocated to image versus text, and the situations aligned as evoking similar feelings are not juxtaposed side by side. We argue that the similative meaning is there because it is the emergent meaning of the *when*-meme as such. This is the phenomenon we discuss throughout this book by referring to memes as constructions – form/meaning pairs, where all formal and interpretive features participate in the constructional template.

One of the important points Lou has made is that multimodal artefacts can express similative meaning without using the standard similative form – the preposition *like*. This seems to be possible because the image selected evokes a situation to which we react emotionally without having to process the whole linguistically. In fact, a very common function of memes is to allow the Meme Maker (MM) to comment on a situation or vent about emotionally charged events. Similative meaning, more specifically, is often about describing the experience of a situation by matching it with another situation which is easier to understand in terms of the experience evoked. This is the case in standard similes, such as *The classroom was noisy like a beehive*, where the quality of sound is rendered by reference to another frame which evokes the relevant experience more saliently. We also find it in more creative and more complex similes, such as Kimmel's tweet and the Texas internet poster above. In general, as was argued in Dancygier & Sweetser (2014), the figure of simile is about using a figurative form to evoke the right kind of experience, and thus the image constructed for similative purposes is often vivid and exaggerated. This becomes even more interesting in the cases where the speaker or writer wants to describe how they feel (rather than their basic perception), and we are convinced by Lou's argument that *when*-memes are designed to represent how the MM feels about a situation by using evocative images that profile the same feeling.

These images and situations referred to by *when*-memes can be quite complex, while profiling a very specific experience. In their 2014 textbook, Dancygier and Sweetser describe simile as a 'limited scope blend', to address the fact that the scope of the correlation between the situations compared may be very narrow – which means that simile, unlike conceptual metaphor, is not easily used in extended discourse, yielding rich inferences.

Returning now to the question we have posed regarding the connection between multimodality and figuration, we can argue that, perhaps surprisingly,

some memes rely standardly on a figurative pattern, but it is simile, not metaphor. Multimodality in general is not necessarily dependent on figuration, but when figurative meaning is present, as in many ads and certain meme templates, it is integrated into the kind of meaning being constructed and is not the only aspect of meaning worth discussing. We will return to the question in Chapter 4, to show the various ways in which figuration can participate in memetic meaning. We will also show other instances where similative meanings are likely to emerge in memes.

We have also now introduced the approach wherein memes can be talked about as form-meaning pairs – constructions. The constructional meaning emerging does not have to, but can be figurative, though it is not necessarily restricted to metaphor. Memetic figuration as a general phenomenon thus emerges out of a combination of factors – form- or frame-related. We will follow the constructional approach throughout the book, after we specify its assumptions briefly in the next section.

2.4 *When*-Memes as Constructions

Consider the *when*-meme in Figure 2.2. It uses a *when*-clause, describing a possible situation (in fact, it is a kind of situation any student has experienced at some point). The meme matches the incoherent and messy look of the wall with the incoherent and messy answer to an exam question. It allows the viewer to understand the student's experience – the frustration coming from offering something inadequate and disjointed – in comparison to the experience of the person who repaired the wall in such an unsatisfactory way.

Figure 2.2 The *Messy Wall Repair when*-meme.

When-memes have a rather specific form and structure. Each *when*-meme starts with a temporal clause, similar to generic adverbial-temporal linguistic constructions, such as *When you forget your umbrella, you have to hide from the rain somewhere not to get wet.* The temporal subordinate clause, describing a situation the speaker wants to consider, is introduced by the conjunction *when*, and followed by the main clause, detailing the predicted consequences of being left in the rain without any protection. In the *when*-meme in Figure 2.2, the elaborate *when*-clause is completed constructionally by an image representing a messily repaired wall. The image fills the slot of the main clause, but, unlike in the linguistic construction, it does not describe the real-life consequences of the *when*-situation, but rather the emotional (*feeling like Y*) situation. The form of the *when*-meme thus resembles the form of the linguistic construction (*When X, Y*) but *Y* is visual, not verbal, and profiles the experience similar to what the consequence of *X* would prompt – in this case, the sense of having produced something disjointed and sloppy. The constructional meaning of a *when*-meme can thus be rendered as follows: the *experience* of the *when*-situation is construed as similar to the *experience* of the situation in the image (*When-X feels like Y*). This constructional pattern is characteristic of all *when*-memes.

We can speculate here that the prompt for making such memes is seeing a vivid image which seems to represent a type of experience, which the MM relates to a memory or conceptualization of a different situation. In other words, we assume that the image of the messily filled out hole evokes an association with an example of behaviour which was not competently executed and created a messy and disjointed result.

2.5 *When*-Memes, Experiential Meanings, and Multimodality

The section above shows some of the questions a linguistic analysis of memes can address by approaching memes as constructions. We will make such observations more specific in the remainder of the book, considering formal features such as layout, constructional role of images, use of pronouns, or argument suppression. In this section, we want to continue the discussion of *when*-memes as examples of multimodal artefacts, to consider two central issues in meme analysis – the nature of multimodal constructions and the emergence and salience of experiential meanings.

The point we have made, about the power of images to evoke experiences in a different domain of behaviours, may be further confirmed by looking at *when*-memes using various representations of facial expressions and body postures. In the *Teacher Is Watching* meme in Figure 2.3, the facial expression in the image is dreamy and disconnected, meant to match the look of a student trying hard to avoid being caught cheating. Importantly, the face is clearly meant to evoke the pretence created by the student, and not the invigilating teacher's

Figure 2.3 The *Teacher Is Watching when*-meme.

attentive face. Also, the MM suggests that the expression in the image is the kind of expression they would adopt when cheating in class. In the case of this meme, then, all the features of the assumed embodied behaviour contribute to the meaning – the relaxed body posture, the wondering eye-gaze, and the indifferent facial expression – all these are meant to suggest being deep in thought. The combination of features in such memes suggests that in memetic discourse both types of multimodality may be present in one artefact – this meme is an image-text combination, in which the image represents the embodied aspects of multimodal interaction, while suggesting the whole interactive scene (complete with the classroom environment, the teacher, and the student). Memes can thus be 'multimodal' in all the relevant ways.

This 'multimodal duality' explains why so many *when*-memes use classical art pieces as the image. In such memes, representations of faces and body postures are read as parallel to behaviours then described in the *when*-clause text (Piata 2020, Barclay & Downing 2023). In the example in Figure 2.4, the meme uses the 1876 *Absinthe Drinker* painting by Degas, described as representing loneliness and exclusion. In the meme, it is meant to evoke the body posture and facial expression of someone still sitting at the lunch table and impassively pondering the approaching (and clearly unwelcome) time of return to work.

As we have seen, *when*-memes represent experiences of various kinds – the way one behaves in situations or the way one feels about that situation. In fact, some *when*-memes, described by Lou (2021) as synaesthetic, attempt to render very basic embodied experiences such as taste. One such example is Figure 2.5.

Figure 2.4 The *Absinthe Drinker when*-meme.

Figure 2.5 The *Cold Water and Mint* synaesthetic *when*-meme.

The expression of taste via perception of light is truly ingenious, even if the information actually provided is not valuable or even personal. But we need to note that *when*-memes are extremely popular, apparently because specific and evocative representations of body postures (whether human or not), facial expressions, or salient experiences allow MMs to represent their moods and responses to (sometimes very unimportant) events with efficiency, speed, and a dose of humour. In other words, the flexibility and enjoyment of producing memes outweigh the need to communicate something specific and of informative value.

2.6 *If 2020 Was X* Memes and Further Constructional Complexities

Multimodal construction of experiential meanings is a salient feature of many memes and so *when*-memes are not the only cases of memes targeting similative meaning. Another such example is the *If 2020 Was X* meme (Kang et al. 2023). The year 2020 was difficult for a lot of people, mainly because of the pandemic, as the rise of the novel coronavirus forced people to change the way they lived their lives. In the meme in question, the text sets up a comparison between the year 2020 and a situation *X*, but then chooses an image that represents an undesirable, dysfunctional, or outright dangerous specimen of *X*. In one such example, given here in Figure 2.6, the top text says *If 2020 was a slide* . . ., and the image shows a (presumably photoshopped) image of a slide in a children's playground. Instead of leaning evenly towards the ground, the

Figure 2.6 *If 2020 Was X* meme.

slide becomes an abrupt drop, which, if real, would be extremely dangerous. There are quite a few such memes, showing playgrounds that are potentially deadly: in one case, the surface is that of a giant cheese grater, in another there is an open manhole at the bottom of the slide, and so on.

The construction of the meme is more complex than the *when*-meme case. Putting the choice of the verb form aside (*were* and *was* now both seem to be common choices), the text of the meme starts out by setting up a hypothetical conditional construction parallel to expressions such as *If I were you* or *If I were the President*. Such conditionals typically set up an imaginary situation in which the speaker places herself in the 'conceptual shoes' of another person, while maintaining her own set of values and judgements. This split has been discussed (e.g. in Fauconnier 1997: Ch. 4) in terms of reference to the 'role' versus the 'value', so that in the *If I were the President, . . .* example, the speaker assumes the role of the most influential politician in the country to describe what their personal values would make them do. The typical continuation in the apodosis is a sentence describing the consequences of the situation set up in the *if* clause (as in *If I were the President, I would fund free tuition*). In the meme, however, this pattern is pushed much further – not only is X clearly in a category that has nothing to do with the year 2020, it does not even represent the core category, but rather a peripheral, obviously defective and dangerous member of it. In other words, the meme is about the fact that we experienced 2020 as a disastrous year, presented in ways comparable to the imagined experience of the dangerous or faulty X. Even considering that the meme does not use a verbal representation of the situation following from *2020 being X*, the meaning yields itself easily to an interpretation which is a conditional but also has a simile embedded in it: *If 2020 was a slide, it would be like the one you can see – no fun and harmful*. There are numerous examples of the meme, all relying on images pointing to the sense of disappointment and danger, since 2020 started out full of hope and then thwarted all the expectations people may have had. In all these instances, the similative pattern is the same – the unsuccessful and disappointing year is compared to objects which are also disappointing, or outright dangerous. The pandemic and its consequences are not overtly mentioned, but the Meme Viewers are expected to map the dangers of the X object represented onto the dangers of a serious infectious disease. There is a clear figurative pattern in all such memes, but the meaning replicates what language similes do and does not assign domains neatly to expressive modes. It relies on evocation of situations with similar emotional impact, without placing them visually side by side, or making them visually similar.

As we have shown above in our brief account of *when*-memes and *If 2020 Was X* memes, memes create meaning in complex ways. They can rely on figurative meaning, but then they are more likely to use similative meaning,

because of the overall memetic focus on rendering an understanding of experience. They can evoke specific constructions (such as a temporal or conditional formula), but do not profile the entire form, and insert images in lieu of the main clauses of the temporal and conditional constructions evoked. The images are not meant to represent anything specific, but are used instead to evoke experiences. Such constructional strategies show clearly that memes are anything but simple combinations of text and image. Throughout this book, we will work to demonstrate memetic construction of meaning and give a full account of the constructional means used in various types. To achieve this, we will focus on memes which follow an identifiable pattern, but we will also show how different patterns may rely on select shared components. The grammar of memes requires a dual description, where individual expressive means (such as pronouns or discourse forms) are viewed from a general cross-memetic perspective, but the full patterns, or constructions, are also accounted for. In subsequent chapters, we will attempt to address these goals.

We have provided this brief overview of *when*-memes and *If 2020 Was X* memes here to further illustrate our approach to memes and draw the reader's attention to several important aspects of memetic discourse:

- Memes are not, as such, multimodal metaphors, though their constructional meaning may involve figurative patterns, especially simile. Simile, as a trope designed to represent perceptions and experiences, fits the overall role memes play, that of representing stance.
- Memetic multimodality is a multimodal genre in its own right, different from other genres such as advertising, as memes are not simply combinations of images and text, and images are typically not repetitions of the textual content. For example, *when*-memes have a strict form, inspired by, but not repeating, linguistic temporal constructions.
- Memes are constructed via specific rules (which we may tentatively refer to as 'memetic grammar'). They rely on linguistic constructions to a degree, but they often modify them in crucial ways. Images fill specific slots or play other specific roles in memetic constructions.
- Memes also use the selected layout as a meaningful aspect of form – for example, choices such as Top Text and Bottom Text prompt specific processing. In the case of *when*-memes and *If 2020 was X*, entire images fill the constructional slot reserved for the main clause, thus completing the constructional meaning of the meme.
- Memes are very efficient means of representing moods, opinions, or experiences. They rely on humour in expressing opinions ranging from self-aware criticism to poking fun at others.

We should also add that in order to represent complex experiential patterns, memes rely very heavily on currently salient frames – whether with regard to

observed behaviours, political events, cultural norms or fashions and fads. Memes which have been around for too long may become more and more opaque to those who have not seen the initial stages. This does not mean that analysing memes is pointless. Rather, it suggests with increased force that the meaning of memes emerges on the basis of reasoning patterns built via memetic forms. Properly understanding those forms is a productive way to uncover how the new and still mysterious patterns of multimodal meaning construction actually work. Also, a better understanding of memetic mechanisms may facilitate clearer perception of how multimodal (text and image) artefacts affect our use of language. Memes have started inspiring other multimodal genres, such as advertisements (see Chapter 11), and they also promote a more dynamic understanding of linguistic constructions.

3 Image Macro Memes

Since memes are often defined in terms of their use and communicative role in various online communities on specific sites, general aspects of form and paths of meaning construal are typically not included in the definition. At the same time, the formal specificity of many memes is naturally acknowledged via easily fillable templates available on meme-generator sites. We will use Chapters 3, 4, and 5 to describe three major formal patterns (image macros, labels, and grids), taking the role of the memetic image as the starting point, while establishing the primary formal and grammatical patterns used in memetic text. Our focus throughout will be on the way in which image-text combinations can be seen as constructional patterns, and on the paths of meaning emergence specific to the given meme type.

While meanings of memes emerge on the basis of formal features as well as frames and event types evoked, there seem to be several structural features jointly constructing the specific template of a given meme type.

One variable is that of the degree of image entrenchment, ranging from fully pre-determined to open-ended, one-off image choices, appropriate to the situation or current events described. An entrenched image or Image Macro (IM) becomes the most easily recognized aspect of memetic form, while a Non-Entrenched Image (NEI) is chosen based on the event commented on and evokes a frame relevant to the stance the meme as a whole is expressing.

In terms of text added onto the image, many memes use both Top Text (TT) and Bottom Text (BT) areas, though there are memes relying on Top Text only. The form and content of text (especially Top Text) can be fully entrenched; for example, the *One Does Not Simply* meme, which we turn to in the next section, always uses the same phrase in Top Text, while *Said No One Ever* (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2016; see also Chapter 7) requires a variety of the entrenched phrase in the Bottom Text. Furthermore, TT and BT may require specific linguistic features (tense, specific conjunctions such as *if* or *when*, etc.). However, not all memes are structured in terms of TT and/or BT. In one group of memes, labelling memes (Chapter 4), the added text is superimposed over the selected elements of the image (IM or NEI).

Grid memes (Chapter 5) compose images into multi-cell structures, to be read left to right and top to bottom.

The above structural conventions will be discussed in more detail in the next chapters. Here, we begin with possibly the most traditional and easily recognizable type, using an entrenched IM, TT, and BT. But first, we will consider the underlying reason why individual memes build on a stable memetic template, while describing wildly divergent situations.

3.1 Social Media, Categorization, and Virality

In earlier work (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017b) we demonstrated what makes memes replicate, and what exactly is replicated – in other words, what constitutes the core of how memes are used by Meme Makers (MMs) and how they are immediately understood by Meme Viewers (MVs). There are essentially two ways we distinguish. The one-off, ad hoc memes are usually based on NEIs, or indeed two such contrasted images, which carry an immediate humorous evaluation of a current event. We will discuss an example of such a meme (the *Hawley Running* meme) below. On the other hand, memes based on IMs and TT plus BT do not evaluate the specific situation depicted. They evoke a pattern familiar to MVs, and represent a situation for MVs to understand as an example. Our primary example of such a meme has been the *One Does Not Simply* (ODNS) meme (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017b: 573–7).

All instances of the ODNS meme use the same IM – a screenshot of a character from *The Lord of the Rings*, Boromir (played by Sean Bean), making a distinctive 'point-making' hand gesture while talking and looking intently at the addressees (off-camera). The still is taken from a fraught and intense scene, in which Boromir discourages other characters from going into the country of Mordor by telling them ominously *One does not simply walk into Mordor*. In the scene and the text referred to, he presents entering Mordor as an extremely difficult course of action. The meme using this scene and text replicates the TT (*One Does Not Simply*), and adds a new BT in every case, providing another example of 'an extremely difficult' or 'futile' action. The meme has thus morphed into a representation of a **category** – thus creating a stable meaning, and a recognizable, stable, immediately usable form. This meaning is specialized in the meme, as the words taken on their own (unsupported by the IM) can function differently, particularly as a reprimand (e.g. *one does not simply barge into one's boss's office without knocking*). All the next MM needs to do is use a meme generator to insert a new BT, thus adding another member to the category of 'futile propositions'. One example, for instance, uses as BT the line *Save Africa by donating $1*, referring to the case of charity campaigns which often promise to solve enormous problems if given minimal donations. The MMs know what category of events the meme

represents and can instantly produce scores of memes simply by referring to the new category member in BT. The 'replication' process is easy because the category is well-defined and clearly represented, the template is accessible with one click, and there is no need to fill in any details about the specific situation. The meme is now a token of a general category, not a specific event.

Categorization processes of this type – essentially guaranteeing an easy spread of an idea – seem to be common on social media, not just among memes. Our observations suggest the emergence of experiential categories is an important feature of internet discourse as a whole. To support this, we now consider an example of a Twitter hashtag, #CDCsays.[1]

The hashtag #CDCsays emerged in what we might call the 'second' stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the tendency of public health authorities was to relax existing restrictions widely adopted in the first stage. In late December 2021, the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that people diagnosed with COVID-19 need to isolate for five days, not ten – which was the earlier recommendation. The responses on social media made it clear that not all sections of the public were convinced it was safe to make that change. X/Twitter soon saw the emergence of the #CDCsays hashtag, where, rather than seriously debate the merits of the decisions, X/Twitter users posted imaginary examples of absurd medical and behavioural advice. Here are some examples (among many more circulating at the time):

(1) The CDC says you can now run with scissors
#cdcsays it's OK to use a dryer while taking a bath
The CDC says just wear jeans and a cute top
The CDC recommends eating only leftover Christmas cookies until the new year
CDC says you can now eat the Silica Gel packet if you're feeling a little peckish
The CDC now says that people who are fully vaccinated should still not get back together with their ex.

These tweets seem to perform some of the same communicative tasks as memes. There are two features of note. On the one hand, the tweets are prompted by a specific event (the change in COVID policy announced by the CDC) in a way similar to one-off memes – ridiculing the decision announced, by offering obviously uninformed and dangerous advice (we all know that using a hair dryer while immersed in water can lead to swift electrocution), suggesting something comfortingly irrelevant (jeans and a cute top), or simply silly (eat only cookies). On the other hand, similarly to memes we focus on in this chapter, the whole series of tweets creates a **category** of absurd advice, to

[1] For a broader discussion of the communicative functions of hashtags in discourse on X/Twitter, see Zappavigna 2018.

which the advice to reduce the period of COVID isolation now belongs. In other words, rather than say something equivalent to *CDC gave us a recommendation that we feel was not well-founded*, tweeters ridiculed it by creating an imaginary category of misguided suggestions and attributing them to CDC. Such discourse strategies make the point, but do so in a very economical way, without elaborate argumentation, while also making it humorous and shared by a group of social media users.

The hashtag here gives a quick and convenient label to the category, and it can be playfully used to expand the category. As we show below, memes are often used for venting about daily occurrences which qualify as 'trying to do something impossible', 'having an encounter with an inconsiderate person', or 'wishing your girlfriend were perfect' and assign these events to memetically available categories. The emergence and use of the #CDCsays hashtag reflects the process of setting up a category, so that the event that prompted the whole stream is evaluated. And finally, the hashtag can be seen as metonymically evoking the original CDC announcement, along with the social media response to it. As we show in this chapter, some types of memes perform a similar function, as they metonymically evoke a whole category of tasks or behaviours, adding examples which expand the category while allowing the MM to vent about an event they have encountered.

3.2 Non-Entrenched Images and One-Off Memes

We will start with a look at an example from the meme-storm caused by the incident shown in the final summer hearing of the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th, 2021 Attack on the United States Capitol.

The January 6th Committee meetings were all broadcast on American TV in the summer of 2022, hence the viral nature of many of the images and facts presented. In the July 22 hearing, the Committee showed two images (video clips) of Josh Hawley, the Republican senator from Missouri. On the fateful day, Hawley, like other members of Congress, arrived at the Capitol. When passing the gathering protesters on the steps of the Capitol, he made a 'fist pump' gesture to demonstrate his support. Later on, however, as the acts of the crowd became more and more aggressive and outright dangerous to members of Congress, he swiftly ran away from the building, and was caught on video while running through the hallways. The clips of these behaviours presented at the hearing prompted laughter in the audience, but also quickly went viral and spawned countless memes, all unambiguously judging Hawley to be hypocritical and cowardly. The stills from the videos are a prime example of how memes prompted by a specific, impactful event use visual information. Neither of the images used in Figure 3.1 has (to our knowledge) gone on to be featured much in later memes (in other words, they

Figure 3.1 Non-Entrenched Image meme: *Hawley Running.*

have remained 'non-entrenched'), yet their use is highly effective. The images rely on the viewer's knowledge of the context (which also means that these memes may become largely incomprehensible with time), but also build heavily on the significance of body language in 'reading' a person's character. It is generally the case that memes work best when relying on widely recognized means of expressing a person's attitude or emotion. This instant 'readability' of certain embodied features makes a meme such as this one a very efficient tool to communicate instant evaluation of the senator's behaviour.

The fist pump gesture is a generally recognized token of solidarity and moral support. Hawley's gesture, in the top half of Figure 3.1, could only be judged questionable once we find out that he was showing support to people who wanted to violently take over the Capitol and interfere with the Congress's vital job – certifying the result of the election. The still in the bottom half of Figure 3.1, showing Hawley running, does not represent any intended communication on his part, but in the context of the approaching mob, he is immediately seen to be not just running, but running away from danger. In any other context, a member of Congress running down the hallway holding some documents would be construed as an example of someone late for an important meeting. But the damning effect intended by the maker of the meme is finally in the juxtaposition of these images – a fearless supporter first, a cowardly man running away soon after. The combination shows Hawley as dishonest first in manifesting his support for dangerous rioters and then running away not to end up being hurt by them, and thus abandoning other members of Congress to face the violence.

The images convey their damning effect through three meaning construction channels: frame metonymy, depiction, and construal of emotions. The context of Hawley's behaviour acts frame-metonymically as a lens through which the actually represented actions are to be seen – so that running becomes 'running away' and showing support becomes 'showing support to a mob which you then choose to escape from'. The whole context of the January 6 insurrection contributes to the meaning of the meme and will likely render it incomprehensible as time passes. The idea of 'depiction' (Clark 2016) allows us to see gestures and embodied behaviour as communicating meanings without verbalizing them. The image in the meme shows Hawley using a gesture of solidarity to address people who have since faced trials and sometimes prison terms for acts which a US senator should have never condoned – it depicts him as aligning himself with the dangerous mob. And last but not least, we want to refer to Barrett's (2017) argument that facial expressions do not unambiguously represent emotions, because our evaluation of emotional responses is constructed (in the same way in which other meanings are constructed, we might add). Thus, an event-bound meme such as the *Hawley Running* meme relies on very deep ties to events addressed and people depicted. The image component of the meme in Figure 3.1 has thus not given rise to a stable IM, repeatable and adaptable to ever changing contexts. (Note that the textual component is part of a longer trend that predates the events of January 6th and continues to flourish, where MMs combine the phrases *how it started* and *how it's going* or *how it ended* with a sequence of two images.)

Most memes, regardless of formal variety, express MMs' opinions or viewpoints, relying on contextual frame evocation, depiction of facial and otherwise embodied behaviour, and on general mechanisms of meaning construction. However, there is an important difference between event-bound memes (and hashtags) which have a short 'shelf life' because new events soon obliterate them, and template-based memes, which are easier to make, while achieving some meaning permanence as tokens of a category of behaviours or responses to situations. These memes not only create a stable category of socially recognized situations, they create form-meaning packages that give stability to memetic forms throughout the communicative universe of internet discourse and social media. In forming such immediately recognizable packages, they thus form a kind of 'template' not unlike that discussed for various kinds of subgenres (such as horoscopes) in Construction Grammar terms (Antonopoulou & Nikiforidou 2011). Such presentational templates in memes will be our focus throughout this book.

3.3 Entrenched Image Macro, Meaning, and Constructions

We want to return now to the IM of the *One Does Not Simply* meme, introduced in Section 3.1. As we indicated there, its source is a scene in the

Lord of the Rings movie, where the character Boromir utters the phrase *One does not simply walk into Mordor*. In the IM, Boromir adopts a troubled facial expression, and uses the gesture commonly recognized as accompanying a forceful making of an important point: raising the hand, so it is clearly visible, and connecting two fingers to mark 'a point'. The fact that in the scene Boromir is delivering a warning is relevant to the emergence of the meme. He wants to be sure that all understand the foolishness of trying to do the impossible – go into Mordor and destroy the ring there. It is important to note, though, that the frame evocation of the movie plot only lasted for a while. Many people may well know and understand the meme without knowing the provenance of the *one does not simply* phrase, including details about the actor and role he is playing. In other words, the meaning of the meme – adding an example to the category of things that are doomed to failure – is clear, but the way it has arisen is not. The meme has been 'constructionalized' to represent a specific category of events, and so the IM serves to evoke that meaning, rather than the context of the movie. Meme Viewers exposed to ODNS memes do not have to know the source, as long as they identify the current meaning correctly. Consequently, the popular playful artefacts (T-shirts, bags, etc.) that say *I simply walk into Mordor* are not referring to any specific part of the movie plot, because they are only saying generically that the wearer of the line feels invincible. Such extensions are possible because the IM and entrenched TT have become the token of the category, not of the relevant part of the movie plot. The IM now serves a role that is purely metonymic, standing for the category of 'impossible achievements'. In the process, however, the IM has adopted the TT as an integral part of its memetic form.

Our example of an IM meme so far has been the ODNS meme. We now move on to discuss a popular group of IM memes that allow us to discuss constructional features that are more subtle than the literal re-use of a fixed phrase such as *one does not simply* (in Construction Grammar terms, we might say they are more 'formal' rather than lexically 'filled in', Fillmore et al. 1988). The memes we turn to here exemplify types of behaviour, by attributing them to hypothetical good or not-so-good people. Originally, the memes appeared in four sub-categories: a considerate man (*Good Guy Greg*), an inconsiderate man (*Scumbag Steve*), a considerate woman (*Good Girl Gina*), and an inconsiderate woman (*Scumbag Stacey*). For a short time, there was also *Neutral Nigel*, but perhaps it was a more difficult character to maintain. We will refer to this broad category of memes as GGG memes, to be able to consider the constructional features of the category as a whole. Each sub-category uses its own photograph as an IM, with the looks assumed to match the character (good or bad), to ensure immediate recognition of the meme and of the type of behaviour represented. Early on, all four types were

commonly represented and added to, with Scumbag Stacey gradually disappearing, for reasons we will not speculate about.

This cluster of memes displays some unusual formal features, ones which help us see the defining aspects of memetic discourse, as well as its relation to both standard grammatical structure and the nature of image-text multimodality. We will now consider the visual and linguistic features of such memes in more detail.

3.3.1 The Role of the Image Macro

The feature of primary relevance is the IM. In each of the four groups of GGG memes, the image is a representation of a person matched with the 'character' represented; the IM is entrenched, and remains stable across all the examples. The sites which discuss sources of memetic images and texts, such as *Know Your Meme*, tell a story in each case, clarifying the actual identity of the person represented in the IM. However, while inherently interesting, such information does not change the perception of the IM – the face represented is so tightly identified with the specific 'GGG character' that it becomes irrelevant to know whose face it is in reality. The IM (primarily the facial expression, but also clothing, body posture, etc.) is meant to embody the personality type in question and provide a good match to the kinds of behaviours described in TT and BT. The fact that the image is entrenched also means that it does not show any dynamicity or change. Comparing the GGG IMs with the one in the ODNS meme and other, more spontaneously created memes suggests that there is a range of such cases, but that some aspects of the IM's contribution to meaning construction remain specific to memetic discourse. In the case of GGG memes, the evocation is unambiguous, but not in any sense referential. What the GGG images do is evoke a personality – either considerate or not considerate at all – as well as a memetic construction wherein the TT will set up a new situation, and the BT will confirm the predictably helpful or unhelpful response from the Meme Character.

In the two examples shown here (featuring *Good Girl Gina* in Figure 3.2 and *Scumbag Steve* in Figure 3.3), we see representations of two very different characters – Gina (a perfect girlfriend) and Steve (a consistently inconsiderate person). We should note that the evaluation of the Meme Character's behaviour as 'good' or 'scumbag' is based on highly viewpointed social expectations. The *Good Girl Gina* example only makes sense if one assumes (as the MM does) that it is typical for young women to act offended without ever spelling out the nature of the offence. The (otherwise reasonable) expectation that the offence would be identified, giving one a chance to avoid such situations in the future, is here presented as typically not fulfilled when young women are concerned – *Good Girl Gina* being the rare and virtuous exception that proves the rule.

Figure 3.2 *Good Girl Gina* meme.

Figure 3.3 *Scumbag Steve* meme.

As regards the *Scumbag Steve* meme in Figure 3.3, the inconsiderate act of blocking an empty parking space (possibly the last one available) is not a major offence, but a truly annoying behaviour showing no regard for other parking lot users.

Such examples of GGG memes suggest a number of observations. First of all, the IMs are the most easily recognizable tokens of a type of personality (considerate or not), and therefore the behaviour described in TT and BT is judged primarily in that context. One might assume that a girl can feel offended

while not feeling obliged to elaborate on her feelings, but that is not what GGG memes are doing, and they are achieving the effect primarily because of the stable IMs. *Good Girl Gina* is 'good' because she does what many young women do not do (and what young men would like her to do), and thus the meme's main role is to add behaviour examples to fit the memetic idealized personality – a category of approved or not approved behaviours, easily assigned to the right category with the selection of the IM. The IM tells the Meme Viewer which category the behaviour in BT is to be assigned to, regardless of how the Meme Viewer would actually feel about it.

The clear one-on-one connection between the IM and the category represented is confirmed in a meme where two IMs are combined – *Good Guy Greg* alongside *Scumbag Steve*. Both IMs feature the same TT and BT: *Sees that you are drunk / takes your car keys*. Importantly, viewers would attribute two different kinds of intentions to the act of taking the keys – Greg would make sure that nothing bad happens (for instance, he might drive you home), while Steve would use the keys to do something harmful and illegal (like go on a joyride and crash your car). What an example like this shows is that the IMs of GGG memes have 'grammaticalized' away from pointing at individual referents, and towards an evocation of a character type, with all the attendant expected behaviour.

We should add that the actual images are not necessarily unambiguous. In our opinion, for instance, Scumbag Steve looks more nonplussed and rosy-cheeked than actively inconsiderate or 'scumbag-like'. Likewise, the photo representing Good Guy Greg shows a man who looks cheerful, but not automatically trustworthy. This adds again to Barrett's (2017) point – we do not respond to faces by automatically aligning them with emotional content. Rather, we use the faces to construct an understanding of their emotional impact. So, because we associate the face known as Good Guy Greg with benevolent and friendly emotions, we assume he is driven by good intentions. If we had encountered the same face independently of the meme, we might have decided not to automatically trust the individual.

To sum up, we have argued that memetic images play roles specific to memes as a discourse genre. First of all, all such images function as mechanisms of frame evocation – either building on currently available events or evoking the meaning of the memetic type they are consistently associated with. IMs, restricted to the latter case, are the most easily identifiable access points that guide the Meme Viewer in processing the meme. Additionally, they may guide the Meme Viewer toward an emotional interpretation of targeted frames. When images become IMs, they gradually lose their embeddedness in specific situations or artefacts, but adopt the framing specific to the meme and become primary indicators of the memetic meaning being constructed. In other words, frame evocation remains their main role, but the frames may be either outside

of the meaning of the meme (as in the *Hawley Running* case, where Insurrection, for instance, isn't part of the meme's meaning), or become built into the meaning of the meme (ODNS, GGG memes). The process, which we might tentatively refer to as 'image grammaticalization', is certainly present outside of memes – for example in election campaign materials, where the depiction of a candidate in a positive or negative light is often achieved through selecting evocative images. In memes, however, image grammaticalization is but one aspect of the overall meaning of the meme. In the next section we show how GGG memes further rely on constructional meaning prompted by the language forms used.

3.3.2 Predictive Constructions and Good Girl Gina *Memes*

In the section above, we have clarified the role of the IM in GGG memes. The IMs represented a Meme Character (male or female, considerate or not) and support a category of behaviours relevant to the distinction between considerate and inconsiderate people. Individual memes thus add examples to a selected category of behaviours. We will show in this section how the structuring of TT and BT in GGG memes correlates with predictive constructions in English (Dancygier 1998, Dancygier & Sweetser 2005).

First of all, the predictive memetic constructions involving stock characters like Scumbag Steve are lexically most 'open': there is no particular key word or phrase. Instead, the combination of a recognizable stock character image with a line each of Top Text and Bottom Text forms a sufficient presentational template for Meme Viewers to access the grammatical meaning of a predictive 'when P then Q' construction, alongside the more lexical meaning pertaining to behaviour type embodied specifically by the image (scumbag behaviour, good girl behaviour, etc.). The *when*- and *if*-memes discussed in Chapter 2 are different: in the absence of a repeatable image (like Scumbag Steve or Good Girl Gina) and of a line of bottom text, they *do* explicitly contain *when* or *if*, though apart from that they are also lexically entirely open. The presentational template of these similative *if/when*-memes becomes that of *when* or *if* followed by a clause, and then completed below the text by an image. One of our examples in Chapter 2 had as its text *When you don't know the answer to exam question but you refuse to leave it blank*, which was completed by a picture showing a hole in a wall very clumsily stuffed full of bricks piled loosely on top of one another, by way of makeshift repair (Figure 2.2). Even though the image is unrelated to exam questions, viewers take up the cue provided by the *when*-clause in figuring out the way in which the two unrelated situations *feel* similar (Lou 2021): they are both desperate attempts at doing *something* at least, however ineffectual, in a situation where one is incapable of doing a professional job.

The GGG memes, for comparison, are quite specific in their structuring of the text accompanying the image. Some typical examples are given in (2)–(4):

(2) Gets mad at you (TT)/Tells you why (BT) (*Good Girl Gina*)

(3) Comes to your house for a party (TT)/Helps clean up before he leaves (BT) (*Good Guy Greg*)

(4) Uses shopping cart (TT)/Leaves it in empty parking space (BT) (*Scumbag Steve*)

Each one of these is an example of the same construction, with TT setting up a mental space in which the Meme Character engages in a common and unremarkable behaviour (getting upset, visiting friends, or shopping), and BT describing the consequence of the event, in terms of the behaviour one can expect from the Meme Character shown in the IM. Predictably, the 'Good' characters behave in considerate and helpful terms, while the 'Scumbag' character acts in disregard of other people and generally accepted rules of conduct. All the clauses are in present tense and subjectless, and the sequence of events represented puts the earlier event in TT, and the later one in BT, while not using any conjunctions such as *if* or *when*. The content of TT and BT could be expressed through many varieties of predictive constructions. For example, if we were to expand the *Good Girl Gina* example into a full linguistic construction, we could use several formulae: *When / Whenever / If Gina gets mad at you, she tells you why.* Each of these constructions represents a similar reasoning – if you imagine a TT situation such that Gina gets angry, you can also predict that she tells you why. In other words, TT is an equivalent of the P clause (the protasis) of a predictive construction, while BT is an equivalent of Q – the apodosis. That is, the iconic sequence of clauses in the construction representing the sequence of two connected events is replicated in the meme by placing the earlier event higher (in TT), and the later event lower (in BT).

Outside of memetic discourse, predictive constructions display a number of formal features and allow a number of simplified variants. Thus a prediction such as *If you miss another meeting, you will be fired* sets up an unpredicted future mental space wherein the addressee misses the meeting again, and predicts the consequences of that event, formulated with the standard marker of the predicted future, the modal *will*. But the same prediction can be made in a range of simplified forms, such as *Miss another meeting and you're fired* or even *Miss another meeting, you're fired*. Dancygier & Sweetser (2005) argue that the predictive interpretation can still emerge because the sequence of clauses and the use of tense indicate the predictive pattern sufficiently. Dancygier & Sweetser (2005) termed the fact that constructional meaning can be preserved in spite of reduced grammatical marking 'constructional compositionality', which is a form of frame metonymy: using some of the

salient parts of the full constructional form is sufficient to call up the whole construction's meaning.

In the GGG memes, formal markers of prediction are simplified further – subject NPs are suppressed and the clausal pattern is marked not as a sequence, but through the TT/BT contrast. The subject suppression is not common, but it is fully standard in the context of the IMs which indicate the subject without ambiguity. In a sense, the image fills in the constructional slot of the subject. This subject suppression, along with other forms of reduction such as the 'newspaper' style omission of determiners (*shopping cart*, not *a shopping cart*), can be interpreted, following Ruppenhofer & Michaelis (2010), as licensed by the specific meme genre. In their study, Ruppenhofer & Michaelis considered examples of genre-based argument omission in a range of linguistic genres, like diaries (*Went to market*) or recipes (*Whisk and add to the mix*); our case here presents a multimodal extension of the scenario.

There remains the question of how we can interpret the Present Tense, especially since it would not seem acceptable to use *will* in the BT clause. We argue that the constructional format is restricted in these specific ways because the meaning of the construction is determined by factors other than predictive reasoning. *Gets mad at you / tells you why* does not just predict the behaviour of a person. Also, it is not enough to view the construction as a truncated form of a generic statement such as *When(ever) X happens, Y happens*. Instead, we argue that the role of Present Tense in these memetic constructions can be understood as 'characterization' – in the sense that the behaviours mentioned constitute a character type, rather than being reports of behaviour of a specific person. The predictive constructions in GGG memes describe generic patterns, but the causal nature of predictions is downplayed, as being angry does not cause Gina to explain her reasons, and using a shopping cart does not cause Scumbag Steve to leave it in an empty parking space. Rather, memetic predictions display correlated events which are meant to illustrate the memetic 'character', so that Gina behaves in a nice way, while Steve does not. In other words, GGG memes engage in categorization in ways very similar to the ODNS meme discussed above. The four memetic characters are icons of types of desirable or undesirable behaviour, and individual memes exemplify situations where their character (*good* versus *scumbag*), as appropriate to men and women, is illustrated with yet another example. They do not formulate generic patterns of the same type as *Whenever*-constructions, and the point is not that the imaginary Gina often gets angry and explains the reasons every time. The point is, rather, that every next GGG meme adds another specific behaviour to one of the four categories – 'good girl/good guy' or 'bad girl/bad guy'.

GGG memes describe behaviours that are quite specific to the age-appropriate understanding of cultural norms. So they do refer to dating, parties, sex, cheating, and so on, but not, let's say, to rules of professional conduct.

What is more, specific types of behaviours described in GGG memes are worth mentioning only because in the Meme Maker's view they stand in contrast to common behaviours. Importantly, because the meme type selects a behaviour which is likely to cause approval or disapproval, it also profiles underlying assumptions about what constitutes desirable or undesirable behaviours. While thoughtlessly blocking a parking space is always reprehensible, explaining one's annoyance is not a golden standard of being nice in general – however, refusing to explain reasons for being upset is a type of behaviour often attributed to women. There are in fact many memes criticizing the stereotypical behaviour of women, by describing the 'perfect girlfriend' such as Gina. The GGG memes, once very popular, are now used much less – perhaps because the repertoire of behaviours easily categorized as 'good' or 'bad' has been sufficiently described. Overall, this group of memes, by virtue of relying on a rather restricted format (the IM, tense, subject suppression, the TT/BT role) represents what can legitimately be called 'the grammar of memes', where linguistic forms are adjusted to the multimodal format, while visual elements are cohesively embedded in the constructional pattern. Many other types of memes are less restricted in terms of formal parameters, but it is important to note that GGG memes, while less popular now, have been a stage of meme evolution where the very idea of a 'multimodal construction' – a form-meaning pair combining text and image – has been fully developed. All the choices such as clause-structure, spatial arrangement, or argument suppression are aspects of memetic form which have helped build a foundation for creating memes as a constructionally determined multimodal genre.

3.3.3 Constructional Networks

We've touched on a number of examples, and shown various constructional features motivating our invoking of construction grammar in approaching internet memes. They involve conventional or conventionalizing patterns where certain recognizable forms are coupled with consistent meanings, at least within specific communities of discourse. What we want to add to this picture in this section, as further support for a broadly constructional approach, are the network relations and prototype effects typical of purely linguistic constructions, which we can also find in meme constructions. Construction grammarians think of constructions as forming a structured inventory, forming a network sometimes dubbed 'the constructicon' (Fillmore 1988; see e.g. Hoffmann 2017a for discussion). In this network of constructions, a given (sub)construction inherits features from one or several superordinate constructions, while also involving some adaptive specifications unique to it which may override some of the features inherited by default. For instance, as shown in Dancygier & Sweetser (2005: Ch. 9), a number of coordinate structures that

inherit some of the features of the full conditional construction ('if P happens then Q happens') equally have conditional meanings, while also having particular characteristics of their own, as in the examples below:

(5) Linking two declarative clauses with 'and', with a conditional meaning; for example, 'We get rid of Coyne and we're clear' said Hayden eagerly (from *A Void in Hearts* by William G. Tapply qtd. in Dancygier & Sweetser 2005: 237).

(6) Linking an imperative with a declarative clause using 'or', with a deterrence meaning; for example, 'Shut up', he says, 'or next time I fire the loogie gun into your mouth' (from *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson qtd. in Dancygier & Sweetser 2005: 248).

(7) Linking a noun phrase (referring to a minimal unit of something verbalized) with a declarative clause using 'and', with a deterrence meaning; for example, 'Another yelp, and overboard you go' (from *Innocents Abroad* by Mark Twain qtd. in Dancygier & Sweetser 2005: 253).

These and other construction types all represent, in a sense, deviations from the full conditional construction prototype (a biclausal *if-then* construction). They inherit not just from the conditional construction, but also from other constructions in the broader language network, for instance from *and* and *or*-constructions, and from the lexical items that occur in them, since lexemes are also conventionalized form-meaning pairings.

If we extend this line of thinking to meme constructions, we can similarly see relations between closely related meme constructions and, on the other hand, with other constructions in the language more broadly. For instance, the more schematic predictive Image Macro construction – centring on good and bad, gender stereotypical behaviour – has more specific subconstructions around *Good Girl Gina*, *Scumbag Steve*, and the like, while also relating to (non-memetic) predictive constructions. Figure 3.4 represents part of this network, and includes our earlier examples as specific 'constructs', that is to say, as concrete usage events illustrating the constructional schemas. Simplified as this diagram undoubtedly is, it does suggest a view in which the 'memicon' – if that's what we want to call the structured inventory of meme constructions – is inextricably linked with, or part of, the constructicon of a given language such as English.

That prototype structure concerns not just lexical categories (e.g. Rosch 1975, Geeraerts 1997) but also grammatical constructions (e.g. Taylor 2003) has long been accepted in construction grammars of various flavours. Transitive clauses form a textbook example: from cases where there is a high transfer of energy from an agent onto a second participant, undergoing the effect of the energy transfer (as in *I hit the burglar*) to superficially similar cases like *the car cost $15,000*, some core features are shared, but a lot of features are

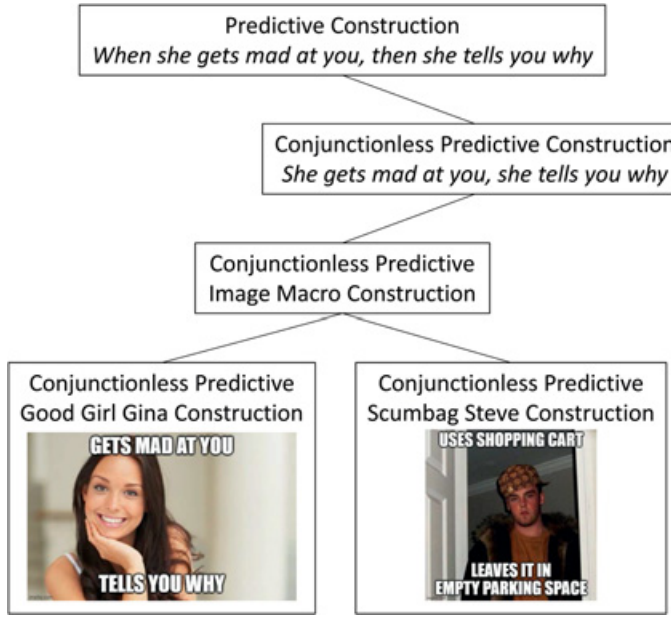


Figure 3.4 A network of constructions including GGG memes.

not shared (compare, e.g. *the burglar was hit by me* vs. **$15,000 was cost by the car*). We can use notions of prototype and periphery in interpreting construction networks on a macro scale as in Figure 3.4, but also to approach micro-variations within any one construction. For instance, Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2016: 32–3) described a number of variants of the *Said No One Ever* meme (which we will discuss in Chapter 7): there are shortened forms, which use *no one ever* or even a long dash followed simply by *no one* instead of the full phrase, and there's also the form *Said No X Ever*, where a noun is used (e.g. *said no student ever*) instead of the indefinite pronoun *no one*. In terms of visual aspects, deviations from the prototype can include for example the use of other fonts than the prototypical meme font Impact (cf. Brideau & Berret 2014), altering or blending the supposedly fixed image or elements of it (see Chapter 9, Section 9.1), or even, in a rare example, deliberately creating an 'Image Macro' without image (just a blank space), but with as TT and BT *image macro* and *'nuff said'* respectively.[2]

In this chapter, we have distinguished NEIs, as one image type found in memes, from IMs. The distinction was needed right from the start, but as we

[2] Our thanks to Eline Zenner (p.c.) for drawing our attention to this example.

will see, also matters for other meme types, such as the labelling memes we will turn to in the next chapter. Our main examples in this chapter were ODNS and GGG memes, as good examples of IM memes which also suggest some of the range of constructional properties involved. We cannot be exhaustive, and each IM meme may add different particulars. For instance, in the meme featuring as its IM a picture of Kermit the frog drinking tea (cf. Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017b: 577), BT (rather than TT) is part of the template of the meme that is repeated in each iteration (*but that's none of my business*). On the other hand, in the example featuring the so-called *Most Interesting Man in the World* – in which the IM is a self-confident bearded man in a beer commercial – the original commercial's phrase *I don't always drink beer, but when I do, it's Dos Equis* has given rise to a construction with two open places, spread out across TT and BT, with humorous examples of recommendations provided by Meme Makers (e.g. *I don't always work* (TT), *but when I do, I start an hour before I leave* (BT), Vandelanotte 2021: 166). Particulars notwithstanding, we stress the importance of frame evocation, depiction of embodied behaviour and construal of emotions, and constructional forms in the emergence of meaning in these multimodal artefacts.

4 Labelling Memes

The memes we looked at in the previous chapter all treat the space of the meme in a similar way: the image takes centre stage, but at the same time it delineates two regions where text can be put – Top Text (TT) and Bottom Text (BT). The distinction is significant in that it invites a specific kind of processing sequence (notice and appreciate the image, read TT, then look further down and read BT). Where the image is an entrenched Image Macro (IM), as in our main examples in the preceding chapter, the IM may represent a 'Meme Character' (such as 'Boromir' or 'Good Guy Greg'), thus directing the viewer to expect the meme to illustrate a specific unsolvable problem (ODNS) or to add another instance to the category of desirable behaviours (GGG). In such typical cases, TT prepares the ground for understanding the situation set up as matching the category, and BT describes the specific way in which the TT situation fits into the category. Other variations provide different roles for TT and BT; for instance, in the case of GGG memes, TT and BT respectively are mapped onto the protasis and apodosis of a predictive construction.

While the varieties of TT/BT memes use the text slots and the image in various ways, there are other types of memes which use images and linguistic forms in less structured ways. This chapter thus turns to examples which present very differently: they do not reserve a special place for text along the top and bottom sides of the central image, but rather 'label' different parts of a holistic scene in a picture by means of words or phrases, to serve as guides to the intended interpretation of the scene. The visual template by which such labelling memes are instantly recognized is thus this labelling of distinct parts of an image, in a way which clearly distinguishes it from descriptive types of labelling known in instructional contexts such as technical manuals (e.g. naming the different components of a piece of machinery) or vocabulary textbooks. These memes have been called 'object labelling' memes (e.g. on the *Know Your Meme* website), but we will use the simpler term 'labelling memes' here.

Some images used in memes, as we noted in Chapter 3, frame-metonymically evoke an event (as in the *Hawley Running* meme in Figure 3.1); others (such as ODNS) strongly evoke a specific memetic pattern

familiar to Meme Viewers. The distinction between non-entrenched, 'one off' images and recurrent IMs becoming increasingly entrenched will inform our discussion here as well. We do not propose a precise analysis of this process of entrenchment and popularity of memetic images here. Some capture salient features of a situation and continue to be selected to reflect behavioural patterns, while other images remain less popular. In presenting examples as more one-off or random (and others as firmly entrenched), we try to capture their degree of virality and (lack of) staying power at the time of writing, making no strong predictions as to how stable and entrenched the images and patterns they present will prove in the future.

We start by considering some more ephemeral, one-off examples (Section 4.1), and build up towards examples of highly entrenched labelling IM constructions (Sections 4.2 and 4.3). Next we consider the question of figuration in labelling memes (Section 4.4), to close on a brief discussion of a related meme subtype – the so-called *Sections of* meme (Section 4.5).

4.1 One-Off and Partly Productive Labelling Memes

Our first example of a labelling meme – built around a Non-Entrenched Image (NEI) – is Figure 4.1 (posted by @SaHreports on X/Twitter, 26 December 2021). It might be useful to compare it to the *Messy Wall Repair when*-meme in Chapter 2 (Figure 2.2): there, the picture of a clumsily bricked up hole in a wall completed the clause *When you don't know the answer to exam question but you refuse to leave it blank*. In Figure 4.1, the text is limited to two indications of years: *2019* (before the COVID-19 pandemic) and *2022* (the third year of the pandemic). No particular grammatical template, like a predictive construction, is imposed, nor do we interpret *2019* and *2022* as BT and TT in the way we might in a typical IM meme of the kind discussed in Chapter 3. Rather, we are prompted to consider ways in which *2019* and *2022* parallel the two different areas of the image: one, a fairly properly constructed piece of wall, apparently providing a solid basis for the rest of the structure; the other an increasingly irregular, badly planned, makeshift type of wall that will just about do the job, but that deviates considerably from most people's expectations of a neatly constructed wall. This reflects many people's experience of 2019 as a comparatively normal time, pre-pandemic, as compared to the upheaval and changes to our established routines which the pandemic brought and which were still not at an end by the time 2022 heaved into view.

Following Lou (2021), we have discussed Figure 2.2 as representing similative meaning, so that a possible paraphrase of the meaning intended is a sentence such as *When you don't know the answer to [an] exam question, but you refuse to leave it blank, you produce something as disjointed and messy as the makeshift wall shown.* In other words, in Figure 2.2, the image suggests

Figure 4.1 *Pandemic Brick Wall* labelling meme.

a comparison and a sense of dissatisfaction brought about by being unable to produce a coherent and well-structured response. The messy form of the wall visually represents the messy form of the exam response. The comparison (the simile) is between how a student feels when not able to answer exam questions competently and the wall repair which has been performed incompetently. The experience of these two actions is similar – the result feels messy and inadequate.

Figure 4.1 seems somewhat comparable, yet it is also different in interesting ways. Like Figure 2.2, it represents a brick wall, parts of which have been structured properly, but there are also parts which feel inadequate. The comparison is primarily between two parts of the wall – that is what the image does. When labels are added (*2019* and *2022*) the evaluative aspect of the comparison (well-structured versus dangerously messy) is projected onto the experience of

two recent calendar years – pre-pandemic 2019 (predictable) and mid-pandemic 2022 (full of challenges). Paraphrasing the meaning could be verbalized as *2019 felt like the structure at the bottom of the wall, reliable and predictable, but 2022 felt like the messy part towards the top of the wall – haphazard and unreliable*. What we are suggesting here is that both these memes represent similative meaning (*X* feels like *Y*), but in Figure 2.2 a more holistic interpretation of the visual (messy wall) is compared to the textually provided information (messy exam answer). Figure 4.1, on the other hand, introduces multiple foci of comparison, with a configuration of visual components (orderly vs. messy wall) being compared to the textually provided labels (orderly vs. messy year). Importantly, both memes are good representations of similative construal – they focus on one dimension of the comparison (disorderliness) and choose a visual and experientially salient representation of the Meme Maker's or Viewers' experience. In both cases the image has been selected to match the experience, while the difference is in the explicit focus on distinct components within the image itself requiring comparison (labelling), or a lesser focus on the internal structure of the image (*when*-meme).

Before we move forward with further examples of labelling, we'd like to consider a question. We are proposing a rather specific figurative meaning to explain apparently 'loose' combinations of words and images. Are such examples still within the realm of linguistics? As we argue throughout this book, the way in which images – from the smallest emoji to the most richly detailed picture – are now routinely used in grammatically patterned combinations with text increasingly requires us to broaden the remit of linguistics. This has long been accepted in discourse studies (e.g. Stöckl et al. 2020), for instance in studies of the use of captions and longer texts alongside images in advertising, but the example of memes shows the integration of images at lower levels of analysis – phrasal and clausal at least. At the most schematic level, the Labelling Meme Construction is a very abstract schema indeed, which we may see instantiated in potentially very one-off, non-conventionalizing constructs such as Figure 4.1.

This is the case particularly with an internally complex image in which many components are labelled. Arguably, such cases tend to demand too much cognitive effort on the part of the Meme Maker for them to really take off and spawn many new versions. Consider Figure 4.2 in this regard: it requires quite an extensive thought process to follow the reasoning we're invited to make in order to apply the two images of pouring drinks to the concepts textually evoked. Trying to absorb knowledge into my brain by reading the words in a book turns out to fail, as the words and knowledge are spilled outside my '*brain*/glass', but absorbing weird (*dank*) memes into my brain works perfectly fine (they are poured effortlessly into my '*brain*/glass'). In addition, perhaps there's the suggestion of a more enjoyable experience overall, with

Figure 4.2 *Words-and-Memes* labelling meme.

wine involved in the bottom image, as against presumably plain water in the top image. Applying no fewer than nine labels across two contrasting drinks pouring scenes is quite an onerous task, so it does not seem surprising this format has not developed into a widely reused meme construction.

Importantly, the meme in Figure 4.2 relies on two levels of comparison, which build on some metaphorical and image schematic basis: the slips of attention in reading cause some content to not get into the brain's container, while memes flow into the brain smoothly and with no spillage. In each case the content carried by words/memes flows into the brain in a way specific to the conduit metaphor (Reddy 1979), which describes communication as transfer of objects. However, there are similative elements here as well – first of all, reading *feels like* spillage, meme viewing does not, and they both yield the experience of some content entering the brain to be processed. This combination of frame evocation and frame metonymy (words and memes stand for the content they 'carry'), image schemas, metaphor, and simile creates a rather complex construal, too specific and figuratively motivated to be naturally extended into forming a meme template.

Occasionally, we've come across video versions of labelling memes which are, almost inevitably, not productive cases being replicated many times over either, given how they require more technical skill and effort to produce. In one example, a still from which is shown in Figure 4.3 (posted by @AMOMARSDEN on X/Twitter, 26 September 2022), we see an incident (apparently staged) in which a young person falls off a skateboard, which subsequently causes a man cycling by on a white bike, while holding an umbrella, to crash over the skateboard and fall into the water. The young person on the skateboard is labelled as *Kwasi Kwarteng*, who was the Chancellor of the Exchequer (or chief finance minister) of the UK during the short-lived premiership of Liz Truss in September 2022. The skateboard is labelled as *Mini budget* (the name used in the press for a series of tax cuts planned to be brought in abruptly), and the cycling man crashing over it and ending up in the water as *The UK Economy*. Figure 4.3 shows the moment just before impact. This memetic artefact reflects the dramatic reaction of the economic markets to the financial plan. In the soundtrack of the clip, which only lasts eight seconds, apart from the sounds of the skateboard and bike, we hear an apparent bystander (perhaps the person filming the skater) reacting with consternation as the event unfolds (*oh oh oh oh!*) and the agonized cry of the man falling into the water (*aargh!*).

An artefact such as this uses the basic mechanics of labelling a complex, moving image, but the added temporal dimension allows the Meme Maker to label elements of the scene only as the clip unfolds and the elements appear (rather than all at once). The quick dramatic movement towards an undesired destination (falling into the water), supported by the distressed sounds produced, vividly reflect the target frame's quick drive towards economic calamity.

Figure 4.3 *The UK Economy* meme.

Relative complexity – as with a large number of labels (Figure 4.2), or the use of video (Figure 4.3) – seems to be one factor in determining a labelling meme's success and productivity, but clearly it cannot be the only one. After all, Figure 4.1 is simple enough in those terms (just two labels, and not a video), but nevertheless it hasn't garnered the same popularity as more firmly established cases such as the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme (on which more below, in Section 4.3). Conversely, sometimes a fairly complex image does catch on to some degree, producing at least a limited number of new iterations. As an example of this scenario, consider Figure 4.4 – by no means a strongly entrenched meme, but not a one-off either, considering it is featured on at least one meme generating website (*imgflip.com*). In the image used (and reused) here, a kebab shop brawl breaks out among various customers, while one of the customers eats calmly on, quietly concentrating on his phone. The suggestion made by the labelling in Figure 4.4 is that among UK bands which rose to prominence in the 1990s, Radiohead stands alone as a special band unfussed by the Britpop rivalry between bands like Oasis, Blur, Pulp, and Suede. While Figure 4.4 does feature a fairly large number of labels (five), it is considerably simpler in its configuration compared to Figure 4.2, in that it builds on the basic opposition between one customer (eating his meal and reading his phone) and others (various participants in a brawl). Other more or less popular, occasionally resurfacing memes share this feature of a simple

Figure 4.4 *Radiohead* labelling meme.

opposition underlying multiple labels. For instance, one example that is somewhat productive features a teapot with five spouts serving five cups at once; the cups can be labelled separately. In one iteration, the tea pot is labelled up as *Defund the police*, and the cups are labelled as *education*, *universal healthcare*, *youth services*, *housing*, and *green new deal*. Here again, as in Figure 4.4, the high number of labels (suggesting complexity) is offset by the relative simplicity of a two-way division between a policy disapproved of, and a set of policies approved of by the Meme Maker.

In general terms, all these examples build on an assumption of intersubjective agreement: the Meme Maker assumes that a kind of understanding or alignment exists with the Meme Viewers, who are expected to potentially agree with the viewpoints expressed, or at least to recognize their validity to some people. For instance, Meme Makers will be confident that their immediate audience within their personal social network will generally agree that memes are more easily absorbed than bookish knowledge (Figure 4.2), or that Radiohead is a cooler band than all the others put together (Figure 4.4).

Additionally, such interpretive co-alignment is supported, as in Figure 4.2 above, by some image-schematic and primary metaphoric structures. In Figure 4.4, there is a clear evocation of two separate angles of participation – the combative group versus the indifferent 'Radiohead' character. The spatial distance represented, and the eye gaze focused on the phone screen, make it clear that the 'Radiohead' character does not participate in the brawl. Also, from the perspective of the viewer, the Radiohead Meme Character is the one in focus (being more visible, closer, and alone). At the same time, the four fighting characters in the background evoke the Competition family of metaphors (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014), prompting a natural transition from the brawl represented to the idea of rivalry among the bands, as signalled by the labels. This is, then, a true case of multimodal metaphor where the source domain of conflict/war is mapped onto the target domain of competition. However, the metaphor does not represent the entire meaning of the meme, as the main point concerns the secure and unchallenged position of 'Radiohead'.

At the same time, we argue, the meme is primarily focused on the stance of the music fan, and the nature of the stance is expressed primarily by the Meme Maker (even if intersubjectively shared by other fans). In other words, being a Radiohead fan *feels like* observing the scene in the photo, with labels attached: one knows that Radiohead has an unchallenged first place in the rivalry, while other bands keep fighting. As Dancygier & Sweetser (2014: 137–48) have argued, similative meaning, being a limited scope blend, connects domains on the basis of a specific experience (watching a competition the result of which is already settled) and frames this experience (and only this experience, rather than the entirety of the situation) in comparison to the situation in the source domain (here represented by the image). Because memes are

typically prompted by a specific situation (rather than the entire frame structuring that situation) the comparison between the experience and its similative correlate remains focused on the situation at hand.

Importantly, labelling memes often work because of a specific evocative potential of the represented scene as a whole, rather than any inherent connection between an object/person labelled and the meaning of the label. That is, the examples we've discussed so far do not invite us to meaningfully connect walls to time or kebab shop diners to music bands, for instance. Instead, individual components making up specific scenes are explicitly linked, one by one (i.e. label by label), to an unrelated situation or frame, inviting us to see one particular important facet of correspondence between aspects of the situation represented in the image and another domain of experience: disorder versus order in Figure 4.1; unreceptiveness versus receptiveness in Figure 4.2; unhindered progress versus being thrown off course in Figure 4.3; animated disagreement versus aloof calmness in Figure 4.4. The exercise of recognizing the links intended by the Meme Maker relies on the humorous, entertaining potential of incongruity (e.g. Attardo 1994, Brône 2008, Antonopoulou & Nikiforidou 2009): there is nothing much that *really*, seriously, connects the domains, but the playful labelling guides the Meme Viewer through the intended, imaginative reading. Unlike in typical jokes, in which a sudden glaring incongruity prompts a shift in the script or frame to be applied (cf. Coulson 2001), in labelling memes the intended reading is quite methodically put centre stage up front, thanks to the labels applied.

In this section, we have looked at the effects of labelling in the context of less popular memes. Also, most of the examples above (perhaps with the exception of Figure 4.1) represent rather complex scenarios, involving a number of participants. While not necessarily one-off, these memes demonstrate how labelling allows Meme Makers to refer jocularly to other scenarios, though in some cases some familiarity with the frames evoked is important. But, unlike in the cases described in Chapter 3, it is hard to point to major meaning-construction processes, though frame evocation, frame-shifting, and figuration play important roles.

In the next sections we turn to the use of images firmly entrenched in specific labelling meme constructions, such as *Is This a Pigeon?* (Section 4.2) and *Distracted Boyfriend* (Section 4.3) memes. These typically feature IMs which are simpler and more salient in experiential terms, helping IM labelling memes construe more productive (as in, viral) constructional patterns. Relying on these more structured examples, we will show the interaction between labelling, constructional phenomena, and similative meaning.

4.2 Labelling Image Macro Memes as Constructions

While the examples so far have focused on the relatively more idiosyncratic correspondences between parts of the image and the labels, we have seen how

various meaning construction processes support the emerging memetic meaning. In the cases considered in the previous section, the images were not fully established as IMs, often because of high complexity, but the processes involved were among ones we have seen across other meme types, especially frame metonymy and similative meaning. In the current section we will focus on highly productive IM labelling meme patterns that fully merit the label of 'construction' at the individual level of the specific IM being used. Particularly widespread patterns tend to focus on two or three labels. In the so-called *Trumpet Boy* meme, a trumpet-playing boy pursues a girl blocking her ears (labels include e.g. *society* for the boy and *my sanity* for the girl, or *ads based on sex-appeal* for the boy and *me* for the girl). We should note that the more popular images are not only simpler and clearer, but also tend to involve an established memetic scenario that Meme Viewers can relate to, and can apply to many situations. The brick wall that gets messy with time may be the ground for referring to issues that have some history, such that the beginnings looked clear and well-structured, but then the situation evolved in unpredictable ways. But such a situation has no clear experiential correlation, easily applied to other situations. In contrast, the success of the *Trumpet Boy* meme seems to lie largely in the fact that the image represents an unambiguous situation in which the action (trumpet playing) and the response (covering your ears in order to block the sound) is immediately recognizable on an embodied level. Reactions such as 'I don't want to hear/to know' remind us of children covering their ears and shouting 'la, la, la, la!' to drown the words addressed to them with a different sound. The important thing, it seems to us, is that the situation in the *Trumpet Boy* image is experientially and emotionally transparent, and thus can be carried over to various situations in which one party insists on saying what they consider important while the other firmly refuses to accept it. The connection between sounds produced and the meaning they might carry is necessary for this meme to make sense – thanks to the pervasiveness of the conduit metaphor. We have referred to the metaphor as a component of the meaning of the *Words-and-Memes* meme above (Figure 4.2), but it was enmeshed in a network of frame metonymies. The *Trumpet Boy* scenario, in contrast, is immediately available in experience, while less productive, more one-off labelling memes require more work.

The question that we are trying to address throughout is what makes an image a good candidate for an IM – an image with situational meaning which is clear enough to be easily replicated and applied to a number of situations. The embodied or experiential impact is one very important factor in this. If the image cannot achieve that viral status on its own (as the *Trumpet Boy* could), it may need to be supported with language structures (such as the *One does not simply* phrase), enabling image plus text together to achieve enough 'notoriety'.

We have considered two factors so far, as possibly affecting the selection of an Image Macro: the simplicity of the image and the salience of the experiential scenario. But we should also consider a rather practical issue of the 'ease of labelling', a correlate of the simplicity we have discussed. A rather complicated case is the *Is This a Pigeon?* meme, which uses a still from an anime (*The Brave Fighter of Sun Fighbird*) in which the character of Katori, an android, points to a butterfly asking *Is this a pigeon?*. Given that he is still learning the language, it is entirely understandable for Katori to confuse one thing with another because of some superficial similarities (such as having wings). The image has become widely applied to make fun of people who badly misconstrue the situations they are facing or, worse still, try to deceive others by pretending that they do not understand the true meaning. In this specific meaning, the meme does not require any more that the Meme Viewer knows the anime. An example is presented in Figure 4.5.

In typical examples such as Figure 4.5, three labels are applied: one to the character of Katori, one to the butterfly, and one to the subtitle *Is this a pigeon?*, where *a pigeon* gets relabelled – a different, somewhat more complicated case where part of the IM being labelled is in fact a textual part. Note that this question can be analysed as a kind of 'fictive' discourse in the vein of Pascual (2002, 2014); we will discuss this at length in Chapters 7 and 8. The meaning of Figure 4.5 can be paraphrased as follows: the fact that Silicon Valley entrepreneurs tend to bypass labour laws and safety regulations in the name of pursuing innovation is pointed out and criticized, with a suggestion that they pretend not to know the difference.

Figure 4.5 *Is This a Pigeon?* labelling meme.

As we've suggested in this section, both the *Trumpet Boy* and the Katori template IM are different from the less productive labelling cases discussed in Section 4.1, and illustrate the IM labelling construction well. Other such patterns are quite common, and we can safely argue that one of the most popular memes over a long period of time has been the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme (DBM) (see Walker 2023 for a recent study, mainly from a historical, literary, and aesthetic perspective). In the next section, we will situate it in the context of the kind of salience Image Macros in labelling memes require to go viral.

4.3 The *Distracted Boyfriend* Meme as a Construction

The IM of the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme (DBM) represents a dynamic situation. The young man in the centre seems to be walking away from the viewer with his girlfriend (Girl in Blue), but is suddenly attracted to another young woman passing by (Girl in Red). The Girl in Blue stops walking as well and her face clearly suggests that she is upset, while the Girl in Red keeps walking (towards the viewer), with a very smug expression on her face. The image thus tells the story of being attracted to something new. At the same time, all three faces suggest various emotions – disappointment, interest, and being rather pleased with oneself. The composition of the image is very important, as it captures the dynamicity of the scene and displays all facial expressions to aid the viewers' response. What is important in this IM, then, is not only the evocation of a specific meme or Meme Character, but also, in contrast to ODNS and GGG memes, a portrayal of a situation where emotions and actions can be attributed to the Meme Characters represented. This interpretive potential is what makes such labelling memes significantly different from ODNS and GGG memes, where the possibilities for further interpretation are quite limited.

The labelling of these three Meme Characters can be seen in Figure 4.6. The depicted 'attracted to something new' scenario has now been transferred from the domain of romantic relationships into the domain of political alignments. The boy in the centre now represents the entire young generation, while the girls become stand-ins for political views. However, what remains unchanged is the story of someone suddenly willing to shift their attention and alignment to something new.

Many DBM examples use linguistic labels to apply the memetic template to new situations. But with all the possibilities of image manipulation, DBMs have also been altered visually, to give a pictorial representation of a new DBM scenario. In one such image (posted by @GuillaumeTC on X/Twitter, 11 June 2018), given in Figure 4.7, the photoshopped heads change the three characters into three heads of countries – Justin Trudeau (Girl in Blue), Donald Trump (Young Man), and Kim Jong Un (Girl in Red). The situation depicted thus represents the sudden shift in the then US President's interests, from

Figure 4.6 *Political Affiliations* DBM (Credit: Antonio Guillem/Shutterstock).

Figure 4.7 *Heads of State* DBM (Credit: Antonio Guillem/Shutterstock).

strengthening ties with Canada to courting North Korea. The photoshopped faces are of the three politicians, but they express emotional states very much like the original DBM photo – interest (Trump), disappointment (Trudeau), and self-satisfaction (Kim).

The flexibility of DBMs and their astonishing popularity and staying power suggest their status going well beyond the more one-off cases like the *Radiohead* meme or even the *Is This a Pigeon?* meme. We argue that the

DBM is an example of a construction, even if the structure and the form of expression are not clearly indicative of language forms playing that role. Before we unpack the constructional layers of the DBM, we want to illustrate the process postulated with one of the best-known linguistic constructions in English, the Caused Motion Construction, discussed, among others, by Goldberg (1995: Ch. 7). The construction can be illustrated with a sentence such as *Mark put the book on the desk*. The argument structure of the construction features the 'mover' (*Mark*) applying force to the 'object' (*the book*) and the 'intended location' (*on the desk*). From the perspective of a more traditional analysis, the verb *put* profiles the situation where three syntactic functions need to be present: the subject (*Mark*), the object (*the book*), and the object complement (*on the desk*). Whichever approach we prefer, the sentence describes a scenario wherein a person intentionally moves an object into a new location. There may be additional considerations, such as the path leading directly to the new location, the object not moving into the location all on its own, and so on. There are thus many specific requirements, which can be represented by postulating three layers of constructional form and meaning. The syntactic form requires the formula 'NP VP NP PP', the choice of a verb like *put* determines that the entire syntactic pattern needs to be represented, the stable constructional meaning can be formulated as 'The **mover** used force to **move** the **object** to a new **intended location**', and the specific lexical choices can yield sentences such as *We pushed him out of the room* or *They took him to prison*.

The additional point that constructional grammarians have made about such constructions is that the constructional pattern as a whole may carry the weight of the meaning, and so inserting other verbs into the construction, those which are ordinarily not used to represent caused motion, coerces them to acquire the Caused Motion sense. This seems natural in cases of directive speech acts verbs such as *order*, as in *We ordered him out of the house*, which rely on the force of authority or ability to compel others to act in suggested ways, or cause others to behave in a desired way (which may include going into a new location). The 'coercion' effect is even more pronounced in sentences such as *They laughed him off the stage,* where the verb alone has no potential for caused motion meaning, but can now be understood as causing a singer or performer to change location. In other instances, the location does not have to be spatial, as in *His colleagues bullied him into running for office*. Such examples show that constructional patterns can be applicable to situations which are not literally describing events involving a forced change of location, while reflecting the meaning of agency, image-schematic force and image-schematic change.

Now, what does this tell us about the DBM examples? We argue here that labelling memes such as DBM demonstrate the meaning potential in ways

proposed for linguistic constructions. In other words, like linguistic constructions, they have three layers of meaning: the form, the constructional meaning, and the meaning signalled through the choice of labels (whether lexical forms or images again), representing a specific situation which is an instantiation of the constructional meaning. In DBM, similar levels can be recognized: the form is the image (of 'current girlfriend', 'young man', and 'new girl') while the constructional meaning derived from the image and then applied to other situations could be summarized as 'having something one enjoys and suddenly being enticed to consider another possibility'. The labels create a specific instance of the constructional meaning, applied to political views, international alliances and any other situation where a change is considered. In one of our favourite DBM memes (Figure 11.1 in Chapter 11), the girl in blue is labelled as *traditional human language*, the young man is *people of the future*, and the girl in red is *communicating entirely through the Distracted Boyfriend meme*. While for some, perhaps, such a change might seem possible (even if unlikely), the existence of such examples underscores how popular a meme can be – and not because it is particularly funny or original, but simply because its constructional meaning, such as being attracted to something prompting a change, is such a pervasive human trait. Indeed, a completely different labelling meme (*Exit 12*, with a car suddenly veering right to take Exit 12 at the last minute) provides a template for a similar 'sudden desire for change' scenario (cf. Figure 9.2 in Chapter 9). The similarity of the scenarios depicted in these memes can further be seen in the fact that it has itself become the target of a DBM, in which the boy is labelled as *Me*, the girl in blue is labelled by a small inset picture of the DBM IM, and the girl in blue by a small inset picture of the *Exit 12* IM. The desire to change a comfortable situation is here used metamemetically to describe the choice between two memes representing essentially the same scenario – the original DBM has perhaps become a bit 'tired', so the *Exit 12* meme may seem an attractive way to say the same sort of thing.

In the case of labelling memes, the visual arrangement of constructional slots is also part of the construction's formula, so that in the examples of DBM the old favourite is to the right of the central figure, while the new interest is on the left. The entity considering the change is in the centre. This can even apply when different people are depicted, still showing the same kind of attentional shift. This, then, abstracts away from the original *Distracted Boyfriend* meme, but enough is retained in terms of posture, direction of gaze, and number of participants for different images to be brought into correspondence with the original. Some have involved black and white pictures, allowing, in one example we collected, a 'meta-meme' (i.e. a meme about a meme) in which *me* (girl in the centre) is now interested in *the original lookback meme* (passing man) while ignoring *the lookback meme* (boyfriend). In another, a combination of old and new allows a temporal dimension to be built in, thereby doubling the

attention shifts. The top half of the meme shows a black and white still from a Charlie Chaplin film, marked as *then* in the top right corner, with the central man (Chaplin) representing *linguists* who change their focus from *other languages* to *Indo-European languages*. The bottom half is our familiar DBM IM, marked *now* in its top right corner, with *linguists* (the guy in the middle) now favouring *UG* [= Universal Grammar], *syntax* (girl in red), to the frustration of *other fields of linguistics* (girl in blue, annoyed): back then linguistics saw a change in focus to Indo-European languages, leaving other languages frustrated for lack of attention; now Universal Grammar and syntax have (according to this meme – we would beg to differ!) been favoured, to the frustration of other fields of linguistics.

Further departures from the original meme re-arrange the basic configuration a bit, while relying more prominently on the clustering of the figures and subtle aspects of posture and eye-gaze. In Figure 4.8, for instance, the person whose attention shifts is on the right, clustered together with the 'old favourite', and looking over towards the 'new interest' in the background. What is also striking in this example is that the description given in one of the labels clashes quite clearly with the labelled element in the image. The phrase 'the wife in this pic' is confusingly applied to the beefy man emerging from the water in the background of the image, effectively textually dragging the homosexual attraction visually suggested in the picture's attention shift, back to the original,

Figure 4.8 *The Wife in this Pic* meme.

heterosexual scenario. The comical effect achieved is to suggest that the Meme Maker finds the *wife in this pic* (in the wedding dress) more attractive than his actual wife – with the complication that it's the more attractive woman depicted in the image who is labelled as his apparently less attractive actual wife (*my wife*), and that a man is labelled up as a woman (*the wife in this pic*). In another example we collected (included in the larger Figure 4.9 below), Conservative Party member and former UK Prime Minister Theresa May is the central, change-desiring figure, confusingly labelled as *Eurosceptic Labour MPs*, and the two men between whom she shifts her attention are labelled as two versions of her proposed Brexit deal with the EU: May's deal a few months ago, and May's deal now (see Vandelanotte 2021: 181). Labelling an obvious man as a woman (Figure 4.8), or a (then) Conservative party leader as a member of the opposing political party would be incoherent in any other setting. However, the abstract schema generalized from the DBM construction, along with the labelling schema itself, are strong enough that meme proficient communicators and interpreters have no problem assigning coherent meanings to these kinds of artefacts.

Examples like these clearly show that a more abstract constructional schema has emerged out of the DBM construction. The representation in Figure 4.9 suggests this schema licenses any variety of three-person constellation to fill the roles of this broader construction, so long as two people are positioned more closely together, and the third becomes a new focus for one of the two people physically close to each other, irrespective of particular gender or sexuality features of the conceptualizer, or even irrespective of the precise position of the conceptualizer, who need not always take up central position (though usually does). This higher-level schema, in a way, seals the success of the DBM construction: not only is it one of those labelling constructs which has become so widely spread and deeply entrenched to have established itself as a construction, but it has proven further successful in having abstracted away from its specifics a more general construction, licensing a range of memes that are visually very different from the original, and that can contain differences in terms of the Romantic Disloyalty frame they cue as well (male vs. female, straight vs. gay). Apart from the examples of the wedding photo and Theresa May, mentioned previously, Figure 4.9 also features a 'meta-meme' in which *a popular meme* watches on in annoyance as *me* turns away to admire *a Star Trek version of that meme*.

As a final, jocular twist on DBM, consider Figure 4.10, which shows the same people, still dressed in the same way for the photo shoot the image comes from.

What is really interesting in this rendition is the fact that the 'boy' (*me*) is still looking at the 'girl in red' (*this new stock photo from the same shoot*), while the

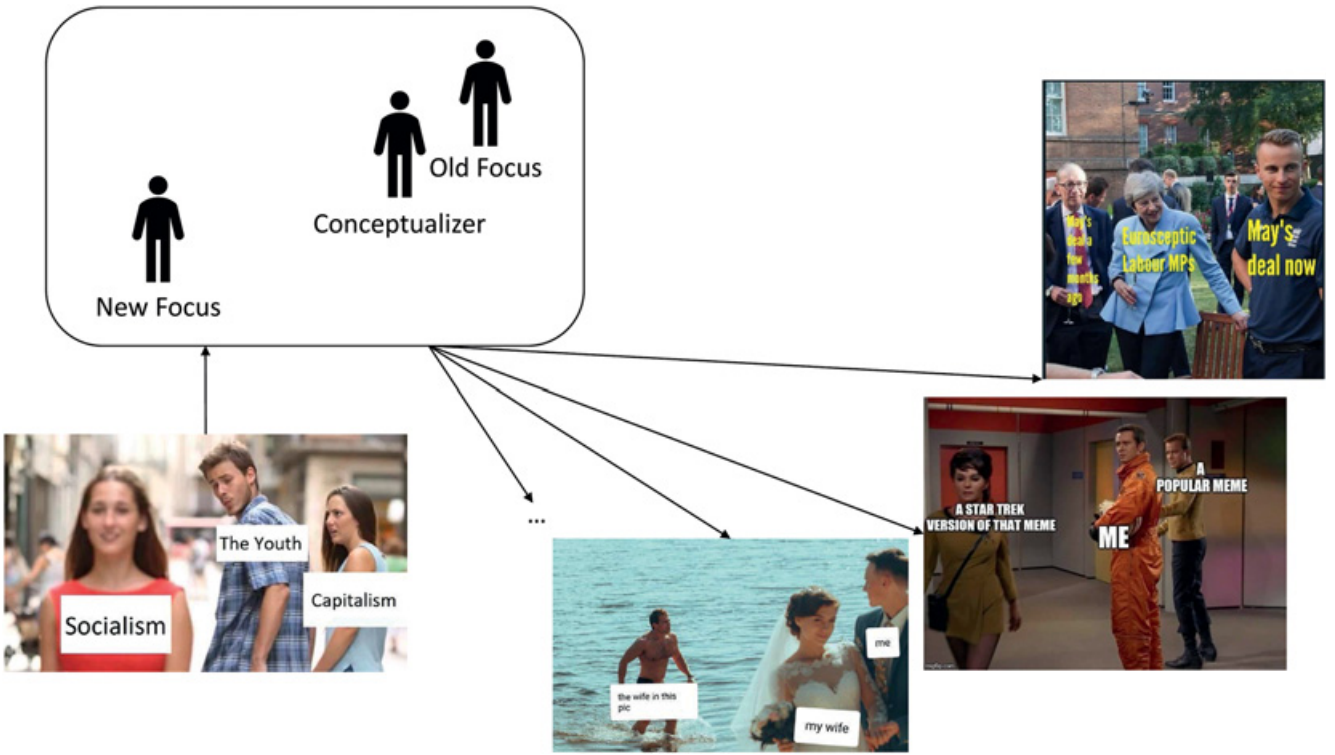


Figure 4.9 DBM constructional schema (Credit: Antonio Guillem/Shutterstock).

Figure 4.10 DBM meta-meme (Credit: Antonio Guillem/Shutterstock).

girl in blue (*the original stock photo used in this meme*) is overjoyed, looking at the engagement ring she appears to be presented with, so she does not notice his gaze being turned away. These twists on the standard DBM point to something more interesting than the fact that a very popular meme can become a bit tired. We see this, rather, as a confirmation of the salience not just of the meme, but of the scenario it sets in motion, which can then be playfully extended, viewed from a different perspective and otherwise re-used, without actually changing much about the original meme as such (note, in this respect, the telling detail of the text saying *this meme* – suggesting it's the 'same' meme despite the different image). Primarily, these meta-memes confirm that in the world of very common memes, DBM still rules. Its extensive usability comes, in our opinion, from the embodied clarity of the central change in gaze within the IM, and the salience of the basic scenario – the constructional meaning. We will return to the DBM construction in our discussion of memes in advertising (Chapter 11) and in the final chapter, and will further address the question of meta-memetic forms in Chapter 9.

4.4 Labelling Image Macro Constructions and Figuration

In the first part of this chapter we have considered less-entrenched labelling memes and noted that in some complex examples (such as *Words-and-Memes* in Figure 4.2) memetic interpretation may rely on figurative patterns (metonymy, metaphor, and simile), even if figuration is not the primary aspect of interpretation. In this section, we want to look briefly at DBM from that perspective. But first, we should add a few points regarding figuration and linguistic constructions.

In the previous section, we introduced the Caused Motion Construction. Its primary examples involve an agent deliberately moving an object into a new location (as in *Mark put the book on the desk*). We also added examples which use verbs such as *laugh* or *bully*, which represent situations of caused movement where the instrument causing motion to occur is behaviour and not physical force. Such constructional variants rely on two processes: coercion (*laugh* is not a typical caused motion verb), and a metaphorical understanding of location as a state (so that one can be bullied into depression or anger, emotional states metaphorically understood as locations). We will consider another example to show the possibilities of figurative use of constructions: *You got bullied into that courtroom by the memory of a dead lawyer* (*A Few Good Men*, 1992). The sentence is said in a conversation between two military lawyers, Jack and Danny, by Jack. Jack is the prosecutor, and he assumes that Danny decided to go through a trial (rather than plea bargaining) to live up to the reputation of his now deceased father – a famous courtroom lawyer.

The sentence, in passive voice, creates a Caused Motion scenario in which most of the components are not understood materially and literally. The agent doing the 'bullying' is Danny's memory of his father – a powerful force 'pushing' him to act. The location into which Danny is forced is *that courtroom*, a room indeed, but also a metonymic representation of the event (a trial) that takes place there, but not anywhere else. The *bullying* that pushed Danny to choose a trial involved strong encouragement from colleagues, leading to Danny's own realization of a moral obligation to show that his clients are innocent and his growing conviction that he can succeed. And the motion is the change of heart Danny experiences (as per the primary metaphor CHANGE IS MOTION). In effect, the components of force, causation, motion and location are all represented metaphorically. Crucially, however, the change of mind is happening in Danny's conscience only, so the causes, events, and all other components are conceptual. The meaning is figurative, but it is also compositional, as it builds on a range of figurative processes, rather than representing one specific metaphorical mapping.

The role of figuration in multi-argument constructions thus seems to match some of the observations we made in Section 4.1, in which we have shown how partial figurative construals (image-schematic, metonymic, or metaphoric) participate in the overall meaning of the artefact. We also suggested that in memes it is often the case that the broadest figurative component is specifically similative, whereby the nature of the experience depicted can be viewed via the visual and textual components brought together. While some memes, such as *when*-memes, are similative in the simplest and easily articulated way (as in, *giving inadequate responses to exam questions feels like patching a hole in the wall in an incoherent and ineffective way*), the experiential content of the *Words-and-Memes* or *Radiohead* memes is built in the context of the figurative

content and visual components of these memes as structured wholes. We suggest that memetic figuration functions in ways similar to the emergence of figurative meaning in complex constructions – such as the *being bullied* Caused Motion example discussed above. There may be (unpredictable) figurative and constructional elements, but they jointly render the experience of one memetic entity – a Meme Character or Meme Maker. The emerging overarching construal in each case can be rendered in similative terms (e.g. *Reading words feels like spilling some of the content before it reaches your brain, while viewing memes feels like absorbing all the content there is*, or *Radiohead likely feels like the man in the kebab joint brawl, safely undisturbed by the competition*). This 'figurative compositionality' leading towards a similative construal appears to be specific to memetic discourse, even if not all labelling memes will naturally profile figurative meanings.

While the meaning of DBM revolves around concepts such as 'old', 'new', and 'change', and centers around the entity represented by the boy in the middle of the photo (it is his impulse that drives the scenario), the 'change of mind' of the boy is not naturally seen in metaphorical terms we have applied to some of the examples above. Instead, the image is rich in embodied signals of the emotional responses of all three participants: turning away from the old interest, following the new interest with one's gaze, feeling good about being noticed, and feeling shocked and saddened about being abandoned. Most of the meaning is thus built around expressive behaviours represented in the image, but, because all three MCs signal their experience of the situation through body language, the emerging 'feels like' meaning is built on experiential behaviour, not on figuration. Also, we should note the difference between memes like DBM and those like *Radiohead* – the Radiohead scene is rich and active, but facial and embodied expressions are only relevant to the Radiohead character – who lacks any expression whatsoever.

The final question concerns the degree to which the expressivity of the original DBM photo carries over to the memes carrying different labels or identities. We want to consider two memes from that perspective – the *Heads of State* (Figure 4.7) and *Political Affiliations* (Figure 4.6). We are not convinced that Figure 4.6 necessarily carries emotional responses. Would capitalism really feel abandoned if young people chose socialism? Probably not, though we can imagine that the political and economic aftermath of such a change would involve some surprise and recriminations on the one hand and some sense of pride and achievement on the other. At the same time, the expressions in the *Heads of State* example are fully emotional, and perfectly matched to what we expect the three Meme Characters to feel. It is enough to imagine that the photoshopping had been done differently to recognize that the facial expressions and generally known facts about the three leaders agree with the interpretation the meme creates.

To conclude, figuration plays a very interesting role in labelling memes. It helps construct lower-level meanings, but also leads towards what we can perhaps identify as the primary role of memes – an expression of experiential, similative meaning.

4.5 *Sections of* Memes

In this final section, we discuss so-called *Sections of* memes. They form a meme type that shares some features with labelling memes (and indeed are treated as such on the *Know Your Meme* website). What is different from standard labelling memes is that, rather than labelling different objects within a composite image, *Sections of* memes label parts of a single object, and link these with a scale. The initial example appears to have been that in which a joint (i.e. a cannabis cigarette) has hand-drawn brackets depicted alongside it, with the sections marked off in this way labelled with text. The idea then is that those parts of the joint smoked later correspond to mental states that are more divorced from reality, possibly leading into paranoia (thereby reflecting degree of intoxication). For instance, in one comparatively innocuous example, the sections labelled from left to right are *hehehe*, *i* (*sic*) *have never felt this happy*, and *someone is watching me*. Among the popular variations on the *Sections of a Joint* meme is that involving a bottle of red wine, where the scale of intoxication often appears to be combined with escalating discourse exchanged between the fictive speakers sharing the wine bottle. The text used to label three sections of the wine bottle is shown for two examples in Table 4.1.

Both examples show a friendly, entirely uncontroversial conversation starter – a compliment about someone's looks or an expression of thanks for the invite. In

Table 4.1 Sections of a Wine Bottle *memes*

Bottleneck	Top half of bottle	Bottom half of bottle
1. grandma you're looking lovely tonight	look you guys I just think healthcare is a universal right	cousin john you're a fascist and the revolution will not spare you
2. Thanks for having us at your lovely home.	why supporting actress is the best Oscar category	Do you know how much your co-workers make? You know you should, right? The company is never operating in your best interests. By dissuading conversations about money, they're keeping you under their control. Normalize transparency. Have you thought about unionizing?

the second phase of the conversation, and of the bottle, topics appear to be tackled around which there might not be a unanimous consensus around the table (e.g. healthcare as a universal right). By the final stage (corresponding to the bottom half of the bottle), many examples, like the first example in Table 4.1, descend into angry argument (here for instance, *you're a fascist*); the second example in Table 4.1, while not turning to invective, does suggest a pushy and one-sided insistence that is unlikely to make for pleasant conversation.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, parodic variants of the *Sections of* meme can be found; one involves an image of a taco headlined *Parts of a taco* and shows five sections labelled, from left to right, *good*, *really good*, *om nom nom*, *yummy*, and *more please*. Another play on the meme's conventions consist in adding a single bracket (thus not actually distinguishing different sections) alongside a single whole object, as in an example where someone bracketed and labelled a picture of their cat with the text *free therapy* (@drewhyde on X/Twitter, 28 November 2022). A third amusing variation in a sense concerns a kind of reverse *Sections of* meme, where communicators take an existing bracketed object, known in motivational psychology as Maslow's hierarchy of needs and typically represented as a layered pyramid, and obliterate the divisions between the layers in order to present something as meeting all their needs – basic (safety and physiological) needs, psychological needs (esteem, belongingness and love) and self-fulfilment needs. In the example in Figure 4.11 (posted by @ULTRAGLOSS on X/Twitter, 20 March 2022), all these needs are met by

Figure 4.11 *'Hierarchy of Needs' Sections of* meme.

just literally a girl telling me she likes my outfit, effectively cancelling (humorously) the scalar hierarchy of needs from more to less basic.

The most interesting form of *Sections of* meme, in our view, returns to the original idea of a scale, but interprets it specifically as a time scale, and applies it not to a single object (like a joint or a wine bottle), but rather to a printed word or logo. In the example in Figure 4.12, we see the word *UNIVERSITY* with two sections hand-drawn underneath – one very short and partly preceding the word, partly overlapping with the first part of the letter *U*, the second long and extending all the way to the end of the word. These two sections are then labelled with the phrases *I did good in high school I think I'm smart I'll do good in uni* and *I do not belong here I'm the stupidest person to walk the face of this earth* respectively. Readers/viewers are thus invited to blend the extent of the printed word UNIVERSITY with a timeline corresponding to the time spent at university, where one arrives with initial great expectations, but very early on and until the very end this turns to disillusionment, disappointment, and crippling self-doubt.

Some examples in our collection make the timeline element explicit, drawing a line going from *birth* on the left to *death* on the right, with various crosslines in between. One example adds this timeline underneath the phrase *Life of an artist*, and then divides up the birth-death timeline into three sections, labelled from left to right as *gifted kid*, *a burned out disappointment*, and *an old weirdo with a home studio*. Still other examples feature not a word or phrase, but a logo, as in an example where the old Twitter logo of the blue bird has a short section on the left labelled as *Hey this is kinda cool I can talk to my friends and celebrities*, and then a long, unclosed bracket (continuing to the edge of the image) labelled, dispiritingly, as *I have never been more mentally ill*.

What these examples share, intriguingly, is the dynamic interpretation of a word, phrase, or logo as reflecting a temporal process, from an early stage (early time at uni, early life stage, early stage of using Twitter) on the left to

Figure 4.12 *'University' Sections of* meme.

later stages on the right. This maps a basic spatial left-to-right lay-out onto temporal progression in a way that somewhat matches our reading experience,[1] but blows it up, of course, to a much larger scale than the time needed to read a word or process a logo. While the meme shares features with standard labelling memes, it adds its own features, particularly the scalarity, and also lacks the feature of applying in some way a source frame (like the *Distracted Boyfriend*) to an unrelated target frame (like the world of politics). In the visual examples, the meme playfully imagines mental states or discourse corresponding to a scale of intoxication; in the examples involving words, phrases, and logos, on the other hand, it presents a mocking interpretation of successive temporal stages that relate, quite literally, to the phrase or logo (e.g. university, life of an artist, Twitter).

* * *

In this chapter, we considered both less-entrenched, more one-off labelling meme constructs (such as the *Pandemic Brick Wall* and the *Words-and-Memes* examples), and labelling meme constructions using firmly entrenched IMs, such as *Is This a Pigeon?* and DBM. The specific meaning emergence varies across the different examples discussed, but we highlighted the role of embodied features, constructional configurations and sometimes figurative compositionality. We argued that overall, an experiential meaning is construed suggesting in which respect the experience which the Meme Maker wants to communicate 'feels like' the configuration of visually depicted (and labelled) elements taken from an unrelated situation or frame. We added a discussion of a special subtype of *Sections of* memes, labelling off portions of an image or a printed word or logo to call up a scale of intensity, and/or a temporal progression (we will see a creative application of this meme in a number of advertisements discussed in Chapter 11).

Chapter 3 considered memes which combined an image with specially dedicated zones for text, typically showing a meaningful distribution across TT and BT. This chapter focused on labelling memes which abandon these specially reserved 'zones', but instead scatter textual labels across different components of an internally complex image. The next chapter turns to various types of grid memes, which present yet another type of spatial configurations of image and text.

[1] Though note that we don't really read by taking in each letter or bit of visual information from left to right, but more holistically, jumping from focus to focus and piecing the bits together.

5 Memetic Grids

This chapter considers a number of meme families which share the use of grid-like arrangements. The types we focus on first in this chapter use grids to present values along a scale, or even along more than one scale at once; examples we discuss include the *Tuxedo Winnie the Pooh* meme and the *Political Compass* meme. Different, non-scalar uses of four-cell grids include presenting a sequence of discourse exchanges (as in the *Anakin and Padmé* meme, discussed more fully in Chapter 8) or presenting a story-like sequence of scenes (as in the *Drowning High Five* meme, which we introduce in this chapter and discuss further in Chapter 9). Vertical grids, tiers (used to rank things from best to worst) and four-cell grids appear across many different memes, and may combine elements of Image Macros (IMs) (using a fixed image or set of images, though always open to creative variation) and even of labelling memes. All grid memes tend to be 'scanned' and read left to right, top to bottom. The popularity of the formal arrangements themselves, and of the four-way grid in particular, across so many artefacts motivates our focus on them as a significant genre in its own right.

5.1 Scalar Grids

5.1.1 Vertical Grids and Tiers

We start by considering vertical grids. These are structured by a single scale, and are presented as a column of images with some kind of development across the sequence of images on one side, and words or phrases corresponding in some way to that scale, but in a different domain, on the other side. One example is often known as *Tuxedo Winnie the Pooh*, and it shows a sequence of Pooh drawings (at least two, and often three) where Pooh's outfit becomes more formal, fancy, and posh across the iterations. Correspondingly, words or phrases or whole utterances are presented which show an increase in degree of formality, as in the example in Figure 5.1.

From bottom to top, across the three images, we infer a scale of formality of dress, based on our frame knowledge of dress codes: from casual Pooh, over

Figure 5.1 *Tuxedo Winnie the Pooh* meme: working at McDonalds.

tuxedo Pooh, to a tuxedo Pooh further adorned with a hat, monocle, and moustache. The pretend quotes on the right-hand side of the meme show an increase in length and linguistic sophistication; given that a job at McDonald's is so far outside the Winnie the Pooh frame most Meme Viewers (MVs) will presumably not see Pooh as the speaker of these quotes, but will interpret the meme as a comment on ways of saying things in language – a very metalinguistic concern. By the time we get to the final version, the potential speaker of the utterance manages to make a part-time job at McDonalds sound like a globally important high-ranking job. We get the sense, as viewers of this artefact, that people use overly convoluted language to make themselves seem more important and impressive, and we also share the sense that this is laughable and futile – we can still see it's Winnie the Pooh, just as we can still presumably see it's a modest part-time job serving fast food. Note also how, unlike in some other meme types that present multiple lines of discourse (see Chapter 8), the three bits of discourse in this example do not together make up a speech event; rather they are presented in parallel as different potential ways of construing one and the same reality.

This example and others like it were discussed by Lou (2021: 153–60) as cases of multimodal scalar simile: saying things in unnecessarily complex and roundabout ways 'feels like' dressing up in fancy wear. Scalar simile is less typically commented on, given the general assumption that simile in language involves *like* or *as*, but as Harding (2017) has shown, many other forms can also signal simile, including scalar forms such as *more than* . . . or *as* . . . *as* . . .. An example Lou also discusses, from the broad family of *Classical Art* memes, shows a similar metalinguistic bent as Figure 5.1: in it, three increasingly elaborate paintings representing horses and their riders are combined with the sequence of expressions *from this point forward*, *hereafter*, and *henceforth*. Here again, using more formal or even pretentious words 'feels like' horses and riders being more elaborately and flamboyantly decked out. Other popular examples found online might focus not on degrees of formality, but on different accents and varieties of language: one example shows so-called 'meme man' (a grey 3D rendering of a human head; see *Know Your Meme*) accompanied by the phrase *Bottle of water* in the first row, and then a photoshopped version of meme man, adding in the Union Jack, a top hat and the iconic Elizabeth Tower in the background, accompanied by the sequence *Bo'ohw'o'wo'er*, suggesting a kind of Cockney pronunciation replete with glottal replacements. Although this seems less scalar, we would argue the strong association with scales in the standard patterns of vertical grids suggest an interpretation whereby this particular British pronunciation is viewed as in some way 'superlative' or next-level.

Returning to *Tuxedo Winnie the Pooh*, here too we can see how established meme patterns invite creative elaborations that deviate from the standard pattern. Most examples involving Winnie the Pooh feature the tuxedo, and as a third step the version with bowler hat, moustache, and monocle, but one example of a different take involves the same initial representation (casual Pooh), and then a version of Pooh dressed in a doctor's white jacket over a suit and tie, and wearing a surgical headlight. More than formality, the 'scale' involved here is home versus work context, specifically the medical setting. In this case, it is less clear that this is still being understood as a 'scale', as there is no obvious step further 'up' (a more doctory doctor?). Interestingly, the example is also cleverly different in terms of the words combined with it: straightforward, casual Pooh combines with the typed phrase *You have cancer*, while doctor Pooh shows a hand-written but illegible scribble. Instead of different ways of *saying* things, this example points up different ways of *writing* them, opening up the opportunity to make fun of the cliché of doctors' illegible handwriting, particularly when writing prescriptions.

Our examples so far have essentially been memes presenting ironic comments on people's use of language: pointing up the pretensions of very formal and convoluted language, making fun of a particular accent, or laughing at the

cliché of GPs' illegible handwriting. Not all vertical, scalar grid memes have this metalinguistic focus, however. One of the best known of these scalar memes, known variably as *Galaxy Brain* or *Expanding Brain*, shows a number of metalinguistic cases, and indeed a popular earlier example of it belonged to that category (featuring the word series *who*, *whom*, *whom'st*, and *whomst'd*, suggesting a cline of formality reaching over into the non-existing and absurd). It is also used in many other types of context, however, applying the scale of ever larger, ever more illuminated brains to various topics. One example, for instance, captions the series of expanding brain images as *paper straws*, *metal straws*, *pasta straws*, and *just drink with your fucking mouth*. Based on our frame knowledge, we quickly assume the topic is that of ecological alternatives to plastic straws, passing through various stages of alternate materials (paper, metal, even pasta), to peak in the maximally 'brainy' alternative of just not using straws at all and drinking directly from the glass or cup. Here as elsewhere with the galaxy brain meme, the overall viewpoint suggests that people come up with increasingly far-fetched or inane options (*whomst'd*, *pasta straws*), indicative of a so-called galaxy brain only in a deeply ironic sense, for the options are in fact viewed as far-fetched and stupid. Arguably, in the straw example, the final step along the scale (*just drink with your fucking mouth*) drops the ironic pretence and presents, instead, a genuine breakthrough solution, in the shape of a return to basic principles.

It is worth briefly reflecting on the role of the image series in memes like *Tuxedo Winnie the Pooh* and *Galaxy Brain*. The 'crescendo' arrangement in a vertical series along a scale applies across different examples of the patterns, but the specific frames called up by the image series do, of course, strongly influence *what* is being 'measured' along a scale. In the typical Winnie the Pooh examples, the frame of dress codes is evoked, providing access, metonymically, to the idea of degrees of formality. The galaxy or 'expanding' brain shows increasing brain size and luminosity, which we associate metaphorically with intelligence and 'bright ideas', so we assume a scale along that dimension, even if subsequently understood ironically. As a further example, consider Figure 5.2, in which the image series is taken from a video tutorial demonstrating how to put on clown make-up. The final state represents a full clown face, the emoji version of which 🤡 is frequently used in online communication as a reaction image suggesting the stance responded to is viewed as being completely gaga and delusional. The gradual emergence of this full-fledged clown then corresponds to a scale of self-delusion. In this example, the scale is applied to academic plans and ambitions, culminating in the idea (delusional according to the Meme Maker (MM)) that a tenure track job, with its promise of stable, long-term employment, will open soon in a suitable field of study.

In addition to the image series, the series of accompanying lines of direct discourse is worth noting as well. Both memes, the *Pooh* and the *Clown*, align

Figure 5.2 *Putting on Clown Make-up* meme: academic jobs.

the scalar structure of images with self-describing sentences, using the first-person pronoun *I* and tensed clauses either carrying the increasingly pompous self-description (the *Pooh* cases) or representing the person's expectations about the future (the *Clown* cases). We will have more to say about the use of Direct Discourse in memes in Chapter 7, but it is worth pointing out here that the sequence of sentences matched with the images reflects scaled expressions of someone's self-evaluation. But whose self-evaluation? In spite of the use of the first-person pronoun throughout, the fictive speaker is *not* the character represented in the image – Pooh or the Clown. We will analyse Meme Characters in relation to pronoun usage in greater detail in Chapter 6, but here we can point out that in most cases, there is no specific referent (attached to a specific deictic ground, as would come naturally when talking about oneself or one's plans). Instead, the meme as a whole targets the type of behaviour many people display (boastful self-perception or unrealistic professional expectations). In this sense, these memes align with the type of meanings we saw in earlier chapters – humorous commentary on broadly observed patterns of behaviour. The fictive direct discourse here, as in most memetic contexts, provides a demonstration of how some people misrepresent their own

situation. It is enough to look at the bottom cells of the Clown meme, where the hopes for highly prestigious academic prospects are associated with a clown.

Should we consider examples like *Tuxedo Winnie the Pooh*, *Galaxy Brain* or *Clown Make-up* vertical grids as multimodal constructions? The case may seem less intuitively clear than with cases discussed in other chapters, where parts of the multimodal artefact are linguistically 'nailed down': some fixed, formulaic phrases for instance (*One does not simply, I don't always X but when I do Y*), or at least the *when* signalling the start of a *when*-meme, or less substantive but more formal types of idiomaticity (in Fillmore et al.'s 1988 sense) as in the predictive memes of the *Good Girl Gina* type (biclausal, present tense, etc.). Nevertheless, like the entrenched examples of labelling memes, such as the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme discussed in the previous chapter, each of the well-entrenched examples has a recognizable form with a coherent meaning correlate; it's just that the fixed elements of form are visual and don't include text. The text parts of this family of memes are part of the 'open slots' filled in in actual use of the construction, rather like in labelling memes.

This doesn't make the examples like labelling memes in other respects of course: the scalar evaluation marks one important difference already. Another difference is in the text portions 'captioning' a series of developing images (from casual to formal Pooh, from smaller to larger and more activated brain, from less to fully made-up clown), as distinct from labelling memes labelling components of a single pictured scene.

Because of their similarity in presentation format to the vertical grid memes discussed, it's worth mentioning here the existence of so-called tier lists, and tier list memes. These find their origin in video games, where characters get ranked based on the quality of their performance. This led to a meme in which MMs amuse themselves and their readers by drawing up rankings in all sorts of domains, from types of candy to political parties. Typical examples have a left-hand column of tiers, identified as *S A B C D E F* against differently coloured backgrounds – the letters reminiscent of academic grading, with an added *S* as a special or 'super' tier (apparently used in Japanese grading systems, as the *Know Your Meme* website explains). The meme provides a fairly simple, rough and ready device for ranking preferences and so expressing the MM's viewpoint on a particular area of experience.

Among the creative variations on this pattern, one finds examples where the ranking scale is adjusted: instead of the letter-based grading, for instance, one example ranks South Park characters in terms of who the MM thinks they could beat in a fight (with categories ranging from *I'm kicking their ass* to *They're kicking my ass*, with intermediate steps) (example posted by @Darth__Biden on X/Twitter, 8 July 2023). While tiers ranking political parties can reflect a MM's political leanings in subtle ways in countries with many political

parties, when applied to a mostly two-party system like the US the tier system can be used to express a strong viewpoint. One example (posted by @RowanMarxFilms on X/Twitter, 20 January 2021) expands the scale to include three further ranks below F tier, of which the lowest is glossed as *Hell on earth* and finds the elephant logo of the Republican Party categorized into it, while the lone Democrat donkey is several tiers higher up under *C*, leaving most of the artefact a vast expanse of black emptiness. It's an effective way of communicating the MM's disaffection with the available political landscape: in their view, there's one mid-tier party, one hellishly awful party, and absolutely nothing else on offer.

In their standard form, then, tier lists offer a fairly basic scale, from good to bad, whereas the vertical grid memes discussed earlier blend the idea of a scale with input from the visual frame (casual/formal Pooh, small/larger brain, initial/completed clown make-up) to produce qualitatively different types of scales that are much more detailed and specific than basic good/bad rankings. What they share, of course, is the sense in which MMs put their views out there, hoping to prompt engagement from other online communicators.

5.1.2 Combining Scales in Grids with Four or More Cells

We now turn to four-cell grids, as well as more complex versions, in which two scales are combined. One prominent example is based around a political compass test which locates one's political views along two axes, the X axis (from left to right) ranging from *economically left* to *economically right*, and the Y axis (from top to bottom) ranging from *authoritarian* to *libertarian*. This defines four cells, coloured from top left, clockwise, red, blue, yellow, and finally, in the bottom left corner, green (though a variant exists which replaces yellow with purple). Internet users might run a test and share their results online, with an open invitation for their followers and friends to do the same – a highly intersubjective set-up, eliciting responses and interaction. This political compass has, however, taken on a life of its own, and has come to structure a whole series of memes. One conceptually fairly simple example in our collection seems content to merely illustrate or depict the four political types by fitting in appropriate panels from Tintin comic strips: a Russian-looking Tintin and Bobby walking (authoritarian-left); a waving Tintin welcoming the police arriving by boat (authoritarian-right); a colonial scene in which Tintin invites the natives, depicted in terms of racist stereotypes, to get to work (libertarian-right); and a scene in which Tintin smacks a police officer in the face (libertarian-left). This shows off the MM's cleverness and knowledge of Tintin, and is enjoyable and funny without, presumably, expressing any clear stance about Tintin (or Hergé, the Belgian comic strip artist).

Figure 5.3 *Political Compass Macron* meme.

Other examples can be much more complex, and do tend to serve the expression of the MM's stance. Consider Figure 5.3, which we might label *Political Compass Macron*. In it, each quadrant is further divided into nine sub-cells, each of them featuring a quote and most of them a picture (mostly of Macron); there are further partially concealed pictures providing a backdrop to the main grid, which seem broadly to suit the ideological spaces (as with the outstretched arm for the authoritarian-right quadrant, or the presence of the hammer and sickle in the background of the authoritarian-left quadrant). Overall this results in a thirty-six-cell grid, rather than just a four-cell grid, corresponding to thirty-six political positions taken at one time or another by the French president. The quotes attributed to Macron appear to be verifiable and genuine (even if, of course, presented in translation rather than in French),

but they are taken out of their separate original speech events and specific deictic grounds. Indeed, the meme makes abstraction of the different times, places, audiences and contexts in which the quotes find their origin; there is no 'real' sense in which there is a single speech event in which all of these things are said, but the meme cleverly presents the beliefs expressed in them all as simultaneously held by Macron. Very strikingly, some of the political positions the quotes reflect are blatantly contradictory. Thus, in the top left quadrant (*authoritarian-left*, red background), we find as one of the quotes *'Yes, I am a socialist'*, while the adjacent cell that falls into the top right quadrant (*authoritarian-right*, blue background) reads *'Honesty forces me to tell you that I'm not a socialist'*. No sane person can really sincerely hold entirely contradictory beliefs, so the overall Discourse Viewpoint being prompted seems to suggest Macron (some would say, like most politicians), will go around and say what a given audience wants to hear at a given time: he is (perhaps necessarily, as a politician who needs to maintain a nation-wide appeal) a political shape-shifter whose leanings and viewpoints cannot be reliably pinned down. To some, perhaps, he might seem the ultimate political centrist.

As it happens, *Political Compass* memes with thirty-six cells, or another implausibly large number, are not uncommon in memes reflecting political divides in specific countries. In one example, the British political left's many warring factions are placed on the political compass but splintered into thirty-six cells, expressing an overall Discourse Viewpoint of mockery towards the unproductive, navel-gazing factionalism in British leftist politics. At the same time, a similar idea as that in the *Political Compass Macron* meme can be achieved with much simpler means: in one example we collected, a single picture of American Chief Justice John Roberts is overlaid with the *Political Compass* meme (four appropriately coloured quadrants and two black axes), with a single line of text appearing in each quadrant, as summarized in Table 5.1. The meme ranks four momentous US Supreme Court decisions Roberts played an important part in, reflecting the overall Discourse Viewpoint that his vote is not predictably aligned with either of the dominant

Table 5.1 Chief Justice Roberts Political Compass *meme*

Cell	Text in cell
red, authoritarian-left	saved Obamacare (2013)
blue, authoritarian-right	dissented against gay marriage being legalized nationwide (2015)
yellow, libertarian-right	allowed unlimited money into politics (2010)
green, libertarian-left	struck down racial gerrymandering (2023)

US political parties, and can have a decisive impact on the outcome of landmark Supreme Court decisions.

A rather different, recursive use of the meme, still concerned with the realm of political ideology, is illustrated in Figure 5.4; we remind the reader that a colour version of the image can be viewed under the 'Resources' section of the website [www.cambridge.org/languageofmemes]. (For more on recursivity, see Section 9.3 in Chapter 9.)

That there are exactly four sub-cells per quadrant (and not nine as in the Macron example) is highly significant here, as it allows the meme to fulfil its desired viewpoint function. Indeed, this meme is really not so much about how the MM views the four political ideology types, but rather about how the MM views how the four types view themselves and others, so a recursive application of the four-cell grid is essential. Note that the colour-corresponding cells reflect the positive self-view of the four types (e.g. the libertarian-right (yellow) see themselves as espousing *freedom* (yellow-within-yellow)), whereas the other types are viewed negatively, for instance as *nazis*, *slave owners*, or *useful idiots* in the authoritarian-left outer cell. These negative views of others tend to be rather extreme and, according to this MM, rather broad-sweeping among

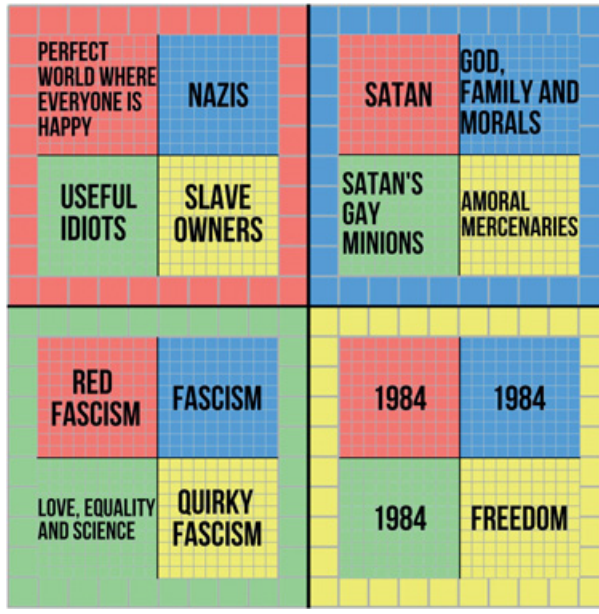


Figure 5.4 Nested *Political Compass* meme in which each outer cell contains another four-cell grid.

libertarians in particular: for the right-wing libertarians, all other approaches boil down to the dystopian world of George Orwell's *1984*; for the left-wing libertarians, all other approaches are just different flavours of fascism. While this example is strongly text-based, it is worth stressing the importance of the visual component, as there is no way of understanding the 'views of views' in this artefact without the colour schemes being repeated across the outer and inner grids: from top left, clockwise, the sequence red-blue-yellow-green is repeated between the outer and inner grids.

Given its origins in a political ideology questionnaire, it is of course no surprise that the political compass meme is often used to package ideas and viewpoints that are about politics in a fairly narrow sense. This includes the specific intersubjective, engagement-oriented usage in which a political compass meme is filled in with lots of statements per quadrant, and online communicators then highlight those statements, potentially across all quadrants of the grid, which they agree with, often sharing it alongside a 'clean' copy (without highlights), to encourage online friends to do the same exercise and then subsequently share their political positions in this format. All of this doesn't prevent the political compass format, however, from being blended with different domains of experience as well, as illustrated by the example in Figure 5.5.

The example is interesting not only in not being strictly about politics, but also in the way in which it imposes a kind of statement-response dialogue structure onto the *Political Compass* meme. As we will see throughout the remaining chapters, memes often insert a dialogic structure in the template, without first evoking or setting up a proper dialogic context (complete with speaker/hearer, discourse form, etc.). The popularity of such dialogic snippets in memetic discourse is largely due to the power of Direct Discourse (or quotation as a form) to evoke attitudes and stances, which is why all quotations have been claimed, in Clark & Gerrig (1990), to be 'demonstrations', rather than accurate renderings of dialogic discourse. In memetic forms, where brevity and clarity are highly valued, the evocative power of discourse forms is especially important.

We argue further that unattributed dialogic excerpts evoke not only some stance-related content, but that they also prompt a structuring of a generalized discourse context in which the quotation would play a role (so that the initial statement above the grid opens up a mental space in which one imagines a student or scholar saying *'I study Old English'* to some not very well-informed interlocutor). We use the term 'Discourse Space' throughout the book to refer to such a subtype of mental spaces (Fauconnier 1994/1985, 1997). In comparison with other mental spaces (which may set up beliefs, emotional states, temporally distant situations, imaginary situations, etc.), the primary role of Discourse Spaces is to represent parts of possible

Figure 5.5 'I study Old English' *Political Compass* meme.

communicative exchanges or conversations, structured via appropriate forms such as quotation marks, 'say' or 'be like' clauses, changes in tense or pronouns suggesting a different deictic set-up, and so on.

In the meme in Figure 5.5, the four quadrants each present a possible response to the opening gambit, and a fifth response – apparently 'neutral' in terms of political alignment – is presented in the middle of the diagram. The four politically aligned discourses produced in response are all dismissive and negative, considering the study of Old English elitist (authoritarian-left), not elitist enough (authoritarian-right), racist (libertarian-left) or useless (libertarian-right). The starting point of all these responses, the opening statement *'I study Old English'*, isn't a stance expression particularly, yet to the strongly ideologically motivated, it seems to call for a negative stance reply. The middle response does not seem antagonistic or even more generally evaluative, but rather ignorant: *'Oh, so you like Shakespeare?'* misses the point that Shakespeare belongs to the Early Modern English period, quite remote from

Old English. Overall, the meme seems to suggest that some people with nothing better to do will take any innocuous statement as a prompt to comment and reveal their ideological prejudice or their ignorance, even when no special engagement was being sought. This will call to mind to some the notion of a so-called 'reply guy', always ready to engage online and take any opportunity they can find to challenge and tiresomely 'debate' people on social media platforms.

A very playful form of grid meme combining two axes of evaluation is the type of alignment chart derived, originally, from a role-playing game called *Dungeons & Dragons*. In the original (pre-internet) game, characters could be judged in terms of their good versus evil character, with 'neutral' as an intermediate category on the axis, and also in terms of their conformity to the law, along a lawful-neutral-chaotic axis (see the *Know Your Meme* website, under 'Alignment Charts'). At the heart of the diagram, we find the *true neutral* category, presumably to avoid a cell being called *neutral neutral*. In the meme format the resulting nine-cell grid gets to be applied to a mind-boggling range of experiences, including, for example, animals, fruits, ways of storing bread; the cells can be filled with pictures and/or text, including quotes, as we saw in the Macron compass meme. What drives the two axes in this meme is textual to begin with (*good*/*neutral*/*evil* and *lawful*/*neutral*/*chaotic*), and then either text and/or image can be made to match the specifications of the format. This works in ways opposite to the vertical grids we started this chapter with, where a series of images (of *Tuxedo Winnie the Pooh*, *Galaxy Brain*, or *Clown Make-up*) defined a frame-appropriate axis in a much more implicit way. The *Political Compass* meme is intermediate in this regard: some work purely based on the basis of the colouring and the axes and require MVs to know what the axes represent; others add the wording and so provide textual support.

One example of the alignment chart meme in our collection, reflecting academics' interests, is the peer review *Alignment Chart* (Figure 5.6). Most cells here use descriptions of peer review comments illustrating one of the categories (e.g. *super critical & extremely nice about it. you want to hate them but can't*), but a number of them offer up (at least partial) depictions in the form of quotes, as with the one-word quotes *'fine'* (neutral good) and *'trash'* (chaotic evil), and especially with the selective, fictive depictions for the *chaotic good* and *true neutral* categories. The text in both of these last two cells can't be taken as a plausible direct quote from a possible review, but it condenses and typifies the kind of discourse that occurs in them (cf. Clark & Gerrig 1990, Fludernik 1993).

What makes a meme like this work for its intended audience is, doubtless, its relatability – academics know the peer review system is inevitable and often useful, but at the same time often share frustrations about undesirable aspects of the process. From the point of view of the MM deciding to formulate some of these frustrations in meme format, what is interesting is the way the format

Figure 5.6 Peer review *Alignment Chart* meme.

drives the creativity. The MM needs to blend their own frame knowledge about the reviewing process and its frustrations with the particular format requiring nine categories along two axes; after all, it's unlikely that existing experiences divide neatly into exactly nine types that fit the exigencies of the meme. Creative adjustments, exaggerations and inventions are needed to successfully pull off this blend, while typically for MVs no such effort or tension is involved in the interpreting – illustrating Rohrer's (2005) argument around the different workings of blending depending on adopting the creator's or interpreter's perspective.

Judging by this and other examples, the *Alignment Chart* meme lends itself well to creating elaborate in-jokes enjoyable by a particular cultural niche or in-crowd. One of the other examples in our collection (posted by @Yair_Rosenberg on X/Twitter, 28 November 2021), for instance, ranges different spellings of the Jewish festival of Chanukah on the chart (with חנוכה as 'true neutral' option, and *Chanukah* as 'neutral good' spelling). Yet another example requires a level of obsession with the political and media landscape of the UK which few can achieve, and fewer still would aspire to: it places on the grid various members of the public, either interviewed for a vox pop out in the street, or intervening in

the BBC debating programme *Question Time*. The relatively better known examples in the grid are in the middle column of 'neutrals': 'neutral good' features Brenda from Bristol, who famously commented 'not another one!' when told there would be another general election back in 2017; 'true neutral' shows Gillian Duffy, famously called 'some bigoted woman' by then Prime Minister Gordon Brown in a hot mic incident during the 2010 General Election campaign; and 'neutral evil' features a Scottish woman saying some exceedingly unkind things about Margaret Thatcher, around the time of her funeral in 2013. Another UK-centric example, given in Figure 5.7 (posted by @dixonary_ on X/Twitter, 27 June 2023), blends the map of England with a version of the alignment grid (though it adds a touch of 'continental drift' to the Isle of Man). Two changes were made to the standard grid, however: what is normally the Y-axis (*good-neutral-evil*) here becomes the X-axis, and the reason for this becomes clear when one considers what the *lawful-neutral-chaotic* axis has been replaced by: Northern, Midlands and Southern, that is, three geographical

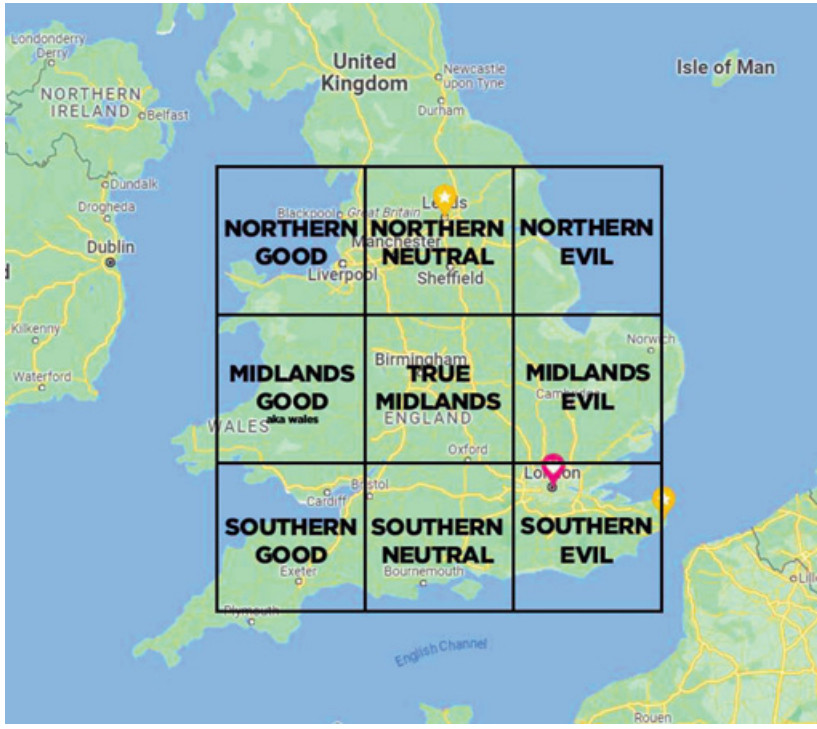


Figure 5.7 England *Alignment Chart* meme.

regions in England which need to be along the Y-axis for the blend to make any sense. In posting this meme, the MM commented 'people keep getting the north/south divide wrong and it's time to set the record straight'. The mapping is very rough around the edges of course, and indeed the MM acknowledges that by adding in small script *aka wales* (*sic*) to the *Midlands good* cell in the grid, but these jokey examples all show how great the human urge can be to take an attractive pattern, apply it to a niche topic, and run with it.

5.2 Non-scalar Grids

The grid memes of various types we have surveyed thus far have been organized around the idea of interpreting and structuring experiences in the world along scales and ranks. We now turn to different uses of, particularly four-cell, grids that have different organizing principles, or even none beyond the mere formal appeal of a four-way presentation mode. The latter type – where the mere formal, visual lay-out seems to inspire the use of the format – can be found, for instance, in the *Dolly Parton Challenge* meme. While precursors can be identified, as the *Know Your Meme* website details, the popular form of the meme originates in a post published by Dolly Parton (@dollyparton on Instagram, 21 January 2020), grouping four pictures of herself arranged in a four-cell grid, and labelled up with the names of four social media platforms: *LinkedIn*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *Tinder*. The caption posted alongside the pictures reads *Get you a woman who can do it all* 😉. The social media platforms were thus taken to represent behavioural types, reflected in the platform/picture blend: professional behaviour (*LinkedIn*/business suit picture), family time (*Facebook*/Christmas jumper picture), leisure activities (*Instagram*/posing in leisure outfit while holding a guitar), and romantic or sexual experiences (*Tinder*/playboy bunny outfit). This example inspired a range of variants applying the format to different people (mostly celebrities) as well as fictive characters, including for instance David Brent (the fictional main character of the UK comedy series *The Office*). The overall Discourse Viewpoint could be taken to suggest that we all have different facets to our personalities and self-presentation depending on context and company – and this diversity is to be celebrated.

A similar visual effect – with a grid-like presentation of four pictures – can easily be achieved on the microblogging site Twitter, which standardly limits the maximum number of pictures to four in a single tweet, and presents them visually as a grid. Thus, in April 2022, a series of pictures showing French president Emmanuel Macron in very different outfits and looks (some more serious and formal, others very relaxed and informal) was circulated, accompanied by labelling in the accompanying text of the same tweet that contained the pictures. For example, in one such tweet, the labels meant to be read as

corresponding to the four pictures were as follows: *pitching article*, *reporting article*, *writing article*, *tweeting about article* (see Chapter 10, Figure 10.1). While this may call to mind the *Tuxedo Winnie the Pooh* meme somewhat, the pictures are not presented in a recognizably structured, graded way (from informal to formal, for instance), and their presentation in grid form seems more random and accidental.

Other non-scalar grid memes do appear to have a firmer logic underlying their formal presentation and meaning emergence. We briefly consider three cases here, further examples of which will be discussed in different contexts in later chapters. One case is the *Drake* meme, featuring two stills from a music video by hip hop artist Drake, accompanied by words or pictures on the right-hand side. Formally this meme closely resembles the vertical grids we started this chapter with, but at least two differences stand out: (i) the 'scale' normally does not extend beyond two, whereas the scales for our other examples typically do (*Galaxy Brain, Clown Face*), or at least can (*Tuxedo Winnie the Pooh*), and more importantly, (ii) the notion of a scale does not suit the change in image very well. In fact, we saw one example earlier that is similar in this respect: in the *Doctor Pooh* example, the difference between 'casual wear' Pooh and 'doctor-outfit' Pooh is perhaps more a matter of contrast or opposition than properly of scale. The embodied postures in the two Drake images similarly involve an opposition, but an opposition in stance: dismissal and dislike in one picture, versus acceptance and appreciation in the other. While normally the dismissive posture is presented in the top row and the appreciative one in the bottom row, the ordering can be reversed, as in Figure 5.8, in which the 'like' and 'dislike' are reserved for different date formats. As with the vertical grids discussed earlier, less metalinguistic and more contentful uses are also common; one example, also adopting the same '*like* changing to *dislike*' order, involves a Drake blended with the face of Russian president Vladimir Putin on the left and an unchanging picture of Wagner mercenary group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin on the right (posted by @MajorPazuzu on X/Twitter, 24 June 2023), reflecting the change of mood around Wagner and its leader inside the Kremlin, following a short-lived mutinous uprising in the summer of 2023.

Our next example involves a four-cell grid representing a sequence of discourse exchanges between two characters. The *Anakin and Padmé* meme presents stills from a Star Wars film scene (from *Episode 2: Attack of the Clones*) in which the characters Anakin and Padmé are discussing forms of government (broadly, democracy versus dictatorship). The meme condenses the discussion into an exchange of a few lines by blending the film scene and dialogue with the so-called *Change* comic by Mr Lovenstein, in which a turtle refuses to answer the frog's question *For the better?* following from the turtle's opening gambit *I want to change the world* (see the *Know Your Meme* website

Figure 5.8 *Drake* 'date format' meme.

under 'For the Better, Right?'). The shot of Anakin's face, on the left-hand side of the meme, changes to become more close-up and with an intense expression on his face, while the image of the Padmé character changes drastically, from smiling and unconcerned, to troubled and sombre, suggesting a very different intonation being used for the repeated dialogue line *For the better, right?*. Meanwhile Anakin's text is limited to the first cell (*I'm going to change the world*), with no dialogue in the bottom left-hand cell. The basic structure of the meme is, arguably, already fairly complex – the condensed dialogue, the changing embodiment reflecting a chilling effect taking hold across the brief exchanges – and this then gets subsequently enriched with labelling. As an example, consider Figure 5.9, which labels the Anakin character as investor and entrepreneur *Elon Musk*, and the Padmé character as *Internet*, in a reference to Musk's conflicting tweets which influenced cryptocurrency markets. The overall viewpoint achieved suggests that internet users have reasons to question Musk's intentions and to fear the outcomes that might follow.

In general, such non-scalar grids have a specific emotional and narrative dynamic and signal attitudes and stances. We need to note here that the *Anakin and Padmé* memes, however easy to process they are, rely on several linguistic, memetic, visual, and embodied conventions. As regards memetic conventions, several are at work here: the faces of Meme Characters are IMs, signalling (based on the knowledge of the Star Wars movies) 'good' characters (Padmé) and 'evil' characters (Anakin). The macros are arranged into a stable grid,

Figure 5.9 'Elon Musk/Internet' *Anakin and Padmé* meme.

which requires the MV to re-create the sequence of the minute bits of communication happening. The viewer's response to the faces in the IMs does most of the interpretive work, as Anakin's boastful claim is welcomed with a hopeful smile, but his subsequent lack of response prompts a shift to a troubled and apprehensive expression. The grid cells are also labelled, so that the change of attitudes can be attributed to a domain other than the Star Wars story. And finally, the cells further contain snippets of direct discourse (including one where there is silence instead), which help the MV process the reason for the shifting moods. In other words, these easily 'readable' memes achieve meaning on the basis of a very effective combination of linguistic, visual and memetic forms. Memes like this which show such complex combinations build on the gradual accumulation of formal signals, but also ongoing conventionalization.

These processes underlie the growing role of memes as a genre and also their continued viral spread.

Our final grid example is *Drowning High Five* (Figure 5.10), another non-scalar grid, but one which centres not on a dialogue but on a narrative sequence of events, without even any particular, individuated characters being profiled. This example is based around a wordless cartoon originally posted by a cartoonist called Gudim on Instagram. The four-panel cartoon shows a hand sticking out of the surface of a sea or ocean, which we can assume to be 'not waving but drowning', to borrow Stevie Smith's poetic phrase; next, a hand emerging from higher up, so apparently from a person (out of the frame of vision) on a boat, approaching the hand of the drowning person; proceeding (in the third panel) to perform a high-five, rather than pull the person out of the water; the comic culminating in a view of the hand (and the person) sinking deeper into the water and fatally drowning in the final panel. Early memes featuring this cartoon turned it into a *when* or *me* meme by adding a line of text above the otherwise unchanged cartoon (*when your ex drowning*, *me liking posts about depression*), but, as the *Know Your Meme* website documents, soon the cartoon itself began to be labelled.

Figure 5.10 *Drowning High Five* meme: UK high-speed train policy.

In the example in Figure 5.10 (posted by @goldenarrw on X/Twitter, 14 June 2023), someone created the meme in order to respond (in a quote-tweet) to a message put out in June 2023 by the UK Department for Transport (*DFT* in the meme) reporting on the Transport Secretary's visit to Japan, where he rode a Shinkansen high speed train. In the tweet, to preface the visual, the MM added the text line 'Meanwhile back in the country that you serve', so as to highlight the perceived contrast between the upbeat messaging and the less rosy reality of UK policy. *HS2*, the label in the first panel of the meme, refers to the High Speed trainline 2 currently being built and planned in the UK (the first being the connection from the Eurotunnel to London), to connect London to the north of England. The project has continued to be scaled down, reduced in ambition, and large parts of it postponed or scrapped, while costs have been overrunning. With just two short abbreviations (*HS2* and *DFT*) and a three-word fictive quote, *'Look at Japan'* in panel 3, the meme manages to very effectively communicate a series of stances common among rail engineers and rail enthusiasts in the UK: HS2 is an important project (just like a human life is important) which is suffering badly at the hands of a government insufficiently committed to it, so it needs help urgently. What seems like a positive message on behalf of the Department for Transport, apparently supporting the principle of high-speed rail, turns out to only be an ineffectual, hollow, window-dressing type of soundbite not accompanied by any real help to keep the project going with proper funding; and so the project just keeps going under. The elegantly visually constructed narrative – call for help; apparent help; positive-seeming but useless gesture not actually helping; drowning – thus becomes a device for stacking stances (Dancygier 2012b), culminating into an overall viewpoint, around complex policy questions. In Chapter 9, we will compare various memes using the *Drowning High Five* grid, to look further into the degree to which the change of memetic template affects the meaning of a meme. Also in Chapter 9 we will discuss the so-called *Loss* meme, based on another wordless four-panel cartoon similarly narrating tragic events, but putting them to very different, artistic uses compared to the *Drowning High Five* example. The correlations between memetic form and memetic meaning are quite varied and, in the case of grids, help in clarifying the nature of the meme genre.

* * *

Across this chapter, we've seen examples presenting multiple lower-level viewpoints, sometimes as many as thirty-six, demonstrating linguistic behaviours, political and policy stances, or attitudes and responses in various domains of experience (academia, transport, and what not). What the various examples share is a requirement for the MV to, as it were, transcend or zoom out from (Tobin & Israel 2012) the multiple individual viewpoints at this lower level, and distil out of them an overall Discourse Viewpoint,

typically ironic: isn't it funny, or otherwise remarkable, how people talk, how the university job market works, how politicians position themselves, how academics review, what things we like or dislike, how we need to be suspicious of changes being promised by self-appointed visionaries, how superficially positive gestures don't stop bad things from happening, and so on. Vertical grids, tiers, and four-cell grids of different kinds all help structure this interpretive move from multiplicity to a coherent MV's interpretation quite elegantly, following, as we've seen, different logics: a single scale, abstracted from the visual framing provided by a series of images in vertical grids; simple good-to-bad rankings in tiers; a combined double scale in scalar grids like the *Political Compass* and *Alignment Chart* memes; discourse exchanges and narrative sequences in non-scalar grids; and also basic contrasts in simpler uses of grid arrangements like the *Drake* meme. Some multimodal artefacts, finally, simply use a four-cell grid as an attractive mode of presentation, as in the *Dolly Parton Challenge* meme. Given the pervasiveness of these grid-like arrangements, we will have cause to return to some of these examples in the chapters that follow.

6 Memetic Use of Personal Pronouns

Memes often use discourse forms that resemble conversational discourse, starting with forms of questions and all the way to explicitly using quotation marks. In fact, some memes use discourses structured as dialogues, including specific speaker and hearer roles, forms of conversational cohesion, forms of Direct Discourse, and the like. And yet, such usage departs from standard forms of conversation in many ways. Primarily, these conversation-like forms usually do not rely on a defined deictic centre, do not display typical conversational ways of maintaining referential patterns, engaging in topic maintenance, topic shift or other such strategies, and often insert images in lieu of conversational moves. They may share some features with Speech and Thought Representation constructions, while not assuming or constructing a sufficiently complete conversational ground (complete with deixis, identifiable participants, and conversational dynamic). Memetic conversations are typically very brief, not longer than four lines. They often repeat recognizable patterns, but the patterns are typically not developed – rather, the conversation snippets used are tokens of complete conversations, and reflect recognizable social and behavioural patterns. The conversational entries given are thus best seen as examples of 'demonstrations' – the category of usage introduced in Clark & Gerrig (1990), where quotations were described as demonstrations, that is, non-serious actions (of the order of play-acting and make-believe) which selectively depict some referent event, state, process, or object (1990: 766). As subsequent work has shown, quotations may often be used to present attitudes rather than any specific or actual discourse.

The truncated, demonstration-like nature of memetic conversations also explains why these examples may mimic spoken discourse, while not relying on an identifiable discourse ground. Dancygier (2021) describes these (and similar) cases as instances of fictive deixis, a communicative situation where the language forms used prompt an emergence of a faux deictic ground, remaining active only for the purposes of the artefact being observed. The specific conditions under which we can talk about deixis in memes at all also result in non-typical uses of both deictic and anaphoric pronouns. In this chapter, we discuss a range of memes in which personal pronouns appear to

signal types of discourses and grounding in ways different from ordinary deictic usage. We argue that these uses are specific to memetic discourse, adding yet another criterion to our discussion of memes as linguistic structures. While our main focus here is on the contribution of apparently 'conversational' pronouns (*I*, *you*, and *me* chiefly) to memetic meaning, we will survey more systematically specific memetic quotation constructions and usage patterns in the next two chapters (7 and 8).

Our analysis of reference patterns in memes starts with establishing the types of conversational roles specific to memes. We distinguish three such roles: Meme Maker (MM), Meme Viewer (MV), and Meme Character (MC). MM is a role specific to memes in at least two ways. Given the ad hoc and 'quick-and-dirty' nature of the meme-making process, we have to assume that MMs are almost always anonymous. It may happen, of course, that one member of a group of friends on some social media site makes a meme to comment on the situation that the group is interested in at a given moment, and so the group members know the MM's identity. But that is an unusual situation, for two reasons – online identities come with no guarantee of authenticity, and also, once the meme moves beyond that initial circle, an average consumer of internet discourse will not know, or even be interested in who made the meme. As we will show, even if the meme is meant to be self-referential, so that the MM creates a representation of their own situation, the form of the meme does not typically reveal the actual identity. The MM role can thus be considered as a type of a blend of a speaker and an author – they are the communicator behind the artefact, selecting the topic and the means of expression.

The second role, that of MV, is visible only in the choices the MM makes. Below, we consider several instances where memes ostensibly evoking the viewer, and using the pronoun *you*, are in fact only using the pronoun in its generic sense. It is important to note, though, that we intend the term MV primarily to be a role inherently evoked by the form of the meme,[1] rather than any specific person who might be looking at a meme or memes. For example, a rather sexist *Good Girl Gina* meme described 'an ideal girlfriend' using the construction: *Says she will be ready in five minutes, Actually is*. This meme addresses an MV who is aware of, or agrees with, the common criticism of women's behaviour, according to which women always need a long time to get ready to leave the house – the recognition of the belief is an element of interpreting the meme. We can only assume that many male viewers nod in agreement, while many women viewers give an exasperated shrug in response, but none of the individual reactions becomes a part of the comprehension process.

[1] For readers well-versed in literary theory, our notion of Meme Viewer is similar to that of the implied reader in reception theory (e.g. Iser 1972).

The most interesting and varied role is that of MC – a subjectivity or an entity represented in the image part of the meme. Here, we will distinguish two broad sets of cases, which we will label as Image Macro (IM) and Non-Entrenched Image (NEI). While previous chapters have shown a degree of gradience in this regard (see, e.g., Chapter 4), our point is that IMs are stable and recognizable aspects of the meme structure, while NEIs may be selected ad hoc and carry no expectation of easy recognition by the viewer. In the example of *Good Girl Gina* given in the preceding paragraph there would be an IM of a pretty and very nice-looking young woman – that IM appears in all *Good Girl Gina* memes (Chapter 3). In that context, the comment made in the meme works well because it adds to many people's concept of an ideal girlfriend. But if the MM were to use an image of Tina Turner or the Little Mermaid instead, the meaning would be hard to process, because the referent's habits as regards the time needed to get ready are not generally known and there is no standard background assumption in that regard that the MM could count on.

In what follows, we consider pronominal usage in memes from several perspectives. We start with IMs and the role of entrenchment in determining the meaning, to then look at the phenomenon of argument suppression – why some memes drop the pronouns that would otherwise be required. Then we consider the use and role of generic *you*, and the ways in which a reference to MM can be made without revealing their identity. Finally, we consider how reference patterns are built in memes which prompt more complex narrative sequences.

6.1 Entrenched Meme Character as Image Macro

In the preceding chapters we have discussed two types of IM memes: *One Does Not Simply* and the GGG class (including *Good Guy Greg*, *Good Girl Gina*, *Scumbag Steve*). We described them from the perspective of constructional meaning, while here we want to focus on the linguistic and visual expression of reference via pronouns.

Let us start with the *One Does Not Simply* meme, discussed in Chapter 3. It is one of the earlier IM memes, which uses a screenshot from the movie *The Lord of the Rings*, where one of the characters, Boromir, questions the rationality of the action planned. As we argued in Chapter 3, the original image and words have become entrenched as a memetic representation of the category of things that are very difficult to do. The constructional meaning of the meme does not depend on the identity of the man in the IM (Boromir/Sean Bean), which explains why we do not expect the meme to refer to him. In other words, the meme as a construction describes the situation in Bottom Text (BT) (for instance, 'win an argument with a woman') as something very difficult or impossible to do, and tacitly suggests that the MV, as a role (any-meme-viewer), or a value (the current-meme-viewer), needs

to assume this attitude to be the stance of the MM. The validity of such a stance is further supported by an assumption that MM and MV share a background assumption about the typical behaviour of women, who do not change their minds in a discussion all that easily. The intersubjective accessibility of such assumptions often underlies the stance expressed in the meme, while also creating an understanding of a Discourse Viewpoint Space shared by MM and MV.

It is also worth noting that the MC represented in the IM (Boromir/Sean Bean) is uniquely associated with the stance expressed, on the basis of the movie plot (if known to the MV), facial expression, and represented gesture, all of which suggest a negative opinion being expressed, but first of all based on the entrenched combination of the IM and the meme's constructionally determined Top Text (TT) – *One Does Not Simply*. That combination is not only the recognized constructional form, it also relies on the format of the meme to metonymically evoke the stance of 'impossibility'. There are thus two possible interpretive scenarios for specific meme viewers encountering this meme. Either they know the source of the IM, and remember the original BT *walk into Mordor*, or they have only been exposed to the meme as such and respond to the constructional meaning it metonymically carries. In either case, though, the MV assumes that the stance expressed in the meme is that of the MM, so that the IM prompts a blend between the MC and MM. As we will show, this kind of blend is the most common way in which memes make the MM's intended stance known without representing the MM as a person, whether visually or linguistically.

6.2 Subject Argument Suppression: Entrenched Image Macro

In Chapter 3 we have presented a (once) very popular class of memes, which we have labelled 'GGG'. Its main three subtypes are *Good Girl Gina*, *Good Guy Greg*, and *Scumbag Steve*. Our discussion was focused on the way in which these memes rely on predictive constructions, while using the meme format (IM, TT, BT) to build categories of behaviours: an ideal girlfriend, a nice man, a rude man. The IMs in these memes are uniquely associated with the stereotype represented (as in, either positive or negative). As we argued in Section 3.3.2, these memes rely on truncated predictive constructions such as *If/When Gina gets mad at you, she tells you why* (cf. Figure 3.2). In such an example the meme is based on a standard prediction with the P clause setting up a mental space of Gina's possible behaviour.

In this chapter, though, we focus on the phenomenon specific to all GGG memes – subject argument suppression. The phenomenon itself is not unusual, especially in stories and jokes (consider a typical starting line of a joke: *A Martian walks into a bar and asks for a double G&T*, where the verb *asks* does not require a subject pronoun because of discourse continuity). However,

Ruppenhofer & Michaelis (2010) have also discussed specific genres, such as the language of product labels or of diaries, where object or subject arguments can be routinely suppressed given the easy contextual availability of the entities involved (e.g. the product or the diarist). There is no such contextual build-up in memes, as each meme sets up its own predictive construction (as in a GGG example like *Says she will be ready in five minutes / Actually is*). We argue, though, that the absence of subject arguments in GGG memes has at least three different justifications.

First of all, as regards the referent of the potential subject noun phrase (NP), all GGG memes use stable, entrenched IMs, which are not connected to any other visual artefacts (this distinguishes GGG from ODNS, where the macro uses a well-known film and represents a popular actor). As a result, the subject of the predictive GGG construction is unambiguous – it is the MC represented in the entrenched image (such as *Good Girl Gina* or *Scumbag Steve*). In other words, in multimodal artefacts such as memes, images may play the grammatical role normally expressed by linguistic expressions.

Second, the predictive constructions in GGG memes are generic – both clauses use present tense. In the *Scumbag Steve* example we showed in Chapter 3 (Figure 3.3), for instance, the two lines of text describe a pattern of behaviour, rather than a non-predicted event (*uses shopping cart*) and its one time consequence (*leaves it in empty parking space*). We should also note that memetic discourse omits various functions words, such as articles, and we can at least argue that these omissions add to the generic meaning of the construction as a whole. And third, where normally anaphoric pronouns (*he, she*) are used, they are licensed thanks to a prior mention of a referent. But the meme is not a representation of a specific event. Rather, it adds another example to the category of Scumbag behaviours, making anaphoric reference to a specific individual inappropriate. We might speculate that the MM uses the meme to comment on (or perhaps vent about) a recent event when a careless shopper left their cart in the last remaining parking slot, but the identity (or even the gender) is unknown and also irrelevant, especially if the MM experienced the inconvenience only after the person has left the parking area. The MC of Scumbag Steve is a generic category of an insensitive and rude person, but not anyone in particular. Maintaining the use of the grammatically appropriate personal pronoun (*he* or *she*) could misleadingly suggest specific, rather than generic reference, against the general function of such memes.

6.3 Second Person Pronouns in Memes

The use of pronouns may become more complex in the cases where the BT is constructed as Direct Discourse – with appropriate grammatical forms and

Figure 6.1 Double use of the second person pronoun.

quotation marks. Figure 6.1 shows another *Scumbag Steve* (SS) IM meme. The clause communicated by MM in TT (*Breaks something expensive of yours*) describes an event space of an unpleasant situation, while BT represents SS's (rude) reaction to the implied distress of the host, framed as a Direct Discourse exchange happening in the space set up in TT (*'Why would you spend that much on it anyway?'*).

It is interesting to note that, independently of the suppression of the subject pronoun in TT, the meme uses the pronoun *you* in two different ways. In TT, the pronoun *yours* is used to represent generic *you*, not a specific meme viewer, while the third-person pronoun *he*, referring to SS, is suppressed, for all the reasons identified above. In BT, appropriately to the context of the TT space, in which the host would complain about the loss, the BT pronoun *you* is a deictic pronoun, in a demonstration-conversation in which SS is replying to the host's complaint. This structure is specific to the grammar of memes.

We should note that the oddity here is not because of a question in the 'apodosis BT', as there are conditionals with questions in apodoses, such as *If you finish the meeting early, will you join us for a walk?* or *If you want to go to Paris, why don't you?*, but in such examples the P and Q clauses have *the same speaker* and *you* in both clauses identifies the same addressee. In the meme, however, there are two independent Deictic Grounds. Top Text has the MM 'speak' to a generic MV (*yours*), while BT has the MC, SS, speak to the (unhappy) host whose property he damaged. Such a deictic split is characteristic of memetic discourse, where the salience of the category represented by the

Figure 6.2 The *Bored Monkey* meme.

meme type is the primary goal and where BT is an account of how the MC's behaviour represents that category.

The pronoun *you* is also common in so-called *when*-memes (cf. Section 2.4), described by Lou (2017, 2021) as constructions of similative meaning – which could be paraphrased as *When (Event), you feel* ***like*** *the subjectivity in the image.* Here we want to consider the *Bored Monkey* example in Figure 6.2.

The MC in such memes is chosen only on the basis of an accurate representation of the experience profiled, which is read from body posture, facial expression, and so on, rather than determined on the basis of the subjectivity represented. In our example here, the fact that the NEI represents a monkey rather than a person is important primarily because of the humorous effect; even so, the slacking and inactive body posture and a bored, impassive facial expression are attributed to the MM. *You* in *when*-memes is generic, not deictic, because the meme does not establish a deictic ground against which the identities of the speaker and the hearer are determined. It is important to also consider the possible ways in which the image is selected and how the meme's temporal grounding can be construed. One possible option, which seems appropriate in the cases of the ODNS and SS memes above, is that the MM has recently experienced a situation which was frustrating – for example, not being able to convince a woman colleague in an argument, or, when shopping, being forced to get out of

the car and remove a shopping cart someone careless left in the last free parking spot. Making a meme is then a quick and effective way of venting, precisely because the meme's entrenched image and stable linguistic form require only one thing – putting the words into the BT (in the ODNS case), or into TT and BT lines (in the SS case) providing information needed for the meme to comment on the situation described as an element of the specific category the meme profiles (things that are hard to do or rude behaviours).

We suggest, however, that making a *when*-meme is much more unpredictable – seeing an image, regardless of its context, prompts the viewer to recognize its mood or stance, but maybe also to recall another situation when they felt the same way. We might even speculate that many memes, involving both NEI and IM, emerge because the image itself evokes a situation which is imminently 'meme-able'. A well-known example is *Grumpy Cat* (cf. Attardo 2023: 131–4, Podhovnik 2023: 19), whose very grumpy-looking face spawned many a meme applied to all situations where the MM (or someone else) feels dissatisfied with the situation at hand. In the case of the *Bored Monkey* meme in Figure 6.2, the memory of a time wasted without one's phone to keep one busy, carries the same mood as the monkey image. In other words, the interaction with an image suggesting a specific mood comes before the impulse to recognize the same mood in another situation. This probably explains why so many *when*-memes use images from art (cf. Section 2.5), where the artist has created an emotionally evocative image, which MMs then interpret as parallel to other, real, and not artistic situations.

6.4 The Use of *Me*

As we could see above, most memetic constructions do not profile full conversational contexts with specifiable addressees and so mostly use the second person *you* as a generic pronoun. The corollary of this observation is that memes do not often use the first person *I* pronoun (though we will explain when they do), but there are several meme types using *me* – also first person singular, like *I*, but not nominative. A typical *me*-meme relies on the implied 'this represents me' meaning, but in two versions. The connection is based either on the depictive power of the image (what you see in the image represents what I do or did, how I feel or felt) or the demonstration nature of the line of dialogue-like exchange (this line of Direct Speech represents what I do or did, how I feel or felt, much like in the *this is me* quotative identified in London adolescent speech by Fox 2012). In other words, regardless of the pattern, the MM does not come 'on stage' as an *I*, but describes themself using *me*. We illustrate only two of the patterns here: *Me* Verb-*ing*, and *Me/Also Me*. In all the examples we have looked at, the role of *me* is to suggest that the

aspect of memetic expression should be treated as a representation of MM's mood, emotions, responses to events or conversational lines, and actions.

6.4.1 Me *Verb*-ing

The example in Figure 6.3 shows one of the simplest patterns of using *me* in a meme, especially when the meme image does not represent the MM. Similarly to a *when* meme, this type of meme represents experiences and emotions, as expressed by blending the MM's reported mood with that expressed by the subjectivity in the image. It uses the *me* pronoun as a reference to MM (in a sense mimicking a pointing sentence like *This is me*). It combines this with a present progressive, rather than a present simple, in full alignment with the general semantics of progressive use of verbs in English (perfective action, internal heterogeneity, and boundedness) (see Langacker 2008, inter alia). Additionally, it correlates with the description of the present progressive as 'freezing an action' as if in a photo (Lee 2001), profiling the entire perfective event via its snapshot. In the simplest terms, the images used in memes, especially when accompanied by a progressive verb form, typically profile a perfective event rather than an imperfective state.

The meme represents MM's stance, by using embodied features of another entity (here an eagle) as a clear depiction of the emotional meaning. In this example, the MM's stance is boredom and resentment (also reinforced with the adjective *stupid*), caused by engaging in routine activities which are recommended, but not enjoyable. In this kind of meme the crucial part of the expression

Figure 6.3 The *Walking Eagle* meme.

of mood and stance is facial expression or body posture of the entity in the image – in our eagle example, some kind of dogged determination to stick with it, face down and malcontent. In another such meme we are looking at the face of a crying woman (the actress Nicole Kidman) driving her car. The text says (spelling preserved): *Me driving home from work knowing Im only going home to eat and sleep so I can do it all again tomorrow.* What we find interesting about the meme is that right after establishing the mood connection between the MM and MC, by using *me* (as in, *I am pointing to the Character in the meme, because they represent how I feel*), the caption enters the mental state of the blended subjectivity – in the blend the image of crying Nicole Kidman actually represents MM's frustrations. As a result of the shift of perspective (from looking like a desperately sad person to rationalizing the reasons for the sadness) the text switches to *I* – while still referring to MM. The fact that many memes use MCs as ways to represent the MM's thoughts or emotions is another feature of memetic discourse – the actual visual representation of the MM is not preferred, but once it is represented via another image, the shift to making MM the speaker of the words in the meme is possible.

The complex idea of how the MM is actually represented in a *me*-meme yields interesting language effects. One such example is the Nicole Kidman meme mentioned above, but another example we found (Figure 6.4) hesitates

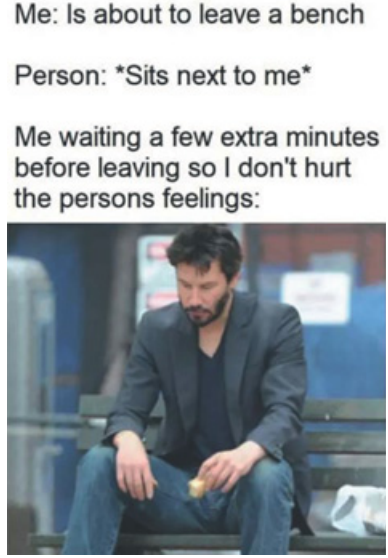


Figure 6.4 *Man on the Bench* meme.

between *me* and the third person, apparently representing the dual perspective, such that the MM is pointing to MC as the 'face' of the blend being constructed, while telling a story of the mini-event represented.

There are three lines in the meme. Line 1 looks like a part of a dialogue in which "me" says something, but in fact the line only tells MV about the pre-image part of the story, where MM was sitting on a bench, but getting ready to leave. In a sense we could expand the line as 'my character is about to leave a bench', so as to make sense of the third person verb. The second line reports the next event in the mini-story represented, again using *me* and introducing *Person* sitting down – a new and anonymous MC, not represented visually at all. Then the third line starts with the *Me* Verb-*ing* pattern, prompting the MC/MM blends, and switches to the pronoun *I* (MM as speaker) in the next clause, where we can 'get' the point of the meme and the significance of MC's expression. One could be led to think that the meme is rather incoherent, mixing up grammatical categories of person and number, and yet its meaning emerges clearly: it describes an insignificant event (as memes often do) to really focus on how one decides to avoid entirely innocent actions in order not to create the wrong impression about one's intentions. This type of meaning is what memes are about, and so the forms of expression are not random, but rather focused on what prompts a form of behaviour, rather than on the behaviour as such.

Asterisks have been noted for their use in online discourse to represent nonverbal behaviour (e.g. Yus 2011: 173, Herring 2022), including vocalizations such as *laughs* or *sigh*, and other actions or states such as *shrugs* or *checks notes* (the latter are referred to as 'performative predicates' by Herring). These asterisk uses are sometimes referred to as 'bounding asterisks' (Gruber 2013, Zimmer 2013) or, on the *Urban Dictionary* website, as 'aster-act', an apparent blend of *asterisk* and *act*, reflecting how these asterisks mark off a description of what someone does, especially in the course of a conversation. This has the effect of making the event represented two-dimensional, including both words and behaviour. In memetic discourse asterisks are on their way to being conventionalized into marking events or actions, as is the case in Figure 6.4: *Person: *Sits next to me**. We propose the category of Represented Action to refer to such usage. The action of sitting down is uninteresting as such, but what the asterisks do is simply mark the arrival of another MC, which has consequences for MM (apparently a person trying hard not to offend anyone).

We have encountered asterisks in other memes where an asterisked event triggers a result important to the brief narrative being constructed. One such example comes from the Facebook Group called Jane Austen Daily Dose. The meme starts with the line: *Rich, single man: *Moves into neighborhood**. The next line says *Mrs Bennet:*, thus presenting Mrs Bennet as the next speaker (she

is one of the characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, and indeed got very excited about a rich new neighbour, and held high hopes for him to choose one of the Bennet sisters for a wife). The third part (ostensibly representing what Mrs Bennet says) is an image of a cartoon character of a woman who could be Mrs Bennet, saying *A marriage proposal can't be far behind.* The meme is thus another example of a complex attempt to represent what happens, what it means to other participants, and how they might react. The levels of the faux-dialogue in both cases are important to the presentation of the significance of what events mean to people. What we find remarkable about such examples is the ingenuity of MMs and their being unmistakably attuned to inner responses alongside acts and speech. The creative use of writing conventions is very effective in this context.

The meme in Figure 6.4 shows some striking effects. The faux-dialogic form of the meme is not unique, even if it is quite different from the pretend-Direct Discourse in the SS meme (Figure 6.1) above. The SS example has BT formulated as a question, apparently a response SS could offer to the offended host. While not being made to appear in a typical dialogue structure, this line is effective in evoking a whole exchange, and is fully acceptable (even if rude) as part of that exchange. In the meme in Figure 6.4, however, the whole text used is structured as a dialogue would be, but neither the structure nor the sentences would be appropriate in spoken discourse. In fact, nothing is actually assumed to be said, and all that the 'dialogue' presents is intentions, actions, and thoughts. As many other examples in this book suggest, memes have developed a discourse formula which saves space and relies on simple sentences by putting representations of relevant viewpoints in lines resembling a dialogue, complete with an almost theatrical convention of starting the line with the reference to the 'character' (examples extending beyond the kinds of pronoun cases studied here will be added to the discussion in Chapter 8). We expand on these and related examples in terms of the notion of simulated interaction in Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2025).

6.4.2 Me/Also Me

As we suggested, *Person* sitting down on a bench as a line of dialogue (in Figure 6.4) is another instance of memetic creativity, aimed at representing only the minimum of information, and maintaining the generic nature of the observations made. Also, it is clear that maintaining grammatically consistent reference is difficult once the meme combines the 'stand-in' image of an MC with spelling out the actual inner thoughts and intentions of MM. Importantly, the MC representing MM is not chosen because of facial similarity, but because the facial expression, the posture, the gesture, or the context are useful in depicting the situation MM is trying to describe. This also happens

Figure 6.5 *Me/Also Me* meme.

in *Me/Also Me* memes, where the *Me/Also Me* construction is used to signal shifting stance and our general tendency not to follow our own resolutions.

Similarly to what we saw in the *me*-memes above, the first line of our example in Figure 6.5 has two goals. First, *Me* identifies MM as the person whose thoughts are being represented, and then *I* introduces a speech-or-thought space in which MM made the resolution. Using the Direct Discourse format assumes the accessibility of a Discourse Space – the type of mental space which consists of packets of discourse structure (cf. Section 5.1.2) – in which the resolution has been communicated. But the second part of the meme is constructed differently. *Also me* adds an image which represents the way in which the resolution was broken, by depicting a situation in which the subjectivity represented has clearly indulged in excessive shopping. That subjectivity represents the behaviour of MM. The choice of *me* is consistent with the *Walking Eagle* meme (Figure 6.3), as both use *me* to signal pointing to MM, and representing their behaviour via a blend with the subjectivity in the image. We should also note that the image of a woman carrying many shopping bags from designer stores is formally structured as the second entry in a dialogue – similarly to what we saw in the *Man on the Bench* meme above (Figure 6.4). This is an interesting tendency in many memes – to assume a dialogic formula as the meme's structure, and fill the lines with non-dialogic forms – representation of thought or action.

Overall, the use of *me* in memes points to some important characteristics of memes. The MM typically attempts to render an emotion or a stance, by relying on images showing other entities (not necessarily even people). One might

wonder why the popularity of selfies has not overcome that tendency. Our interpretation is that memes are not meant to document the events the MM takes part in, in their authentic and natural form, as, apparently, social media posts addressed to friends are better suited to such direct forms of communication. Memes, even when referring directly to MMs' experiences, have a public-facing role. They do not represent MM or events MM takes part in, but they do represent MM's viewpoint or reflection on behaviour – their own in the case of *me*-memes, and other people's in the GGG memes. The role memes play in online discourse relies on two central formulae – representing a situation as an example of a category of such situations, and expressing an opinion, a viewpoint, an emotional response, or a stance – but not focusing on the events as such. It may seem, for example in the case of the *Man on the Bench* meme (Figure 6.4), that all that is being said is that a certain (rather unimportant) event took place. But we want to argue that the meme represents something else – MM's now increased awareness that we tend to use public spaces (such as a bench) in ways that does not make other users feel unwelcome or restricted. Additionally, MM has noted that one may look quite weird sitting on a bench not to relax or wait, but to kill the few minutes necessary for 'Person' not to feel unwelcome – the blank expression on MC's face reflects this quite well. What this suggests, and we believe other memes confirm this, is that memes play a very interesting role in online discourse – they can refer to private thoughts and experiences, but they maintain some distance between MM's actual experience – which could be described in detail through other media – and the way in which the experience prompts a reflection on how such an experience is to be categorized. Making this point creates an impression that memes are a serious form of communication, while we all know that they are meant to be humorous or sarcastic, and often in fact are very funny. But we would argue that the comedic and silly side of memes is a necessary ingredient if personal experiences are to be used as material for generalization. A meme such as the *Me/Also Me* example above actually criticizes people's lack of determination in keeping their own resolutions – not a flattering opinion. But it can be safely expressed in a meme, because the MM's actual behaviour is not central to what the meme communicates, and the criticism is bemused rather than serious.

An interesting meme that is worth highlighting in this context is so-called *Evil Kermit*. The IM in this case shows Kermit facing a lookalike dressed in a dark cloak (apparently a character called Constantine in the musical film *Muppets Most Wanted*, also resembling the evil Emperor in *Star Wars*, as the *Know Your Meme* website explains). A lot of online communicators came up with dialogue lines interpreting this IM as reflecting an inner argument, rather than a meeting between two different characters, with *me* exchanging views with *me to me* (sometimes also referred to as *inner me* or *other me*). The example in Figure 6.6 in fact captures a broadly similar type of situation to

Figure 6.6 *Evil Kermit 'Me to Me'* meme.

that in Figure 6.5 – we know it's good to save up money but we are weak and fallible and often cannot resist spending it all anyway. The way the image works is very different, though: in the *Me/Also Me* case, the image shows the *result* of the failure to live up to stated intentions (i.e., lots of shopping bags with expensive clothes). In the *Evil Kermit* case, the bad behaviour hasn't happened yet, but the inner struggle is being acted out between two MCs (Kermit and cloaked or 'evil' Kermit – in the reality of the film in fact Constantine), the inner voice goading the rational self to abandon reason and let rip. These two characters are understood via the added dialogue lines as two sub-identities, 'decompressed' from the normally blended identity of a single person (cf. Dancygier 2004, 2005).

6.5 *What If I Told You* Memes: Meme Character Addressing Meme Viewer

We have argued above that the choice of *I* as a pronoun referring to MM is not common in memes. We saw that *I* still can be used in such contexts, but only after the pronoun *me* establishes the blend between MM and MC. There are no restrictions on the use of *I* by MC, though, and some memes rely on that.

Our example in this category is the *What If I Told You* meme. The meme features a stable IM, showing the face of Morpheus, a character from *The Matrix* movie, addressing the movie's main character, Neo, clearly reflected in Morpheus's dark, reflective glasses. Morpheus looks imposing and dominant. The TT reads 'what if I told you', and BT varies; in one example, for instance, we read 'you can eat without posting it on Instagram'.

The meme sets up a Discourse Space in which the deictic ground includes Morpheus as the Speaker (*I*) and Neo/Meme Viewer blend (*you*) as an Addressee. Morpheus is the man 'in the know', blended with the MM, here giving advice to

MV outside of the movie context and indirectly complaining about the number of food images on Instagram. It is thus another instance of a meme which voices the thoughts of MM, by visually representing a stand-in MC.

As we observed, it is not usual for MM to put themselves into the meme directly – for example, by using their own representation. MCs are selected not on the basis of similarity to MM, but on the clarity of the facial expression or body posture. Importantly, MCs are often actors in screenshots from movies – and thanks to that the facial expression is highly evocative, while also avoiding any confusion with MM. However, we ran into an interesting example where MM is visually represented in the meme (published by @TRHCol on X/Twitter, 19 October 2022). The example shows a picture of a person posing to camera inside a medieval castle, prefaced by the text *POV: I drag you around Arundel Castle*, where *POV* stands for *point of view* (cf. Greene & Schmid 2024). The person in the picture is, in fact, also the person sending the tweet.

This example is exceptional, in that the MC is the actual MM, but to an MV, the natural interpretation is the same as for the *What If I Told You* meme – an MC (*I*) uses a Discourse Space to address an MV (*you*), while not mentioning that the MC is the MM himself. In examples above, the MM blends with another subjectivity – here, playfully, with himself, but the general pattern is not affected. For online followers who know the person sending the tweet, of course, there is an effect of an in-joke (with an anti-meme flavour; see Chapter 9), but casual observers would need to double-check to 'get' this layer of memetic creativity.

6.6 Referring to Meme Maker in Memes

To sum up the ways in which MM is referred to in memes, we made the following observations:

- The nominative *I* pronoun in memes is reserved for embedded Discourse Spaces, in which an MC talks to another MC, typically not represented in the IM.
- The accusative pronoun *Me* appears to signal how the blend prompted by the image shows the MM's behaviour or experience.
- The pronoun *you* also triggers a blend of the situation represented by the image and the MM's current experience – but it is a generic *you*, so it also evokes an assumption that MV is likely to share the MM's stance regarding the situation portrayed.
- In general, MM is not fully represented in memes, either visually or via discourse, but signals their experience and stance via blends with the relevant aspects of IMs and Non-Entrenched Images.

- Because stances and emotions are central to memetic meaning, many kinds of memes (such as *when*-memes, *me*-memes, *Me/Also Me* memes) use various visual blends representing experiences.

6.7 Memes That Tell Stories

As we pointed out above in discussing the *Man on the Bench* meme (Figure 6.4), memetic discourse sometimes refers to a sequence of narratively connected events, while representing the story in minimalist ways and often leaving some intervening events unmentioned. In this section we briefly discuss two such memes.

Our first example is the *It Will Be Fun, They Said* meme, illustrated in Figure 6.7.

These memes have a rich composition, which yields a narrative by setting up a number of narrative spaces and treating the BT and TT spaces as one Discourse Space located in the past, in which MM asked people for advice regarding graduate school. Those whose advice the MM sought are referred to as *they* (friends, family, mentors, etc.), and it is clear that they encouraged MM to become a graduate student and promised that the experience would be enjoyable. The next narrative event – not described in the meme – is that MM followed the

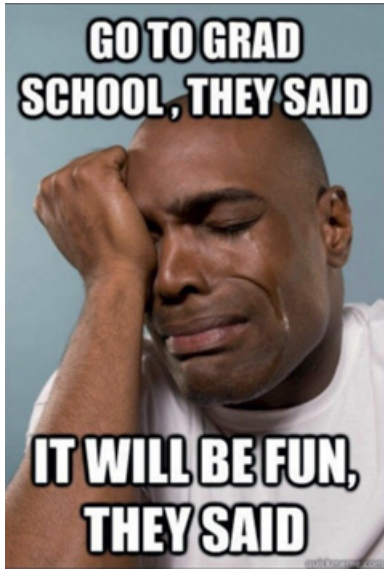


Figure 6.7 *It Will Be Fun, They Said* meme.

advice. The final space is depicted in the image of someone very distraught, which allows the MV to conclude that grad school turned out to be frustrating for MM. The meme thus represents a complex story, which ends with the MC in tears, representing the lived experience of MM as graduate student. What is also interesting in the meme is the assumed discourse interaction between MM and the individuals generically referred to as *they*. As is typically the case in these memes, the viewpoints represented (*their* trust in the attractiveness of graduate school, and the MM/MC's resulting frustration) are depicted via demonstrative dialogue and an image with clear emotional content.

It is, however, also possible that a memetic story can be told entirely through dialogic form (as in Figure 6.4). Our example in Figure 6.8 is the *Bae Come Over* meme (posted by @McJesse on X/Twitter, 15 January 2018).

This meme resembles the *It Will Be Fun, They Said* meme in that it assumes a chain of events leading to the result represented in the Non-Entrenched Image. The dialogue is signalled via quotation marks, without an indication of who the participants are, although the general set-up of the meme is that the participants are young people wanting to get together without adult supervision, and so when the opportunity arises, the boy tries to come and see the girl regardless of possible difficulties, and things do not turn out well. So the story emerges in a complex Discourse Space, structured as Direct Discourse, where the image plays the role of the final move in the conversation – the referent of *bae* changed his mind, but in the end does not reach the destination safely.

Memetic stories can thus take different forms (including a faux-dialogue), but tend to use an image as the representation of the final event in the story – the

Figure 6.8 *Bae Come Over* meme.

unexpected result that adds drama to the story. The image may be another MM/MC blend, but it may also depict the final situation. As we show in Chapter 9, in our discussion of antimemes, memetic stories such as these follow the narrative strategy of a dramatic ending.

6.8 Pronouns and the 'Fourth Wall'

We have observed that, as a rule, the first-person pronoun *I* in memetic text identifies the speaker or MC in the Discourse Space set up by the meme, but not the MM. While presumably representing attitudes and emotions either authentically felt or appreciated by the MM, memes do not treat them as uniquely characterizing one person whose identity can be unambiguously connected to MM. At the same time, the memes which specialize primarily in representation of emotions and other experiential concepts, the *when*-memes, also do not in any way represent the MM. It is thus quite interesting to see how these memetic rules are at work in the *when*-meme in Figure 6.9.

The meme is a combination of several memetic templates. It is a *Classical Art* meme, with MC1 looking with anticipation and hope at the character next to her. This would work well with the *when*-meme template, which often features MCs with vivid facial expressions. However, MC2 comes from a different period, introducing an element of incongruity (anachronism). He is dressed in

Figure 6.9 Pronoun shift and the 'fourth wall'.

contemporary clothes, suggesting a street savvy person, and, crucially, his face is covered with a scarf, so that, even though he is looking intensely at the phone, we cannot tell his response – in ironic violation of the *when*-meme structure.

The text starts in a typical *when*-meme manner: *When you see a funny meme and you pass the phone to your friend* . . . . We expect the image to show the friend's reaction, but instead the text goes on to tell us that the friend is not laughing. When it comes to the word *because*, the MV expects a content-based explanation of why the friend does not find the meme funny, but instead the MM starts commenting on the inadequate caption, which appears to break the fourth wall, that is, it blends the generic time-and-place Discourse Space of the *when*-clause with the specific time-and-space of meme-making. In the final sentence, MM shifts to first person and comments on the failed attempt at meme-making, while the MCs represented in the image are no longer the topic of the commentary. This kind of discourse flow is unusual and even, strictly speaking, not cohesive: MM does not usually come 'on stage' to comment on meme-making, and memes which have failed are not posted. As a result, this meme violates the standard viewpoint pattern in that, instead of accounting for the emotional correlates of sharing a meme with a friend, it moves to a higher viewpoint where reasons for an unexpected reaction (friend not laughing) are independent of the artefact shown on the phone screen and are triggered by MM's inadequate meme-making skills. While these shifts of viewpoint develop in the text, the choice of the pronoun had to be changed from generic *you* to specific 'speaker in the deictic centre' *I*. The meme is overall a perfect example of how viewpoint shifts in discourse – including memetic discourse – require appropriate adjustment in form.

6.9 Memetic Roles and Pronouns in Memes

In this final section, we propose a brief overview of how the memetic roles that we have analysed (MM, MV, MC) are best described and how they correlate with the use of pronouns in the textual part of the meme and with the use of images.

Meme Maker is the entity whose stance and viewpoint constitutes the communicative core of the meme. The MM's identity is usually not profiled and not referred to via the first-person nominative pronoun *I*. Instead, the standard memetic choice for MM is the pronoun *me*, used primarily to add or introduce the MM's viewpoint into the meme via an image or a pseudo-dialogic line of faux-direct discourse; if the stance attributed to *me* is further developed, then the pronoun *I* can be used. The image represents an MC (a person, but possibly also an animal) whose behaviour depicts the relevant aspects of the behaviour of MM.

Meme Viewer is either not referred to at all or referenced via the second-person pronoun *you (what if I told you)*; however, even in these cases, MV is not

necessarily referred to as an individual, as many of the occurrences of *you* suggest a generic meaning.

Meme Character is the only role which is typically represented visually. However, there are two different cases here. The first scenario occurs when MC is represented via an entrenched image, supported by a sentential construction: such a construction licenses patterns of argument suppression as a result of which the third-person pronoun such as *he* or *she* can be reduced to zero. Argument suppression has an additional role of avoiding the strongly anaphoric role of third-person pronouns and inviting the generic meaning of '*someone like* Scumbag Steve'. In the second case, a not-entrenched, one-off, MC profiles a stance or viewpoint that MM ostensibly shares, via facial expression, body posture, and so on.

Non-Entrenched Images and IMs thus play a number of roles in memes. Entrenched macros represent MCs with specified characteristics or communicative roles (Boromir, SS, GGG, Morpheus). Otherwise, images are selected to represent the stance targeted in the meme via blends with entities who provide an adequate representation of MM's experience. There are three broad types of representations:

- Facial expression and body posture (*when*-memes)
- Embodied behaviour (*They Said*/crying, *Walking Eagle*/walking intensely)
- Actions performed (*Bae Come Over*/reckless driving, *Me/Also Me*/excessive shopping)

Some memes represent more complex, narrative concepts. In these cases (*They Said, Bae Come Over*) the image typically represents the final state or result of the story.

Finally, it is important to note the role of faux-dialogic forms in memes, to which we return in the next chapters. The meanings of lines in such a pseudo-dialogue are often not dependent on an actual discourse or even discourse context. They can represent intentions, thoughts, events, actions, and so on.

Overall, our examples show how memes manipulate discourse patterns and pronoun use in ways that profile **generalized behavioural patterns**.

- All the identities referred to are used as illustrations of the patterns and inhabit behavioural frames or generic discourse patterns.
- The transfer of stances between MM's experiences and MV's experiences constructs viewpoint networks, while de-emphasizing specific identities.
- Stances/viewpoints are effectively stacked as the stages of memetic meaning construction unfold.
- We argue that the memetic use of pronouns serves the needs of viewpoint network construction and the expression of attitudes and stances, not of reference.

7 *Say*, *Tell*, and *Be Like* Meme Constructions

Previous chapters, in their own respective contexts, have shown various examples where memes rely in part on Direct Discourse spaces being opened up in them in order to construe their meaning. In Chapter 5 on grid memes, we saw metalinguistic usage in an example like *Tuxedo Winnie the Pooh*, presenting potential discourse options people might prefer, in order to compare and evaluate them (from informal to (overly) formal, corresponding to evaluation of them ranging from normal to over the top and pretentious). We also saw discourse-rich examples of four-cell grid memes like the *Political Compass* meme, or the *Anakin and Padmé* meme. In Chapter 6, we considered the different ways pronouns, especially *I*, *you*, and *me*, are used to construe memetic meaning, including in memes relying on speech and thought representation, like some GGG memes, *What If I Told You* (Morpheus) memes, and *It Will Be Fun, They Said* memes. In this and the following chapter, we reconsider these, and add further meme types, specifically from the angle of speech and thought representation in memes and other online discourse. In this chapter, we first briefly reflect, via a comparison with poetry, on the reason forms of Speech and Thought Representation, and of Direct Discourse especially, are so pervasive across many memes and meme types. Next, we survey a number of, mostly older, meme types that feature a recognizable linguistic reporting 'frame', including verbs like *say*, *tell*, or *be like*, focusing on how the Discourse Spaces built into these meme constructions participate in the construction of stance and Discourse Viewpoint. The next chapter will revisit some, and add further, meme types which similarly embed Discourse Spaces, but in ways that are less clearly related to existing, full-blown linguistic constructions, including various 'dialogue labelling' memes, as we'll call them.

The intersection of internet memes and the representation of speech and thought is a particularly rich mine to tap. This relates to the ease with which representations of discourse can be used not particularly to reproduce something specific actually uttered by an identifiable speaker, but also, and more importantly in the meme context, to instantly evoke an attitude, typify a viewpoint and dramatize a point. Research into speech and thought representation has for a long time now recognized that no actual literal utterance needs to 'precede' the use of

a speech or thought representing construction (e.g. von Roncador 1988, Tannen 1989, Clark & Gerrig 1990, Fludernik 1993, and many more; see Vandelanotte 2009: 118–26 for a brief discussion). To see the general point, one need only think of negated or counterfactual examples such as *No one has ever said your cooking is fantastic* or *I might have said 'I miss you' but I didn't because I don't*. In addition, it's clear in most contexts people's short-term memories don't allow them to remember exact wordings, while they can fairly accurately recall and represent meanings – the gist of what someone has said. Clark & Gerrig's (1990) major contribution was to analyse quotations as *demonstrations* – illustrative depictions, that choose to demonstrate relevant bits of an utterance, whether real or imagined. Following McGregor (1994, 1997), we take from this contribution mainly the idea *that* demonstration is involved, without ascribing to views that want to completely separate out demonstration from description, or that would equate Direct Speech or Thought with the former and Indirect Speech or Thought with the latter. As we noted in our discussion of Figure 5.5, the reliance on pretend-quotations as expressions with a particularly pronounced evocative potential is a pervasive characteristic of memetic discourse. While memes forgo an explicit indication of a richer discourse context, they build much of their meaning on the setting up of dialogic structures (which we refer to as 'Discourse Spaces'). The tendency for memes to focus on opinions, emotions and stances (rather than specific situations) is clearly well-served by evocations of discourse.

In cognitive linguistics, the notion of fictive interaction, introduced by Pascual (e.g. 2002, 2014, Pascual & Sandler 2016), shares Clark & Gerrig's insight, but expands it into a recognition of the importance of the frame of a face-to-face conversation, which is routinely used in language to structure meanings that in fact involve no actual conversation. Examples include inanimate objects 'speaking' to us (*my watch says it's 3 pm*; a candy wrapper that says 'Eat me!'; shop signs that say 'Sorry we're closed'), fictive speech acts as in *Call me old-fashioned, but . . .,* and uses of apparent Direct Speech snippets at lower structural levels (as in *a 'yes we can' attitude*). The notion of fictivity is appealing, as it relates to a family of uses within cognitive linguistics. For instance, fictive motion (e.g. Talmy 1996, Matlock 2004), in examples such as *the road runs across the valley*, involves the mental simulation of moving along the road being presented as if it involves motion. In fictive vision or fictive experience (Dancygier 2012a), a character's conceptualization of an experience is described as them seeing it, as in (1) below, in which the experience of an island sailing past your ship (rather than the 'actual' other way around) is described as what the character sees:

(1) As islands nearly always do, the Isle of Man came up unexpectedly, in the wrong place. It was steaming straight past my bows like a rusty ship (from Jonathan Raban's travel book *Coasting*, analysed in Dancygier 2005: 112).

As Dancygier (2021: Section 5) points out, fictive forms of discourse representation don't exactly involve us actively 'imagining' a conversation, just like fictive motion, for instance, doesn't involve us imagining a road actively engaged in 'running'. Rather, fictive 'demonstrated' discourse borrows something we know from real interactions – having a speaker, an addressee, a speech event in which they participate – in order to represent mental construals such as attitudes and stances. The way in which Meme Viewers (MVs), for instance, interpret a meme including fictive discourse isn't to imagine how they would verbally respond, but rather to recognize that their experience is similar: 'yes, that's what it's like', for instance when people speak in pretentious ways (*Tuxedo Winnie the Pooh*) or when an inconsiderate unpleasant person justifies their bad behaviour (*Scumbag Steve*).

The potential for fictively 'quoted' demonstrations to evoke and typify attitudes is especially useful in forms of discourse where brevity is a virtue. For comparison, we can briefly consider the example of poetry. Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2009: 344–56) explored a range of examples of fictive quotes being used to illustrate a point or an attitude across a selection of poems by Wisława Szymborska and Philip Larkin. Famous examples in the latter's poetry include the poems 'High Windows' and 'Vers de Société'.[1] In the former, we get the *I*-persona introducing a hypothetically quoted direct thought reflecting what he thinks older people than him might have thought about his generation's escape from a sternly religious society: 'I wonder if / Anyone looked at me, forty years back, / And thought, *That'll be the life;* / *No God anymore, or sweating in the dark* / *About hell and that*'. 'Vers de Société', on the other hand, memorably starts with a curious *faux* direct quote which, while grammatically shifted to the represented speaker Mr Warlock-Williams, features evaluative vocabulary that is clearly that of the poem's persona, dreading the idea of a dinner party: '*My wife and I have asked a crowd of craps* / *To come and waste their time and ours: perhaps* / *You'd care to join us?*' An especially pure example of fictive discourse snippets being used to call up types of attitudes is seen in 'Poetry of Departures', a reflection on how incomprehensible it seems that some people can decide to up roots and start a completely different life elsewhere all over again:

(2) . . . So to hear it said

He walked out on the whole crowd
Leaves me flushed and stirred,
Like *then she undid her dress*
Or *Take that you bastard*; . . .

[1] For quotes from Larkin's poems we are relying on Archie Burnett's edition *The Complete Poems* (2012).

There is no specific speaker for any of these brief flashes of discourse, presented in italics; they instead illustrate the kinds of things people say or write in different sets of circumstances: a comment people tend to make when someone ups and goes (*he walked out on the whole crowd*); a racy scene one might read in a novel (*then she undid her dress*); an aggressive move leading up to a physical attack in a pub brawl or street fight (*take that you bastard*). Explaining these kinds of attitudes and feelings descriptively tends to require more language and more narrative context, as well as being less vivid and direct, than *demonstrating* them through the use of a choice fictive quote. Occasionally, a whole poem can take the form of apparent direct discourse quotes: the poem 'Funeral' by Szymborska, also discussed in Dancygier (2021: 8), presents a remarkable case where each line, being enclosed in quotation marks, is naturally understood as some speaker's quote, but the identity of individual speakers or even the total number of speakers is anyone's guess. The quotes are disembodied, so to speak: they are not there to profile actual personalities engaging in small talk at a funeral, but serve as exemplars of casual exchanges and contribute to an ironic experience of life in all its inconsequential detail (recipes, weather, bus routes, etc.) continuing even at the solemn occasion marking the end of a life.

If in poetry economy of expression is important, so too is it in memes, with their even stronger space constraints. Opening up fictive Discourse Spaces to metonymically call up the broader experience they relate to is thus a very effective tool for meme communicators. What is also of particular interest to us in this chapter is how some prominent cases of memetic quotation interact with existing linguistic constructions used to represent speech and thought, adding specific twists to them and moulding them for use in meme contexts. In the remainder of this chapter, we present and analyse a number of meme constructions that include a reporting frame similar to ordinary linguistic ones like *he said* or *I'm like*, though meme-specific constraints make them more formulaic, as our examples will show. The cases included for discussion feature apparent reporting clauses containing *say* (*Said No One Ever; It Will Be Fun, They Said; And Then X Said Y*), *Be Like* (as in *Mothers Be Like X*), and *tell* (*What If I Told You*).

7.1 *Said No One Ever* (SNOE) Memes

One example of an older quotation-based meme is the *Said No One Ever* (SNOE) meme (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2016: 28–34), in which the Bottom Text (BT) is *said no one ever* and the Top Text (TT) is an example of some view being ridiculed. The input of the visual component may be modest in this meme, but it is not non-existent. Initial versions appeared in the form of so-called 'e-cards', with highly stylized line drawings of a person against a brightly coloured background. One example, for instance, showed the text *"Your Facebook status really made me*

Figure 7.1 *Said No One Ever* meme.

change my political views." Said no one ever. Later versions also turned to pictures, used in the meme as Non-Entrenched Images. One example of such a picture, discussed previously in Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2016), shows three teenage girls looking extremely bored and unengaged, with *Can I wear your crocs* as TT, in reference to a popular brand of comfortable shoes not usually regarded as fashionable. SNOE is not an Image Macro (IM) meme, in that different iterations of the meme use different images, but at a more schematic level, most examples rely on a requirement for a potential communicator to be depicted, to whom the apparent quote in the TT can be attributed.[2] As such, an initial interpretation might suggest that the views of the depicted speaker(s) are being expressed in the TT. The subsequent reporting clause *said no one ever* added in the BT, however, has the effect of invalidating this viewpoint, by suggesting it is too inane or ridiculous to be seriously contemplated by anyone, at all, ever: there are in fact no speech events in which the apparent quotation is ever addressed by anyone to anyone. The overall Discourse Viewpoint (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2016) emerging from the different Discourse Spaces in an example like Figure 7.1 – the 'inner' question about wearing Crocs and the 'outer' embedding by the Meme Maker (MM) adding *said no one ever* – holds that no one seriously has any desire to wear (let alone borrow someone else's) Crocs, which in fact have no 'coolness' factor or style appeal at all.

[2] Some examples do deviate from this typical case, for instance in depicting a bunch of crisps and the Top Text saying *I'll just have one*, which is clearly a piece of potential discourse *about* the crisps rather than potentially spoken by them.

The *Said No One Ever* meme, in the end, negates an initial stance as ultimately not being a valid viewpoint at all. It builds on an existing linguistic construction – the Direct Discourse Construction – which it supports with a simple visual depiction of a potential speaker being quoted. However, it moulds the existing construction (which typically features reporting clauses like *she said* or *he went*) to suit its particular needs, by adding further constraints. The subject-verb inversion of a clause-final reporting clause of Direct Speech is a known option in some writing styles (e.g. *'Good morning, Christopher Robin', said Winnie-the-Pooh*) (see, e.g., Green 1980: 590–4, Collins & Branigan 1997), but in the SNOE meme becomes a formal requirement. In addition, of course, the form and position of the clause have become highly formulaic. The meme selects *no one* for subject (or in a variant we discuss below, '*no* + noun') and obligatorily includes *ever*, thereby reinforcing the meaning and packing an additional rhetorical punch. As well, the final position of the SNOE clause (i.e. following the apparent quote) is fixed, whereas in ordinary Direct Speech constructions it is not, and the reporting clause can precede or even interrupt the reported clause. Variants of the SNOE pattern exist (as described in Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2016) which use reduced forms of this full constructional template, such as – *No one ever* (or, for emphasis, *No one. Ever.*), or even just – *Nobody*, using the convention of the long dash to identify the source of a quotation. Salient but partial forms such as these can, then, be sufficient to frame-metonymically call up the full meaning of the complete formulaic pattern *said no one ever.*

As just indicated, a variant of SNOE exists in which *no one* as subject of the reporting clause is replaced by 'no' combined with a noun which picks out a category of people: *no girl ever, no gamer ever, no parent ever*, and so on (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2016: 32–3). This serves to jokingly reinforce existing stereotypes about the category in this noun (girls, gamers, parents, etc.). In terms of images that occur in this variant of the meme, again the image will typically show at least an apparent speaker for the embedded Discourse Space, and possibly even an apparent addressee. One such example uses a scene from the 2008 film *Another Cinderella Story* in which two high school students talk in the school corridor, in front of a row of lockers, the girl on the left smiling and looking up at the taller boy on the right. The TT, shown in quotation marks, reads *'Date? Nah, you're like a sister to me'*, followed by the SNOE phrase *said no man ever* as BT.

The example reinforces an existing sexist stereotype about (straight) men which portrays them as unable to have genuine, platonic friendships, without any sexual tension, with a woman. In this, as in all these examples, there is a very strong intersubjective assumption that MVs will be on the same page as the meme communicator: 'you and I both agree' that men are sex obsessed, or that people who never listen are awful, or that no one in their right mind ever

thinks someone's Crocs are cool and would like to wear them, and so on. This shared assumption is still just that – an assumption. There will be people who do not, in fact, share it at all, and might object to the meme, or even fail to get it. The unattributable *faux* quotation is not 'said by no one' because it is literally impossible or absurd, but because it is fairly widely considered to be ridiculous or uncool within a particular discourse community.

The use of quotation marks in examples like this one, including others in this and the next chapter, helps MVs to recognize that discourse snippets are being highlighted. This is different from journalistic or academic usage, where quotation marks authenticate what was said or written. Quotation marks are an optional stylistic choice in memes – their use is not always consistent across examples even of the same meme type – not concerned with faithfulness or literalness. Instead, they help readers focus on the attitudes and viewpoints these discourse snippets call up. In a sense, this is not too far removed from early functions of both manuscript marginal markings and early print quotation marks (see Moore 2011: Ch. 1), which marked out authoritative passages, commonplaces, maxims, witticisms, and the like, that is, words which are, in Moore's apt phrase (2011: 77), 'communally owned' rather than 'personal property'.

As an internet meme, SNOE is old hat now, though it may occasionally still crop up. The phrase *said no one ever* used on its own, without imagery, in contexts outside of social media discourse, does seem to persist to this day in online and print journalism, as in examples (3–4):

(3) You can trust future Washington politicians not to spend new money when inherited bills are still unpaid – said no one ever! (*Washington Examiner*, 15 July 2021, found via the News on the Web (NOW) corpus, Davies 2016–)

(4) 'A constitutional crisis sounds like a great idea', said no Canadian, ever. (*Globe and Mail* editorial, 8 September 2022)

The meme which circulated as an image-text artefact on social media platforms has thus given rise to a linguistic construction which lives on long after the popularity of the internet meme itself has waned.

7.2 *It Will Be Fun, They Said* Memes

Memes built around the BT *It'll be fun, they said* were already mentioned in Chapter 6 (Figure 6.7), in the context of our discussion of pronoun usage in different meme types. There we stressed the point that these memes, across two lines of text and a picture, condense a whole story sequence of 'advice – acting on the advice – distressing outcomes that contradict the original advice'. We add some brief comments here on other aspects of their linguistic form. One of our examples has as its TT *Go shopping with your dog they said* (and, of course,

as its BT the signature phrase *It will be fun, they said*). In this example, what the image shows is not the directly embodied reaction of the dog owner (e.g. a crying face, like in our earlier example, Figure 6.7), but rather the uncooperative behaviour of the dog, refusing to walk and so effectively being dragged along the floor on the lead. This is the most effective way of demonstrating the bad outcomes of following the mistaken advice given in TT, allowing MVs to simulate the unpleasant, frustrating experience felt by the shopper. We can thus again observe that the image in such memes targets the current result of advice received in the past, while focusing, as is typical in memes, on the one-off experience of the MC. The crying graduate student (Figure 6.7) may not be so unhappy all of the time, and shopping with one's dog is not always disastrous. But the negatively judged situation in the Non-Entrenched Image is the focus of the current complaint represented by the meme.

We want to focus briefly on the linguistic structure of TT and BT. Both TT and BT show a structure in which the reporting clause is in final position. Many approaches have been taken to so-called 'parenthetical' uses of reporting (and related) structures, involving a variety of understandings of the term 'parenthetical' (e.g. Urmson 1952, Reinhart 1975, Thompson & Mulac 1991, Asher 2000, Thompson 2002, Vandelanotte 2006, Dehé & Kavalova 2007, Brinton 2008, Verhagen 2019). What is important from our current perspective is that the final position of *they said*, as indeed was the case for the SNOE meme, has the effect of 'postponing' resolution of the viewpoint apparently being represented. This lays it open to a reading as a kind of afterthought, with the ironic potential of the variant *or so they said* (cf. Reinhart 1975, Vandelanotte 2002), mixing evaluation with speech representation. The meme does not use the *or so* form, but other forms do contribute to this evaluative, distancing effect, indicating the MM's disagreement with the initial thing 'said' by 'them'. Indeed, the echoic effect of the repeated, past tense structure *X, they said*, alongside the vague reference to *them*, prompt the MV to zoom out (Tobin & Israel 2012) of the initial recommendation reading of the TT imperative clause *go shopping with your dog*. The past tense across the two iterations of *they said* makes it clear that this is entirely retrospective (and hence potentially evaluative), and echoic structures have generally been ascribed the feature of producing attitudinal effects (e.g. Sperber & Wilson 1981, 1986), particularly in the analysis of irony as a type of echoic mention. These constructional features finally combine with the image which directly contradicts the 'fun' scenario the initial apparent speakers (*they*) promised in making their recommendation, by showing a dog being a hindrance much more than a joy during the shopping experience. As we've seen, other uses of the meme focus less on the experience of a contradictory situation, but on the pure, embodied emotional response, for instance in showing a crying face, or a sleeping face, in response to the TT *Go to grad school, they said*, suggesting the actual grad school experience is distressing or exhausting/boring.

The use of *they* in the meme merits some discussion. Its reference is vague, and in this the usage is similar to the kinds of non-specific reference of *they* usually described in grammars. Stirling & Huddleston (2002: 1471–2), for instance, discuss institutional *they*, in which the referent is some unspecified, but retrievable authority (e.g. *They had to close Kitsilano Pool for repairs after storm damage*; *they* = the parks board or city council), and also non-referential *they*, which they liken to non-referential *you* but with, potentially, 'a slight distancing effect' due to the suggestion that the speaker doesn't include themselves (compare e.g. *this is what we call a 'fait accompli'* vs. *this is what they call a 'fait accompli'*). The use of *they* in the meme does not seem institutional, but it is perhaps also slightly different from more typical cases of non-referential *they*, which tend to allow a paraphrase such as *people in general* or *people (who know about these things)* (e.g. *people (who know about these things) call this a 'fait accompli'*, *people (who know about these things) say smoking is bad for you*). The more likely interpretation, as we suggested in Chapter 6, is that specific mundane frustrations are being vented in these (like in many other) memes. This suggests some specific in-group of friends, relatives, or other trusted advisers made a certain recommendation, and it didn't work out well, leading the MM to produce a meme omitting some of the detail of the personal experience, to turn it into a more broadly relatable and schematic one that fits the meme format. In other words, it seems likely some more specific group or even individual (given the potential of *they* to refer back to singular antecedents) is at the source of the experience, compared to typical uses like *they say smoking is bad for you*, where the speaker may not in fact have any particular occurrence of this being said to them specifically in mind. The generalizing effect of *they* meshes well with the intersubjective goal of meme making and sharing – to share clever ways of addressing emotions and attitudes within a community of assumedly like-minded online communicators, and elicit responses.

Just as the SNOE meme has an afterlife as a purely textual construction, particularly in written journalism, *X, they said / It'll be fun they said* has developed into what Spreadbury (2022) calls a 'sarcastic multi-sentential construction'. Spreadbury (2022: 143) shows that the internet meme's popularity peak, detailed on sites like *Know Your Meme*, coincides with a peak in interest in the pattern in Google Trends, suggesting that the meme and the image-free use of the linguistic structure correlate closely. In these uses as a purely linguistic construction not supported by visuals, what we find interesting is Spreadbury's examples in which the original, strongly constrained textual pattern is deviated from in a number of ways in the corpus data. For instance, examples appear where the second half of the pattern is different from *it will be fun, they said* (examples from Spreadbury 2022: 146–7):

(5) Learn Rails they said. It's easy they said.

(6) Inhale, they said. You will like it, they said.

While *easy* and *like* are different specific word choices from *fun*, they do fit the established pattern of signalling an expected positive evaluation – one which the construction's meaning as a whole standardly rejects. Interestingly, some examples in Spreadbury's data lack the echoic second part altogether (e.g. just *Join the army, they said*, with no second part), and rely on readers construing the sarcastic reading frame-metonymically from familiarity with the meaning potential of the pattern, and/or from other cues.

7.3 *And Then X Said Y* Memes

A rather different meme using a *say* reporting clause is one which has *And then I/he said* in TT, and a quote in BT. The pronoun can be *I*, *he*, or indeed *she*, *they*, *we*, depending on the example; while Zappavigna (2019) found it was mostly *he*, meme documentation sites like *Know Your Meme*, and a Google image search in 2022, suggest it may (now) be more common with *I*. The BT seems to mostly be Direct Speech, often marked by quotation marks, but Indirect Speech examples are possible (e.g. *And then he said / he's going to ban porn*). The central feature of the image is that it shows people – usually, though not exclusively, politicians – laughing uproariously; the first and prototypical version uses a 1981 picture taken after President Reagan's final interview as President, including other besuited male politicians (George Bush senior among them) alongside Reagan on the left-hand side. Versions with Western political leaders of the recent past or the present can easily be found, including Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, then US presidential candidate Mitt Romney and his then running mate Paul Ryan, Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel, and others. We would consider it in essence an IM meme – except that the central repeatable image varies, and each of the visuals has its own associated family of IM memes. The textual template *And then X said* combined with a picture of a group of people reduced to laughter suggests a kind of mini-narrative with a temporal structure, where *And then X said* introduces the climax or punchline to (what is felt by the speaker and listeners to be) a joke, and the image shows the embodied emotional response – in terms of facial expressions but also body posture – which it immediately elicits in the audience. As a piece of meme communication, the intersubjective assumption is of course that MVs will agree and join in the evaluation of something as laughable.

One example is given in Figure 7.2, showing former President Barack Obama and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in July 2016, sharing

Figure 7.2 *And Then He Said* meme.

laughs backstage at the Democratic National Convention in the run-up to the 2016 US Presidential Elections. Interestingly, the quote in BT is an *actual* quote from their main political opponent, Donald Trump, in his typical hyperbolic style ('no one more/better than me'), claiming to be the height of respect for women despite much evidence to the contrary. Recall our example of the *Political Compass Macron* meme in Chapter 5 (Figure 5.3): in that example, too, verifiable quotes were used, but taken out of their actual speech event to function as tokens for different attitudes, as we also see here. What the *And Then X Said Y* meme shares with the SNOE meme is the overall Discourse Viewpoint in which an expressed view is pointed up as completely implausible and therefore laughable. What is different, of course, is that this meme can be used very effectively to ridicule an actual, verifiable quote, in a process of political campaigning. This is not its only use, however: in examples like *And then he said: I love Google+* (referring to a failed technology platform), or *And then I said: The exam is just like the study guide!*, the meme again comes much closer to the meaning and use of SNOE; indeed, especially in the former case we can easily imagine *I love Google+, said no one ever.*

While we note here in Figure 7.2, and in our discussion of Figure 5.3 in Chapter 5, that verifiable quotes are featured, it is important to remind ourselves that this is not a requirement of the meme. Not only is this not always the case, as our Google+ and study guide examples just suggested; the more fundamental point is that what the meme is really doing is signal MM's attitude – for which authenticity of the quotation is not an issue. For instance, MM in Figure 7.2 believes Trump is not respectful towards women – irrespective of whether *No one has more respect for women than I do* is an authentic quote or not. Depending on context, time of making the meme and time of seeing the meme, MVs may or

may not have knowledge about this authenticity – but it doesn't matter for the meme to achieve its meaning. Similarly in the *Political Compass Macron* meme, while some of the initial audience of the meme might be political geeks sharing a discourse community with MM, others may not stop to even consider whether the quotes are veridical or not – it doesn't matter for them to get the overall message about political shapeshifting.

In the different uses of this meme, the image shows the emotional response, embodied in facial expression and body posture, in the fictive speech event in which TT is situated (e.g. the Clinton-Obama exchange in Figure 7.2). In some uses, as in our example here, the frame of politics called up in the image is relevant, and the BT quote (whether authentic or not) is attributable to a competing politician. In other uses, the politics frame recedes into the background, and what is left in terms of the image's meaning is the embodied emotional response – people being reduced to helpless laughter. This response can then be applied to a BT quote which bears no relation to the politicians in the picture nor to politics more generally, but simply typifies an attitude or experience the MM wants to pillory, such as the idea that anyone could ever take Google+ seriously (*And then he said: I love Google+*), or the idea that lecturers do as they promise and stick to the syllabus strictly in preparing exam questions (*And then I said: The exam is just like the study guide!*).

The two possibilities just laid out are not the only ones, though they seem to apply to most cases. Where the image changes and no longer involves politicians, this reactivates the possibility of the picture calling up a frame that is relevant to the BT quote being evaluated. In one example in our collection, two nurses in a hospital (one of them holding a big pile of dossiers) are seen bursting out laughing, with as TT/BT the sequence *And then I said / 'The doctor will be with you in a minute!'*. Here the nursing frame is clearly relevant, and the meme allows the MM to air their frustration at being kept waiting unreasonably long at a doctor's appointment. And so we observe again the endless potential for renewal, remixing and reuse which memes continue to show.

7.4 *Be Like* Memes

Be like has been widely studied as a quotative form on the rise, mostly from the perspective of variationist sociolinguistics (Buchstaller 2014), but also from more cognitive and constructional quarters (e.g. Vandelanotte & Davidse 2009, Vandelanotte 2012). Its use in a particular meme family comes as no surprise, considering both the general comments about quotation we started this chapter with, and the popularity, malleability and vivid potential of the form – in particular, the vagueness as to the type of reported content, including speech, thought, stance and gesture (for the latter in particular, see Hsu et al. 2021). In

examples like *I was like, wow!* or *he was like OMG!* it's not quite clear whether *wow* or *OMG* are best understood in terms of the traditional discourse representation categories like speech or thought; it seems quite plausible in our view to see these examples as involving a depiction of a stance that remains unverbalized, but clearly felt. Indeed, *be like* has been noted as often marking stance rather than specifically quoting speech (e.g. Buchstaller 2014: 50–4, 69–75). All of this makes the *be like* form used as a quotative a prime candidate for use in memes.

The formal features of *Be Like* memes can be summed up as follows (cf. Vandelanotte 2019: 187–9). The TT features a subject followed by the uninflected form *be like*. This subject (almost invariably) takes the plural form; large numbers of examples specifically feature the offensive forms *bitches* and *niggas*, though many other examples also circulate (e.g. *teachers*, *grandparents*, *moms*, *doctors*, *dudes*, etc.). The effect of this use of plural subject noun phrases (NPs) is stereotype-reinforcing, similar to the *Said No X Ever* variant of the SNOE meme: no particular, individual, 'actual' speaker or group of speakers is invoked, but rather a fictive collective speaker, not situated in any particular identifiable deictic ground, represents behaviour supposedly characteristic of the category of people (teachers, dudes, etc.) as a whole. The use of the uninflected form *be like* is another constant feature of the TT; the feature is shared with at least one variety of English (African American Vernacular English; see e.g. Cukor-Avila 2002). It's possible the meme started out with examples of *bitches be like*, which, as the *Know Your Meme* website tells us, featured in a 1998 rap song ('I'll Bee Dat') by American rap artist Redman, and so the variant may have stuck when the form spread to other subject NPs.

The BT of the *Be Like* meme contains an embedded Discourse Space, demonstrating a type of thing (supposedly) typically said, or the stance typically adopted, by the category of person identified in the subject NP in the TT. Crucially, the image over which TT and BT are applied typically presents a depiction of which some aspect contradicts the text of the meme – usually the BT presenting the embedded Discourse Space. In this way, there's a humorous incongruity (Attardo 1994) between text and image, and noticing and resolving the incongruity is part of what makes the meme enjoyable and fun for viewers.

Consider the example in Figure 7.3. Here, the embedded Discourse Space in the BT presents a jilted lover's professed attitude: *I'm over him*. Taken at face value, this could be a defiant stance, though based on our frame knowledge of romantic break-ups we can also imagine this to be a case of self-deception. The discourse addressed by MM to MV, given in the TT (*bitches be like*), presents the embedded Discourse Space as the typical thing a jilted woman will insist on. This is a subjective kind of generalization – expressed using highly

Figure 7.3 *Bitches Be Like* meme.

subjective, offensive language, even if used jocularly – which reveals the MM's stance as not having a high opinion of women (jilted or otherwise). The image in this example clearly contradicts the lower, embedded stance, showing as it does an image of a woman spying on someone with the help of binoculars; this functions much like a snapshot visual representation of a longer narrative scene, and so could be treated as a narrative space in the sense of Dancygier (2012a). The Discourse Viewpoint Space (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2016) zooms out from the lower spaces and provides a 'view of a viewpoint' (Tobin & Israel 2012): given the depicted situation (woman spying on someone with binoculars), MVs understand that the MM believes that, while jilted women may say they are over their exes, in fact they still obsess over them. In a sense, then, we could 'read' the image as being part of the embedded 'discourse': jilted women show (or 'are like') both the verbal behaviour presented textually (*I'm over him*) and the nonverbal behaviour depicted in the image, contradicting the verbal behaviour. We can think of the artefact as a whole as a network in which the various lower spaces (the embedded Discourse Space, the *be like* Discourse Space, the visual Narrative Space) are supervised from the Discourse Viewpoint Space (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2016), which makes sense of the different stances stacked up (Dancygier 2012b) in the lower parts of the network.

Other occasional examples do not even have this lesser form of incongruity. One example in our collection uses the IM known as *Unhelpful High School Teacher* on meme collecting sites (photoshopped to additionally include the

scumbag hat from the *Scumbag Steve* IM), and its embedded Discourse Space in the BT reads *Oh, don't pack up yet, we still have five seconds of class left*. The image of the smiling teacher does not clash with this information, so the effect of the image here is reduced to illustrating a typical speaker, as we saw in typical SNOE memes discussed previously in this chapter.

A handful of examples we collected show considerable *internal* complexity as part of the depicted content following the *be like* phrase. In one case (discussed in Vandelanotte 2020: Figure 5), a top line *Straight people be like* headed a cartoon depiction of a knife and fork (with some human facial features) asking a pair of (similarly animated) chopsticks *So . . . Which one of you is the fork?*. Thanks to the top line, evoking the frame of straight versus gay relationships, viewers are cued to resolve the apparently absurd cartoon scene (kitchen utensils cannot speak, and chopsticks aren't knives and forks). In terms of the straight versus gay frame, however, the unrealistic scenario (Semino 2010a) of speaking kitchen utensils makes sense, as a parallel of situations where the ill-fitting and inappropriate question 'which one of you is the man/woman' is asked of gay couples to whom the role division does not apply. In another example, the Academia Obscura Facebook page used the phrase *academic writing be like*, and complemented it by a whole four-panel Calvin and Hobbes cartoon with lengthy verbal exchanges between the two characters, and with Calvin practising his academic writing skills by resorting to extremely abstruse language. Here an abstract noun (*academic writing*) is used instead of a count plural subject NP, but other aspects of the meme format continue to apply.

While these examples re-use a complete, stand-alone, internally complex artefact to provide the depicted content following a *be like* phrase, the example we present in Figure 7.4 builds up considerable complexity – and stacks multiple stances up in the process – in a more 'hands on' fashion, the MM assuming a more active role in the making of it. In the example, the TT phrase *Certain people on here be like:* is complemented by an internally complex depiction comprising a cluster of Discourse Spaces, which we can understand as a combination of 'stance leads' and 'stance follows', using Du Bois's (2007) terminology: an initial stance being followed up and responded to. We see an image of French communist politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon, with a depiction of his position on NATO (*Europe needs to detangle* [*sic*] *itself from the US dominated NATO*), in the top left corner. In the bottom right corner, we see French president Emmanuel Macron, with a very succinct summary of his position (*European strategic autonomy*). To a degree, we can understand these positions as broadly similar, if formulated very differently. To the right and left of Mélenchon and Macron respectively, we see a blended representation of a crudely drawn face (known as Soyjak) and a schematic representation of a globe, presumably representing the internet (though interpretations may

Figure 7.4 *Mélenchon vs. Macron* meme: opposite stances.

vary). We can understand this initially as a representation of the stereotype of the 'reply guy' – someone who always has a comment ready to hand in response to a social media post. The frowning meme face evaluates Melenchon's position very negatively (*Fuck off I don't believe in that made up nonsense*), while the exaggeratedly broadly grinning meme face evaluates Macron's very positively, as underlined by the multiple exclamation marks rounding off the positive stance (*So true!!!*). Based on the glasses and the facial hair in both meme faces, we can infer that they are meant to be the same person, responding differently to the two policitians' positions. Moving up from the lower Discourse Spaces to the higher *be like* Discourse Space, we can naturally blend the reply guy/meme face with the *certain people on here* [= on X/Twitter] identified in the tweet text/TT. This finally allows us to appreciate the overall Discourse Viewpoint prompted for by this highly complex artefact: certain

people uncritically applaud anything Macron says or does, particularly with respect to Europe's position within NATO, while roundly rejecting anything Mélenchon says or does, even though their actual positions – according to the Discourse Viewpoint adopted by the MM – are but notional variants of one another. This means the artefact as an online discourse move adopts a specific type of leftist viewpoint, critiquing what it considers to be ideologically blinded behaviour on the part of centrist or right-leaning citizens.

The complex stacking of stance upon stance is quite impressive in an example like this: there's Mélenchon's stance, highly critical of Europe's perceived dependence on US dominance in NATO, followed by the online reply guy's negative evaluative stance towards it. Likewise there's Macron's stance, indicating (in telegraphic style) positive stance towards more European strategic autonomy (and so implying less reliance on US dominance), responded to positively by the MC. Finally there's the zoom-out to the overall stance, pointing up and criticizing a perceived contradiction in the lower stances caused by ideological blindedness in certain (politically centrist or perhaps right-leaning) online discourse participants. The diagram in Figure 7.5 summarizes this line of analysis. Boxes using long dashes and dots in the Discourse Spaces indicate initial stances ('stance leads' in Du Bois's 2007 framework) and those using short dashes indicate stance follows; the dash and dot styles are repeated in Discourse Viewpoint Space for clarity.

In this section, we have restricted our attention to the *Be Like* meme construction as a multimodal artefact combining a *be like* phrase, usually with plural NP subject, in its TT, an embedded Discourse Space in its BT, and an image

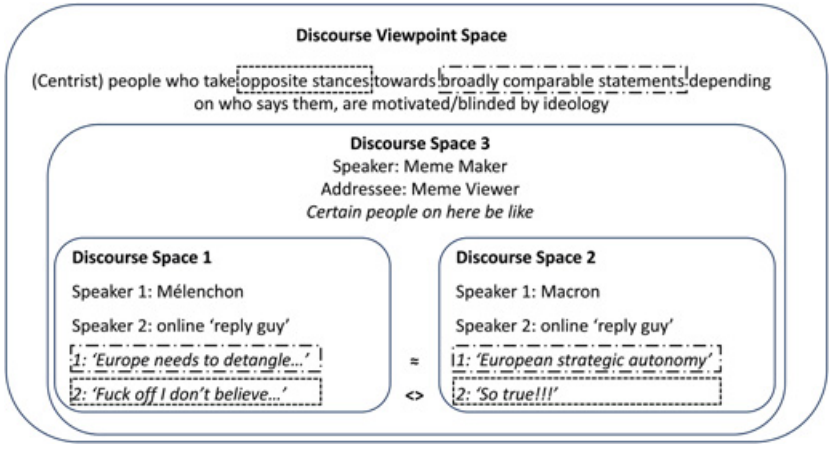


Figure 7.5 *Mélenchon vs. Macron* meme: Discourse Spaces.

usually contradicting some aspect of the textual components of the meme. *Be like* is of course extremely versatile across its linguistic (e.g. Buchstaller 2014, D'Arcy 2017) and multimodal uses, and we will briefly return to its use in X/Twitter discourse (in examples such as *Schools be like* or *Twitter be like*), where it can combine with both text and emoji, in the context of Chapter 10.

7.5 *What If I Told You* Memes

The memes we analysed in the preceding sections, featuring the verbs *say* and *be like*, are arguably closest to existing, purely linguistic speech and thought representation constructions, though in their multimodal forms they each add further specifications and constraints, as we have shown. The *What If I Told You* meme, already discussed in the previous chapter, is worth including here as it does use a fairly typical predicate (*tell*) and uses a phrase common in monomodal, non-memetic contexts. Even in its purely linguistic use, though, *what if* already evokes an alternative mental space allowing reasoning around hypotheses and implications (Declerck & Reed 2001, Hartman 2019). It allows MM to introduce a veiled criticism in a very indirect way: 'what would happen if I told you X – is it perhaps imaginable that, in response to this act of telling, you might stop doing X?' Implicitly, it is clear MM finds the targeted behaviour (e.g. constantly posting food pics on Instagram, in the example mentioned in Chapter 6) annoying, but the indirect approach opted for in the meme allows anyone who recognized that they engage in X to come to their own realization, rather than having to be explicitly told to stop it.

As we discussed in Chapter 6, the IM in this meme is a still from the movie *The Matrix* showing the character Morpheus, who reveals to the film's protagonist Neo that he is living in a computer simulation. As meme collecting sites like *Know Your Meme* point out, the phrase *what if I told you*, which in the meme occurs in TT, is not actually used in the relevant movie scene, though it does suit the overall meaning of the scene in the film's narrative development. At one point in the scene, Morpheus does use the phrase *I'm trying to tell you* … (in answer to Neo's question *What are you trying to tell me?*). The YouTube clip of the scene has prompted interesting metacommentary surrounding this 'misquote' of the phrase *what if I told you*,[3] with people remarking that they thought they had a clear memory of hearing the phrase. Among the comments, one YouTube user turns the phrase on itself:

(7) What if I told you that I never actually say 'What if I told you' in the whole movie, Neo?

[3] See the video *What If I Told You | Matrix Morpheus [MEME ORIGIN]* published by Prime Video Nederland on YouTube.

Returning to the meme, we can note that its BT tends to contain something almost not worth revealing or recommending (unlike in the context of the film, where the living-in-a-simulation reveal is significant) – something unspectacular, rather boring, perhaps quite technical, that should already be widely known, at least in the eyes of the MM, represented by the MC Morpheus. The image of the self-assured face of Morpheus, wearing sunglasses and so not giving much away in the way of emotions, arguably embodies a sense of toughness, manliness, even intimidation, and this clashes humorously with the typical examples of the meme 'revealing' or recommending fairly mundane things. One of our examples, for instance, has as its text *What if I told you / the side with the USB symbol will always be the top side*, instructing the uninitiated in the correct way up of old USB connectors (hardly an earth-shattering revelation requiring the cold-bloodedness suggested in the embodied behaviour depicted). As argued in Chapter 6, the MCs Morpheus (depicted) and Neo (reflected in Morpheus' sunglasses) can be seen as blended with the MM and MV(s) respectively, with Morpheus acting as a kind of mouthpiece teller (Davies 1979) for the MM.

Other examples of the pattern include, for example, *What if I told you 'may be' is a verb, 'maybe' is an adverb and they are used differently in a sentence*, or *What if I told you you can still go to the gym without telling the internet*. As such examples show, the meme often acquires irritated and pedantic overtones. What happens here essentially is that the MM hints to people who offend in the various ways indicated that maybe they should stop and think what they're doing. Then perhaps they'll realize that they keep getting the same thing wrong about USB keys or the use of *may be* versus *maybe*, or that they don't need to publicize everything they do on the internet. Memes are generally tools for categorization of behaviours, and this specific meme adds another interesting example, targeting people who keep on violating social etiquette. Interestingly, because the *you* in this meme cannot naturally refer to just one person displaying the behaviour, the criticism, as is often the case in memes, targets anyone and everyone, without making any internet user feel singled out.

* * *

The types of memetic quotation constructions we have surveyed in this chapter feature textual phrases that are modelled on existing linguistic constructions used to represent speech or thought: they use forms of reporting clauses similar to *he said, I was like* or *I told you*, but with further constructional requirements and specifications added. Nevertheless, the link with existing and easily recognizable linguistic constructions provides these memes with a ring of familiarity, and helps MVs expect, and successfully locate, embedded Discourse Spaces. As some of our more complicated examples have shown, complex networks of viewpoints and stances can be construed in these memes, which would require

much lengthier and less pithy discourse if not supported by images and by constructional 'slots' predefined by the meme format. In the next chapter, we continue our exploration of forms of memetic quotation, but turn to cases which do not use *say* verbs but signal the presence of discourse depictions in other ways.

8 Embedding Discourse Spaces without *Say* Verbs

In the previous chapter, we focused on memetic quotation featuring recognizable reporting clauses not too dissimilar from standard linguistic usage such as *he said*, *I told you*, or *I was like*, even if each case we analysed had formal peculiarities beyond such standard usage. This chapter turns to broader usage without such *say*, *tell*, or *be like* structures, but incorporating memetic quotation in other, sometimes quite implicit ways. We encountered some examples of this kind in previous contexts, including our discussion of grid memes (Chapter 5) and pronoun use in memes (Chapter 6), but here our approach aims to add more of the variety of forms and meanings construed in memetic quotation memes.

In Section 8.1, we briefly revisit the class of GGG memes, which sometimes features what we could consider the memetic equivalent of zero quotatives (Mathis & Yule 1994), where there is no reporting clause and Meme Viewers (MVs) rely on quotation marks mainly. Section 8.2 looks at the way in which pictures can have depictions of dialogue, whether as one-off constructs imagining dialogues matched to a Non-Entrenched Image (NEI), even if unrelated to the original scene visually depicted, or as proper constructions that have become entrenched Image Macro (IM) memes re-using and relabelling lines of dialogue, as in the *Anakin and Padmé* example first introduced in Chapter 5 on grids. We add further cases and more extended analysis here. Finally, in Section 8.3 we take our cue from our earlier discussion of *me*-memes, introduced in Chapter 6 on pronouns, but demonstrate a broader range of online discourse which relies on the dialogue format in which apparent speakers are introduced by means of noun phrases (like *partisan twitter users:* . . . or *nobody:* . . .), and where the 'dialogue' that follows these introductions can in fact be absent or nonverbal.

8.1 'Zero Quotatives' in Memes

In their study of casual conversational speech, Mathis & Yule (1994) proposed the term 'zero quotatives' to refer to usage where there is no reporting clause (subject identifying a speaker, and typically a *say* verb); the term has since been adopted in many studies of language in social interaction. Mathis & Yule found

such occurrences to be identifiable thanks to choices in voice quality, or inferred from turn-taking dynamics, or as cases of the quoting speaker echoing a stance. In memes, the usage in which quotation marks alone are used to present embedded Discourse Spaces, typically expressing a stance of some sort, could be interpreted as a parallel for this usage. We've seen various examples of such usage in earlier chapters, including, for instance, in the *Political Compass* meme (Chapter 5) or in the family of GGG memes. To represent the category in the context of this chapter's overview, we select an example that is subtly different from previous examples, in including a 'quotation marked' direct discourse snippet in the Top Text (TT), rather than the Bottom Text (BT) (as was the case in Figure 6.1 in Chapter 6, whose text ran *Breaks something expensive of yours / 'Why would you spend that much on it anyway'*).

Our *Scumbag Steve* example with a memetic quotation taking up the protasis in TT gives, as its TT, *'Yeah that's like 3.5 grams'*, and as its BT *Only two*. When someone says some quantity is about 3.5 grams, we might expect, naïvely, that it turns out indeed to be around that. However, MVs' frame knowledge surrounding Scumbag Steve, and blending the speaker role for the embedded Discourse Space with the Meme Character (MC) SS, sets us up to expect an apodosis where the quantity is less than expected and, presumably, paid for. Additionally, the mention of *grams*, especially in conjunction with the Scumbag Steve frame, probably calls up the frame of illegal dealings in drugs. When we get to BT and the actual 'Q' part of the predictive construction is revealed, indeed we find Scumbag Steve has lied and cheated a non-depicted MC out of money by selling less than promised. The formal condensation is again striking: a brief, 'zero', quotative in TT, and just two words in BT. The remarkable phenomenon here is the flexible way in which Discourse Spaces evoked very briefly can be used metonymically to quickly call up behaviours and attitudes which are narratively fairly elaborate. Such flexibility once again underscores the importance of such discourse snippets across a wide range of memetic contexts, also when not explicitly introduced by verbs like *say* or *be like*.

In examples such as this, the use of quotation marks signals an embedded Discourse Space, and invites viewers of the meme to imagine a more complex speech exchange with multiple speakers, in which that discourse snippet makes sense and coheres. In the next section, we turn to examples which already depict multiple people, and then associate Discourse Spaces with them, turning them into 'speakers'. In this way, these dialogue labelling memes explicitly invite viewers to 'read' the image as a dialogic speech exchange, for humorous purposes.

8.2 Dialogue Labelling Memes

In this section we turn to a type of meme which, as the name we propose suggests, combines features of memetic quotation ('dialogue') with features of

labelling memes, discussed at length in Chapter 4. This is because these memes involve either a single image, or a composite of multiple images, being 'labelled' or marked up not with 'descriptive' words or phrases (or images), but rather with 'demonstrated', fictively quoted utterances.

As an example involving a single (non-entrenched) image 'marked up' as a multi-speaker speech exchange, yielding a 'dramatic', narrative interpretation of a static scene, consider Figure 8.1. Note that we look at this example, involving an older piece of art, as a 'one-off' construct rather than a full-blown construction: while we can say it instantiates a more schematic and productive pattern (that of dialogue labelling memes), it has remained an idiosyncratic artefact that hasn't given rise to entrenched meanings and repeated use in the way other examples have (like the *Anakin and Padmé* meme, introduced in Chapter 5 and briefly returned to below). The use, in Figure 8.1, of a centuries old painting taps into the huge popularity of so-called *Classical Art* memes, many of which in fact are *when*-memes (Piata 2020).

The painting in Figure 8.1 is by Joshua Reynolds, and is a group portrait of the three daughters of the 2nd Earl Waldegrave and his wife, likely commissioned in hopes of attracting eligible suitors, as the *National Galleries Scotland* website explains on its 'Ladies Waldegrave' page. The reproduction quality is, of course, abysmal, but memes tend to be 'quick and dirty' artefacts where fine

Figure 8.1 Dialogue labelling: a *Classical Art* meme.

finish is not a relevant or even desirable feature. While we consider this a one-off use of an image, and not a construction, it still uses some of the grammar of established memes like labelling memes. The effect here seems to be a combination of irreverence – serious art turned into a jokey artefact – but also common humanity – the recognition that for all their lofty surroundings, and their parents' high status and high hopes for them, even these late eighteenth-century noble ladies may have been as prone to gossip, small talk, and banter as we are today.

The placement of the imagined lines of dialogue attached to the three main characters is similar to how labelling memes work, but of course also similar to how speech bubbles in cartoons and comics are applied. We naturally parse the image from left to right, with the quotes also descending in height to support this temporal sequencing of subsequent speakers. The highest line of text (*Heathcliff is out on the moors again*) may or may not fit this pattern: it might be spoken (as an opening gambit) by the middle of the three sisters, or it might be presented as a kind of 'off-stage' viewpoint (a reading supported by the different font used in the artefact). The humour derives from various sources. The topic of discussion, while vague in its details, seems to border on the raunchy (with the suggestion that Heathcliff is *kind of a dog* potentially understood as sexual innuendo). This clashes with the genteel, refined setting and produces major humorous incongruity. Depending on the viewer's cultural knowledge, mention of *Heathcliff* and *the moors* may open up the frame of Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*, which postdates the painting by almost seventy years, adding a further incongruity. In addition, there is a sense in which the viewer/reader's humorous enjoyment extends to their interpretation of the embodied behaviour of the three sisters, especially the rightmost lady. While working concentratedly on a length of silk lace, she performs her rather remarkable comment in an offhand, matter-of-fact, entirely uncontrived kind of way. It is tempting to read this as a kind of deadpan delivery worthy of Buster Keaton.

Figure 8.2 presents a partial analysis of meaning emergence in this example. The main input – Reynolds' painting of the Ladies Waldegrave – is analysed here as a visually presented narrative space, adapting Dancygier's (2012a) framework for fictional narratives to a visual artwork. Further frame knowledge about the artwork may be more or less accessible depending on specific MVs' familiarity with the painting and its painter. The Discourse Space adds a topic of conversation (*Heathcliff out on the moors*) explored by three young women; the two central keywords in this topic (Heathcliff, moors) will remind many viewers of the frame of *Wuthering Heights*, whether directly (Brontë's novel) or perhaps more indirectly (via the eponymous song by the singer-songwriter Kate Bush, which prominently mentions the name Heathcliff in its lyrics). The blending of these inputs provides us with a view of a scene in

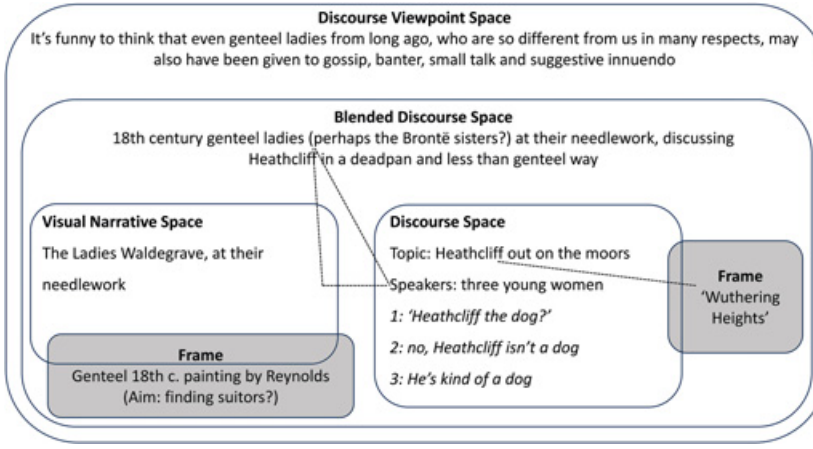


Figure 8.2 Discourse Spaces: a *Classical Art* meme.

which ladies at their needlework in an eighteenth-century setting are discussing Heathcliff in oddly suggestive terms as *kind of a dog*. Perhaps for some viewers, the frame knowledge relating to *Wuthering Heights*, its author and her sisters might even prompt a blend between the ladies on the painting and the three Brontë sisters, adding to the incongruity and comedy of the scene as the deeply dramatic character of Heathcliff seems to become ridiculous in this way. The overall take-away viewpoint of the artefact, we would suggest, results from a further zoom-out viewpoint (the Discourse Viewpoint Space), where viewers ultimately conclude it's funny to think about people living hundreds of years ago in very different circumstances, but sharing common traits of humanity such as gossip and innuendo we might not always have in mind when appreciating serious art.

Moving beyond one-off cases, a prominent example of a multi-image meme arranged in a four-cell grid that uses quotations as dialogic labels is the so-called *Anakin and Padmé* meme, which we introduced in Chapter 5 on grid memes. This can be seen as a composite kind of IM meme, since the four-way arrangement of pictures is reused many times with a consistent meaning. The repetition – but with a very different, concerned and doubtful kind of facial expression – of Padmé's line *For the better, right?*, following Anakin's failure to confirm his intention to change the world for the better, is used as a template to categorize situations unrelated to the storyline of *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*. The incongruous application of this fictively condensed dialogue to unrelated scenarios provides a humorous understanding of people questioning someone's good sense or good intentions; in the example we

showed in Chapter 5, it was Elon Musk's good sense or good intentions – in a moral and/or in a business sense – with respect to the internet that were being questioned mockingly.

Memetic remixes and variants of the standard pattern – adding textual labels onto the Star Wars stills and the (fictive) subtitles – take different forms, with variation pertaining both to the images and the text. What different creative extensions do appear to consistently respect are a number of key constructional constraints: a zoom-in and a lack of second dialogue line on the left-hand side (Anakin), and a sombering over of facial expression and (near-) repetition of the dialogue line on the right hand side (Padmé). These constant elements of form permit the continuing applicability of the meme's meaning of casting doubt on the morality, feasibility, desirability, or good sense of someone's stated plans or intentions. In one example in our collection, for instance, while the four-way grid of pictures is maintained, the labelling is visual rather than textual, and the fictive exchanges are modified: Anakin has a Union Jack flag photoshopped prominently over his face twice (but much larger in the bottom left cell of the quadrant, to preserve the zoom-in effect), Anakin's line becomes *I have colonized half the world for spices!*, and Padmé's repeated line reads *So you'll use them in your cuisine, right?*. The overall viewpoint effect achieved here is one of gentle mockery of the implied blandness of British cuisine – failing dismally to incorporate the flavourful spices sourced from across its erstwhile Empire.

Examples which go further, in also changing the faces depicted, can show interesting creative effects. The example in Figure 8.3 presents a kind of crossover between the *Anakin and Padmé* meme and *Classical Art* memes. Here, different paintings of Napoléon and Joséphine were sought and found by the MM to mimic the original four-cell grid's subtle changes – the zoom-in effect on Anakin/Napoléon, and the change from sunny to worried disposition in Padmé/Joséphine. The practice of finding these different paintings makes for some interesting added effects compared to the original film stills (seen in Figure 5.9): in those Star Wars film stills, the posture and body orientation of both characters remains pretty much unchanged, with the main embodied changes pertaining to zoom-in and intensity of gaze for Anakin, and to facial expression (from happy to concerned) for Padmé. In Figure 8.3, we additionally see changes in body posture and orientation. These are likely 'accidental' – just side effects of collecting different paintings to fit the meme's requirements – rather than specifically intended, but it is tempting to interpret these features, given our experiential knowledge and simulation capacities. In this way, we can see Napoléon's first picture as 'turning towards' Joséphine in conversation, and his second picture as 'breaking the fourth wall', looking at the viewer while realizing his mistake. Conversely, Joséphine can be seen initially facing the viewer,

Figure 8.3 *Anakin and Padmé*: a *Classical Art* meme.

and subsequently turning her head towards Napoléon to note his lack of reply with disapproval. The text added onto this example captures a famous, ill-fated strategic decision of Napoléon's, in giving him the line *I'm going to invade Russia*, and Joséphine the repeated line *In the summertime right?*, in reference to the failed Russian campaign in 1812.

These sorts of cases seem to prompt the observation that men-in-power could have avoided many disastrous mistakes if only they had listened to sensible women. This suggests to us that the categorial meaning of a meme can range across groups of examples which are not just events (judged to be impossible, inconsiderate, or friendly, etc.), as discussed in earlier chapters, but also mini-narratives featuring characters, suspense, and a dramatic ending.

The dialogue lines as we've seen them in the examples in this section so far have been truly fictive – we can imagine them as appropriate to the exchanges, but we do not assume them to have taken place literally or even at all. This even applies to those examples of *Anakin and Padmé* memes where the text is unchanged from the original meme; as we indicated in Chapter 5, the meme's dialogue lines offer a plausible but condensed version of a much longer conversation. We close this section with a brief discussion of a separate but related type of dialogue labelling meme, featuring a sequence of film stills including subtitles that genuinely occurred in the film dialogue, onto which additional text is superimposed to 're-label' the experience in different terms. One such productive pattern concerns an exchange between two characters in the drama series *Mad Men*, portraying a more junior and more senior colleague respectively in an American advertising company in the 1960s. The junior colleague questions the senior colleague's behaviour during a sales pitch, and concludes their brief elevator exchange saying *I feel bad for you*, prompting the reply *I don't think about you at all*. The combination of the two stills with the dialogue lines has been labelled many times over, sometimes just with text (for instance, *the 49 other states* for the top image, with *NJ*, for New Jersey, for the bottom image), sometimes with images (e.g. a European flag in the top image, an American flag in the bottom one), or both. It's a simple but powerful device for stacking stances (Dancygier 2012b): an expression of pity or regretful disappointment, followed by a rejection of this pity by its object, with the verbally expressed stances being supported by the embodied behaviour (facial expressions) of the depicted characters.

The example in Figure 8.4 applies this stance stacking to the frame of academic disciplines, here sociology and economics. Blending the exchange of stances with these disciplines produces the Discourse Viewpoint according to which the academic discipline of economics is arrogantly unconcerned about or dismissive of that of sociology. As is the case with simpler forms of IM memes, like the *One Does Not Simply* meme (ODNS) discussed in Chapter 3, the limited prompts of two film stills, with the short dialogue lines included, are sufficient to metonymically call up the larger meaning of the construction, which is to build a rejection of an initial pitying stance. It is worth recalling, for the case of ODNS, that its TT in fact also originates in the film's dialogue, but the meme does not have the added complexity, which we have here, of a sequence of speakers, and a sequence of exchanges, being subsequently reinterpreted through labelling.

It's worth noting that we've even spotted the odd example which does away with the incorporated subtitles (*I feel bad for you* / *I don't think about you at all*). This suggests that at least for meme proficient users, recognition of the image pattern (and the stances the images embody) is sufficient to access the full meaning of the double stance construction. In one example (published by

Figure 8.4 Dual-labelling meme and stance-stacking.

@IyerC on X/Twitter, 4 August 2023), given here as Figure 8.5, a tweet text *The transatlantic econ discourse* heads the *Mad Men* image sequence, without the subtitles, but with the top image labelled in a boxed frame as *Americans: we have lower inflation, lower unemployment, higher growth than you. We win again*, while the bottom image is labelled as *Europeans: Thanks for your email. I'm currently out of office on annual summer vacation until 30th sep* [*sic*] *2023*. What works especially well in this example is the way in which a (fictive) out of office message (apparently intended to – fictively – cover a large time period, since the meme was posted in early August) meshes well with the original discourse line *I don't think about you at all*. The overall Discourse Viewpoint here suggests that while Americans pride themselves on certain robust aspects of their economy, Europeans on the whole seem to enjoy life more.

8.3 *Me/Also Me* and Related Patterns

In this section, we continue with the theme of dialogic patterns being used without explicit *say* verbs, but moving it into the domain of often two-fold, sometimes more complex, patterns introduced by pronouns or phrases – we already discussed the prominent case of *Me/Also Me* in Chapter 6 (Section 6.4.2). Here, we survey a broader sample of existing usage, not just involving images but also including

Figure 8.5 Fictive messaging meme.

some purely textual social media discourse (such as tweets) that borrow and modify the basic pattern of *X/Also X* constructions. What the variety of forms share is their formulaic and constructional nature, which only 'works' in certain types of internet discourse, not in face-to-face conversation for instance.

In the most minimal form possible, corresponding to two turns in a conversation, communicators on social media platforms can contrast two stances using a general *X/Also X* pattern. This pattern mimics the question-and-answer style of presenting dialogue often used in journalism, for instance when several people are interviewed in a single interview. In its third person form, the *X/Also X* construction is used to highlight and criticize inconsistencies or failures of logic in people's behaviour (verbal or otherwise), often quite seriously, for instance in the context of political discourse. Examples (1–2) below cite examples from X/Twitter, with (1) criticizing a Brexit-supporting UK politician for changing his discourse when it suits him, and (2) generalizing across specific examples of partisan discourse by formulating a highly schematic – and hence highly 'fictive', though all too plausible – pattern of contradictory behaviour inspired by hyperpartisanship:

(1) James Cleverly: 'People would have voted differently if we had known the facts'. Also James Cleverly: 'There shouldn't be another EU Referendum even though people didn't know all the facts'.
(@littleIckey on X/Twitter, 18 March 2019)

(2) Partisan twitter: 'Digging up old tweets by [politician I like] and quoting them out of context is nasty and malicious'. Also partisan twitter: 'I have dug up and criticised old tweets by [politician I dislike]. This is a necessary process of transparency and accountability'.
(@robfordmancs on X/Twitter, 22 February 2019)

What gives an example like (2) extra punch, bringing out even more clearly the hypocrisy across the two contradictory positions held, is the echoing of the language of 'digging up and criticizing': while that language might well be used in concrete examples of the first position (*digging up old tweets . . . and quoting them out of context is nasty and malicious*), it seems discursively less elegant or coherent, normally, to use that language in the second position being typified here, given the dissonance between the disapproving language of *digging up old tweets* and the moral high ground being claimed in pursuing a process of *transparency and accountability*. We further note that, compared to the specific reference of the proper name *James Cleverly* in (1), in (2) the power of metonymy is particularly strong, with not just the name of the technological platform *twitter* calling up people who communicate over the platform, but with *partisan twitter* being variously applicable to any group of people who will fiercely defend 'their side' whatever their failures. The use of the square-bracketed schematizations *[politician I like]* and *[politician I dislike]* further serves to emphasize the applicability to broad swathes of people, whatever their political leanings (left or right): hyperpartisanship can be found all over the political spectrum.

While (1–2) are purely textual examples, more modally complex usage is possible. In one example, we find a combination of text with a screenshot of more text. The text above the screenshot reads, first, ***Linguists****: Linguistics is a serious science!*, and then ***Also linguists***:; this is then followed by an incomplete screenshot of a Wikipedia entry about 'the linguistics wars'. This means that the 'also' part of the contrasted attitudes here involves an image (even though it's one that shows text), picked to typify an 'attitude' assumed to typify a branch of social science (linguistics). The top line faux-quotes linguists as saying, with some insistence (suggested by the exclamation mark), *Linguistics is a serious science!*; this stance is reversed by means of the Wikipedia screen grab, with the net result that linguistics is construed implicitly as unserious and/or unscientific.

Using *X/Also X* in the first person, with the pronoun *me*, tends to involve more light-hearted swipes at people's foibles, failing to live up to what they know to be the more virtuous pattern of behaviour. Compared to serious political or scientific questions touched on in our previous examples, *Me/Also Me* examples typically concern more whimsical content (cf. Shifman 2012 in her discussion of YouTube memes). Recall, for instance, our example in Chapter 6, where the *me* line read *I need to save money this month*, and the

also me line was completed by a depiction of a young woman carrying multiple very large shopping bags of luxury brands like Gucci and Chanel (Figure 6.5). Another example in our collection shows the *me* line as *who am I to judge?*, and completes the *also me* line with a picture of the famous talent-show judge Simon Cowell (Vandelanotte 2021: 185) – suggesting that the MM is actually very judgemental in spite of their initially adopted pose of open-mindedness. In both examples, then, the *me* line depicts a quote, typifying a stance about a social behaviour type (condemnation of being profligate, or of being judgemental); the *also me* line contrasts this stance with the condemned social behaviour itself being depicted visually (a shopping spree, a man whose very mission in life seems to be to judge).

Minor variants of the *X/Also X* and *Me/Also Me* patterns can be found. For instance, it is possible to quote an existing tweet, and comment with an *Also X* line immediately above the quoted tweet, calling out a specific person's perceived hypocrisy quite directly. What can also be found is use of a *Me:* line to typify behaviour just for the sake of highlighting the behaviour, without explicit contrast, as in Figure 8.6 below. Here, a potential quote typifies a parcel delivery message recognizable to anyone who has ever ordered something online (*'your order has been shipped'*); the *me* line which follows is completed by a picture of a dog sitting right in front of the door apparently impatiently awaiting the parcel's arrival. Even though the body depicted is that of a pet rather than of a person, we can easily interpret the posture in human terms and so understand the meaning of the overall artefact, similar to how we process *when*-memes: when you receive notification that your order has been shipped, it becomes difficult to concentrate on anything else and it feels similar to how a dog will sit in front of a window or door, pining for its owner to return home.

The similarity between *Me/Also Me* dialogic memes and *when*-memes is exploited in more complex artefacts as well. Figure 8.7 shows the way in which a number of memetic conventions are combined in a dialogic art-meme, with very distinct *when*-meme meaning. The painting shows Madonna and baby Jesus, but the faux-dialogue is presumably a representation of a parenting experience (with *Me* being the mother). Kids are known to insist on tasting unknown food only to find out they do not like it, so the facial expressions in the painting (the child's disgust and disappointment and the mother's resigned exasperation) fit the experience of many a mother. But the humour is even more poignant given that the painter most certainly did not mean to represent the effect the meme evokes. The humour of the meme is thus built on the basis of several aspects of its form – a less-than-successful religious painting, a typical parent/child dialogue, and facial expressions in the painting construed (again, Barrett [2017] style) to fit the meaning of the dialogue and not the religious grounding. And finally, the last line of the dialogue is simply *Me*-plus-image, where the unhappy faces of both characters represented lead to a *when*-meme pattern: 'when another tasting experiment goes wrong, you

Figure 8.6 Quotation and visual representation of attitude.

Figure 8.7 Dialogic pattern and visual representation of attitude.

feel like Image (and so does your child).' What such examples demonstrate is how the variety of commonly used memetic forms can work together to reproduce a meaning of a simpler meme, while applying it to a more complex situation.

Variations on such dialogic patterns which include sound (as well as image and text) can be found in short video clips shared on platforms such as TikTok. Indeed, a lot of TikTok clips combine a textual phrase describing *me* (or some other category, like *people in their 20s*, or *every indie guitar guy ever*) and then combine with music and a gestural and/or dance performance to depict the corresponding attitude, whether on its own, or in combination with the contrasting counterpart (*also me*). In one series of examples, the soundtrack used is the first seconds of the song 'Bongo cha cha cha' by Caterina Valente. The contrast in the soundtrack, exploited to reflect the contrasting stances, is that of the brief instrumental lead-in, followed by the first words of the song cutting in (*Bongo la, bongo cha cha cha*). In one of the examples we collected, the first part of the music is accompanied by a close-up shot of a hopeful and expectant looking young man slowly turning his head, with the on-screen text reading *Me thinking high school is gonna be an absolute blast* (Figure 8.8a). When the words of the song come on in the soundtrack, the image shifts to the same young man, in a dressing gown dancing rhythmically to the music on top of his bed, with as on-screen text *A global pandemic:* (Figure 8.8b). While the music remains upbeat, the darkened room and the odd scene of a young man dancing in his bedroom on his own with all the curtains closed call up the social isolation of lock-down periods during the COVID-19 pandemic – not exactly the absolute blast the young man had had reason to expect. The textual presentation, down to the use of the final colon, again calls up the use of the conversation frame, inviting us to conceive of the global pandemic as fictively interacting with the young man.

Let us now return to textual examples published on microblogging sites to illustrate some more flexible, and often more extended patterns featuring multiple dialogic turns in a fictive dialogue, and serving a variety of functions. One common pattern uses a variant of ODNS, in listing a number of 'non-quotations', culminating in a fictive quote exemplifying something some people do apparently say, but in a way that is undesirable and uninteresting. What is remarkable about the 'non-quotations' is that they are left empty, as can be seen in example (3):

(3) Nobody:
Absolutely no one:
Not a single soul on this Earth:
Not even their mom:
iNfLuEnCeR: 'A lot of you have asked about my skin care routine . . .'
(@cdcxpe on X/Twitter, 16 April 2019)

Instead of *said no one ever*, we get the similar identification of the source of fictive quotes in the form of noun phrases followed by a colon, in the

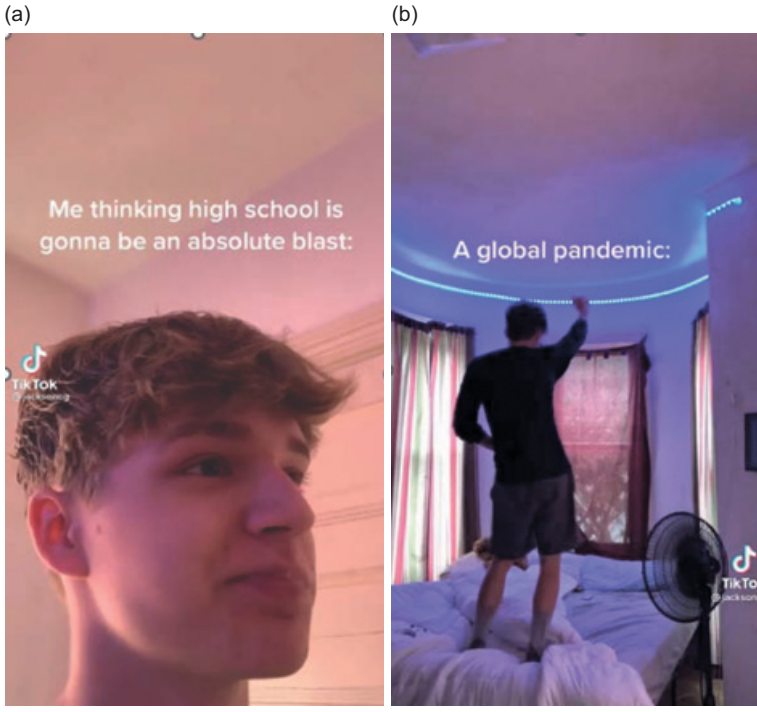


Figure 8.8 a. and b. Me/image/soundtrack TikTok meme.

familiar style discussed above. (3) and many examples like it show a crescendo of 'non-quotations', from *nobody* over intensified *absolutely no one* to even more emphatic *not a single soul on this Earth* to finally the quaintly comical *not even their mom*. The bizarre practice of not providing any quote to go with the sources mentioned can only be understood once the clue is revealed in the final line, in which a so-called influencer (trying to influence other internet users into buying products or services they publicize, in exchange for freebies or pay) is put on stage announcing *A lot of you have asked about my skincare routine*. The repeated absence of communications on anyone's part, acted out in the lead-up lines in the empty quotations, belies the influencer's statement that a lot of people were expressing interest in their skincare routine. We naturally interpret this contrast between non-interest and statement of interest as a mocking criticism of the self-obsession and perhaps even the mercantile desperation on the part of influencers. The negative overall evaluation is strengthened, in (3), by the spelling of *iNfLuEnCeR* – a mixture of lower and upper case

spelling sometimes used in internet discourse to suggest the people referred to are immature, attention-seeking, and such like.

While the use of a string of *no one*, with empty quotes, is highly effective in creating the meaning of 'unsolicited opinions' being typified in the culminating line, a similar effect can be achieved differently, as shown in example (4). Here, the short greeting *hello* is immediately responded to with a long answer to a question the reporter has not asked:

(4) reporter: hello

> jk rowling: there was actually a fifth hogwarts house that no one knew about. it was called sex house and it was where the horniest wizards were sorted into. they spent their days fucking and sucking and not learning much magic at all.
> (@bobvulfov on X/Twitter, 17 March 2019)

The meaning we get from this is similar to (3): an unprompted, uninteresting statement is pointed up and ridiculed, though in this case the lengthy fictive quote is attributed to a specific person (the author J. K. Rowling) rather than to a class of people as in (3). In the broader context, the suggestion appears to be that Rowling seeks attention, a charge which was made in connection with her hinting at the character Dumbledore's being gay. The example in (4) builds up a rather extreme version of this type of after-the-fact commentary on and expansion of the published work, in order to provide an unsympathetic portrayal of the author.

Another example that shows a different twist is (5). Here, the overall structure is similar, but the colon in the opening line is missing, and instead of an empty quote (3) or an innocuous opening line (4), we get the convention of providing descriptions of activities – a bit like in stage directions – contained within asterisks (see the discussion in Chapter 6, Section 6.4.1). The effect is similar: the *Deaf person* fictively given the floor is not asking for anything or saying anything, and yet the *Abled person*, well-meaning perhaps but misguided certainly, launches into a barrage of questions and statements which are painfully inappropriate:

(5) Deaf person *exists*

> Abled person: Whats the sign for this word? Can you hear this? Sometimes I wish I were deaf. I couldn't be deaf, I'd miss music. I can finger spell my name. If you teach your child sign they'll never learn to talk. Have you heard about CIs [cochlear implants]?
>
> #AbledsAREWeird
> (@jmhenner on X/Twitter, 16 March 2019)

In this example, the hashtag at the end of the tweet spells out the final evaluation the reader is invited to arrive at: abled people are weird in how they interact with people with disabilities.

While the examples we have focused on here (3–5), like those of *X/Also X*, involve criticisms towards certain type of people or even a specific person, a more innocent, poetic usage of similar dialogue patterns can also be found, as in example (6):

(6) people on Earth: :(
the night sky:

people on Earth: :)
(@poetastrologers on X/Twitter, 13 April 2019)

What this shares with previous examples is the use of *X:* structures to identify the fictive conversationalists, and also the function of this fictive dialogue to construe viewpoints. But no words are used in the 'quoted' parts of (6), with the viewpoint reversal from starting point to endpoint being depicted merely by means of sad and smiling faces, in the old typographical style of smileys. The interlocutor of the maximally generic *people on Earth* is entirely fictive indeed, in that *the night sky* cannot speak; what is depicted as emanating from it is not any utterance, but the beauty of the stars showing up in it, represented by a mixture of basic typographical means and some starry emoji. The overall meaning we derive from the tweet is that contemplating a beautiful starry sky can lift people's moods. That may be a somewhat banal and timeless bromide, perhaps, but the highly condensed, 'modern' way in which it gets expressed in (6) puts a new sheen on an old and nevertheless valuable idea. Without using any *say* verbs, and without even any actual 'speakers', once again we find a piece of internet communication using the conversation frame to show us viewpoints, and changes in viewpoints.

8.4 *Repeat after Me* Memes: Combining a Range of Meme Types and Features

To round off this chapter, we would like to discuss the case of the so-called *Repeat after Me* meme, since it brings together a number of themes explored across a series of chapters: it involves a grid (Chapter 5), it often features the *me* pronoun used in the ways explored in Chapter 6, and it involves Discourse Spaces (Chapters 7–8). In addition, the image which defines the meme is a constant across its iterations, making it a complex kind of IM (Chapter 3), and some examples involve forms of labelling as well (Chapter 4).

The meme uses a four by two vertical grid, aligning stills of two interacting characters from the popular sitcom *Friends*, Phoebe and Joey, from an episode entitled 'The One Where Joey Speaks French' (see the 'Phoebe teaching Joey' page on the *Know Your Meme* website). The left column features four stills of Phoebe facing the viewer (with a partial back view of Joey); the right column reverses the perspective, showing Joey facing the viewer against a partial back view of Phoebe. The first three pictures in each column are in fact the same, but the final picture changes the embodiment for each character, suggesting a breakthrough moment. Indeed, in the original scene, Phoebe is trying to break down the French phrase *je m'appelle* in a way that allows slow learner Joey to repeat the separate bits (*je / m'a . . . / . . . ppelle*). At the end of the sequence, reflected in the bottom pictures of each column, Phoebe encourages Joey to conjoin the separate bits and produce them fluently – hence the expectant facial expression (featuring an encouraging smile) – and Joey produces, with mistaken confidence and satisfaction (reflected in the 'look at me bossing this' face and confident palm-up hand gestures), completely the wrong phrase (*me pooh pooh*). Note that the IM does not contain subtitles showing what was originally said (unlike some of our examples in this chapter); the meme is fully 'exploitable' in terms of text.

The overall meaning of the meme generally involves a humorous evaluation of a failed attempt to make someone understand something – where that someone draws the wrong conclusion altogether in spite of the explicit coaching given. One example, which we summarize schematically in Table 8.1, applies this to the frame of people seeking medical information online (sometimes referred to as Doctor Google). There is a top line of text that reads 'I think I have stage 15 brain cancer', followed by the grid meme where the left-hand column is headed as 'Me:', with text as in Table 8.1, while the right-hand column is labelled up by superimposing the recognizable four-colour, round-shaped Google Chrome browser logo onto Joey's face, with text as in Table 8.1.

As was discussed in Chapter 6, the role of *me* is to indicate that, while the person depicted in the meme (Phoebe) is not the MM, the stance represented is theirs. The *I* line which follows then represents this stance by depicting the type

Table 8.1 *Text of a* Repeat after Me *grid meme*

I think I have stage 15 brain cancer	
Me:	[Google Chrome logo]
I just have a simple headache I just have a simple headache	You just have a simple headache You have ten different types of cancer

of thing the MM says to him- or herself when they feel unwell (*I just have a simple headache*). The visual labelling applied to Joey, viz. the icon representing the Google Chrome browser, opens up the frame of searching for information on the internet. Joey/Doctor Google starts by faithfully echoing Phoebe/MM's stance (hence the shift in pronoun to *you*: *you just have a simple headache*; cf. Vandelanotte 2010). True to the breakdown in understanding which characterizes this meme, however, the final panel reaches exactly the wrong conclusion: *You have ten different types of cancer*. This in turn echoes the stance expressed above the grid, which reads *I think I have stage 15 brain cancer* – an impossible situation to begin with (as only four stages are normally recognized), but also a stance that represents the state of mind of extreme hypochondriacs who, at the slightest discomfort or physical worry, immediately expect the worst. In the hands of such people especially, using vague symptoms to look up on the internet what might be wrong with them can easily lead to frightening results. Overall, then, we can read the meme as an amused or amusing way of heeding against relying on internet users' self-diagnosis, without the help of an actual medical expert. The epistemic stance presented at the top of the artefact (*I think I have stage 15 brain cancer*) could be viewed as an exaggerated conclusion drawn from the online medical search, prompted for by the interactive pattern presented across the grid.

The specific exchange type of asking someone to 'repeat after them' in order to assemble a correct pronunciation can thus be fictively applied to a situation of trying to lead people to the right conclusion, but producing an incorrect conclusion instead. A typical example circulated during the COVID-19 pandemic counterposed *stay in your house* with *picnic in the park*. At the same time, the origins of the meme in explicit attention to language – teaching Joey French – lend themselves well to more metalinguistic usage, of the kind we discussed in our section on scalar grids in Chapter 5 (with examples including *Tuxedo Winnie the Pooh* and *Clown Make-up*). One example in our collection spells out *syn . . . o . . . nym → synonym* on the left-hand side, only to feature the failed attempt *syn . . . o . . . nym → cinnamon*, producing a humorous take on a plausible mispronunciation of the English word *synonym*. Another example

Table 8.2 Me/My Brain *grid*

me	my brain
brb	be right back
idk	I don't know
wtf	what the fuck
lol	lol

headlined a series of internet abbreviations and their full meaning by means of *me* and *my brain* headers, where the clue is that *lol* was understood by Meme Maker's brain simply as *lol*, not as *laugh out loud* (Table 8.2). This captures a reality where many people find it possible to use *lol* in speech (aided by its containing a vowel), whereas *brb*, *idk*, and *wtf* are not pronounceable syllables, and rather than laboriously spelling these out letter by letter, if used in speech at all they'd be expanded into the full phrases.

* * *

As this chapter has shown, and as previous chapters have prefigured, forms of dialogue and quotation are exceedingly common across a broad range of meme types and examples.[1] In their specific meme usage, they do not need the proper deictic grounding we expect in other contexts of use, nor do they need to live up to any expectations of authenticity, even when quotation marks are used. Instead, it is their ability to quickly call up and structure attitudes and viewpoints that often proves irresistible to MMs, and so it is not a surprise to see them combine with various other meme patterns, like IMs, labelling and grids. These combinations fully exploit the different memetic conventions available – each one meaning something specific and yet combining with other conventions when more stance needs to be expressed. In its own way, memetic quotation in its various guises illustrates the formal variety and versatility involved in memetic meaning-making. The next chapter homes in on the question of form, and experimentation with form, in memes.

[1] In Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2025), we argue that in a broad category of meme usage, interactions are simulated – using apparently 'conversational' forms but also extending the existing repertoire with unique forms – in order to construe emotional and evaluative stance.

9 Memetic Form and Memetic Meaning

In the preceding chapters we have described the most common aspects of memetic form, such as the components of the meme (text and image) and their organization, the use of specific grammatical forms such as pronouns, and sentence structure or discourse choices (questions, conditionals, truncated statements, etc.). The overview has shown, among other things, the importance of memetic form, not only as a guide to meaning, but as a self-sustained and flexible constructional formula. One aspect of memetic expression that we want to look at more closely is how Meme Makers (MMs) tacitly rely on understanding memetic form and meaning as two components of the meme as a constructional artefact, and how the form and the meaning can be subject to creative restructuring or re-combination. To explore these aspects of creative uses of memes we will consider examples of meme blends, the use of recursion and similar formal operations, to end with a discussion of memes which remain constructional, while relying entirely on the aesthetic exploitation of form – yielding a form of expression which we would (perhaps hesitantly) call 'memetic art' (cf. Wiggins 2019: Ch. 8).

9.1 Meme Blends and Meta-Memetic Forms

We have described memes as constructions. The core of our argument was that memes relying on a stable format (such as ODNS, GGG, SNOE, DBM, etc.) have basic constructional meaning written into the format itself, while every subsequent use of the meme with new content builds a specific instance of the meme's underlying meaning. In other words, new memes of a given type are new instances of the category of situations that the basic meaning defines. This further explains the various ways in which any given meme is subject to redesign or to being combined with another meme. Such operations on memes are possible because the basic categorial meaning is a recognizable and useful element of the new use.

For example, an ODNS meme defines the category of 'things so difficult as to be almost impossible', and relies on the original ground of the meme, 'walking into Mordor', a crucial element of the plot of *The Lord of the Rings*, and definitely a dramatically difficult thing to do. While the meme has since

prompted countless new instances, 'walking into Mordor' has remained as the metonymically salient token of an impossibly difficult plan. As a result, the idea has been incorporated into a number of redesigned memes and artefacts, all of which blend the frame-metonymic evocation of 'walking into Mordor' into another meme or slogan.

One such example is a blend combining the *Keep Calm and Carry On* slogan/poster (Figure 9.1), used by the UK government in 1939 to raise the citizens' morale in the face of expected war hardships. The meme created combines the two texts – *Keep Calm and Simply Walk into Mordor* – but does not in fact propose anything new. It simply adjusts the framing of both artefacts (the meme and the poster) to jointly, and of course jocularly, propose a contemporary version of the war slogan.

We find it interesting to see how naturally the constructional meaning of one artefact is blended with another. But we would also like to comment on the aspects of Figure 9.1 which are not directly a result of blending. The background of the artefact is (we think) meant to resemble the country of Mordor, as described in *The Lord of the Rings*, though, with some good will, we could imagine it to be a depiction of a war-ravaged landscape, thus referring to the context of the *Keep Calm* slogan. And finally, the circle reproduces the inscription on the ring, the focus of the quest in Tolkien's novel. What is interesting about this artefact (and many of this type, where 'simply walking into Mordor' is presented in some way) is that it uses a re-phrasing of the crucial line of the meme while tacitly confirming the role of the idea of simply walking into Mordor as a metonymic stand-in for any member of a category of things which seem impossible to do.

Figure 9.1 A blend of ODNS meme and a *Keep Calm* slogan.

The effect of the blend in Figure 9.1 is similar, but not identical to the whole line of merchandise (bags, T-shirts) using the line about walking into Mordor as a way to brag about one's invincibility. Announcing a line such as *I simply walk into Mordor* refers back to the meme, but also suggests that the TT part of the meme (*One does not simply*) does not apply to the person wearing the T-shirt or the bag – they do not consider any task hard enough not to be able to perform it. Again, this bragging message builds on the meme in interesting ways – rather than look for another tough job to make a meme about (as many people would), this person uses the meaning of the meme to announce their ability to overcome any difficulty. Both of the artefacts described build their meaning on the basis of the constructional meaning of the ODNS meme.

Such phenomena rely on several aspects of meaning, represented in the meme and in the off-shoot artefacts. First of all, memes can become inputs to blends. The observation may seem obvious, but in fact it informs our understanding of a meme as a form of expression with stable meaning, with recognizable linguistic and multimodal form, and with a strong frame-metonymic relationship between the original use of the formula and the subsequent rise of a meme as a category with more clearly defined general meaning. The expression *One does not simply walk into Mordor* was the initial text of the meme (even if it is not an accurate quote from the novel and relies on the movie version) and became well-known as a kind of central member of the emerging category of things that are very hard to do. A number of memes were formulated by replacing *walk into Mordor* with other tasks (*win an argument with a woman, get an A in this class, understand a meme*, etc.). But walking into Mordor remained the primary and immediately recognizable, frame-metonymic, case, and so it is natural that this particular task is used in artefacts building on the ODNS meme as a stand-in for the meme's overall meaning without its entire form being accurately represented.

From the language perspective alone, the blend in *Keep Calm and Simply Walk into Mordor* is interesting in that the form of one construction (*Keep calm and carry on*), with two clauses in the imperative form connected by *and*, invites a clause from another construction. There were in fact many versions of *Keep calm and carry on* that filled the second clause with a different pleasant activity appropriate in the context of remaining calm (*Keep calm and eat chocolate, and drink wine, and read a book*, etc.), so extending the worn-out slogan was already done, but in the case of *and simply walk into Mordor*, processing the poster requires familiarity with the form and meaning of the meme, and jocularly suggests that the ultimate 'hard-to-do-thing' can be performed if one remains calm.

Another example of a blend based on meaning combines two contemporary memes, both of which represent instances of changing one's preferences. One of them is the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme, which we have discussed at length

in Chapter 4. As we pointed out, the constructional meaning of DBM is about having or doing something one likes, but then suddenly becoming interested in having or doing something else. The enormous popularity of the DBM formula suggests that the idea of a shift in interests, even if only temporary, appeals to contemporary internet users very much. In fact, there is at least one more meme representing that meaning, the meme known as *Exit 12* (mentioned earlier in Section 4.3). As the example in Figure 9.2 shows, its basic form is a view from a car approaching an exit. The sign above the highway offers a choice between continuing straight on, and thus remaining on a straight and comfortable stretch of the road, or making a right turn. The view shows a car which was clearly going to continue straight on, but suddenly (and quite dangerously) turns for the exit. The meme is a labelling meme, and it comments on the tendency of the media to suddenly deviate from important news reporting to talk about another instance of Donald Trump saying something inappropriate. The *Exit 12* meme is indeed similar to DBM, while additionally showing the force and speed of abrupt shift of direction.

One of the examples in our collection in fact shows how a meme user who obviously noticed the similarity between the two memes, made a meme blend

Figure 9.2 An *Exit 12* meme.

by labelling the elements of *Exit 12* with faces of the Meme Characters (MCs) in DBM (the face of the man labelled onto the car; the girl in blue's face on the 'straight ahead part' of the road sign, and the girl in red's face on the 'Exit 12' part). It is a kind of meta-memetic form, noting first of all that the forms of the two memes in question are different, but the meanings are essentially the same. What is important from our perspective here is that the MM of the blended meme was quite naturally aware of the compositional nature of any meme, such that the form and the meaning can be considered independently of each other. Also, the MM apparently understood that the constructional meanings of DBM and *Exit 12* are very close, while their forms are strikingly different. In other words, this MM knew that a meme is not just an image with words superimposed on it, but that it is a form-meaning pair. Finally, the MM acknowledged that *Exit 12* is not about driving and DBM is not about boys and girls, but that both are about having or doing something you like and still feeling an impulse to try something else. To sum up, meme blends provide excellent material to consider how meme users tacitly recognize the constructional nature of memes.

Our final example here is a DBM meme which relies on another meta-memetic idea. The still from Charlie Chaplin's film *Pay Day* in Figure 9.3 is used as background to a meme demanding that the viewer notices the structural and interpretive similarity between the shot made in 1922 and the photo used as the Image Macro (IM) of the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme: a man, accompanied by a woman, turning around to look at another woman, who clearly appreciates being noticed. What is particularly interesting here is that the labelling applies the DBM constructional meaning to the meme itself, in a meta-comment on its contemporary popularity. In other words, the MM in

Figure 9.3 Film still as *Distracted Boyfriend* meme.

this case blends the two IM photos, on the basis of their form, to comment on the pervasiveness of the associated meaning.

The meme blends discussed here (and there are many of those in meme sphere) all rely on a very clear recognition of the tight relationship between the form and the meaning, but also on the recognition of the possibility of a meaning, such as the basic DBM meaning concerning 'old versus new interest', to be prompted by a different form. As we will show in subsequent sections, memetic form can be playfully used and reused, but as long as there is a recognizable constructional relationship between one form and another, the Meme Viewers (MVs) enjoy the meta-memetic approach to the resulting meanings.

The meta-memetic temperament is also clearly visible in jocular renditions of very popular memes which comment on the form as such – while tacitly acknowledging that entrenched Top Text (TT) may be so well-established that changing the form somewhat will go unnoticed. In one example of the ODNS meme we found, the MM switched the words around, so they say: *One not does simply.* The Bottom Text (BT) then comments: *Notice the words are switched*. Indeed we admit that we had not noticed the switch until we read the BT – another (albeit anecdotal) confirmation of the fact that constructionally determined textual aspects of memes are treated as invariable. In another meta-comment on ODNS, a MM uses the following BT: *Take this scene seriously anymore*. Again, the entrenchment of both TT and BT made the source scene from the movie totally reliant on its memetic rendition. We would add that the existence of a novel behind all this (where the ODNS phrase is not used at all) is a fact that meme buffs obliterate completely. For Tolkien fans, among whom one of us should definitely be counted, the erasure of the original text is a sad, if understandable, occurrence.

9.2 Variability of Form versus Stability of Meaning

As we could see throughout the book, entrenched IMs play into the meanings of memes in various ways. Some, like the GGG class of memes, build on the TT and BT profiling two causally connected events illustrating an element of the category of behaviours determined by the IM – being rude, nice, and so on. The associations that the IM carries in such cases are the result of the recognition of the represented MC as 'good' or 'scumbag'. In other words, the meaning of the memes produced with this template relies primarily on the recognition of the type of character in the IM, while the text adds another example, without affecting meaning in an important way. The image/text balance is quite similar in labelling memes relying on IMs (Non-Entrenched Image (NEI) memes are different in this respect). One such example is DBM, which relies on the IM to evoke the primary constructional meaning, while the labels apply it to a new

category member. Similar effects are also achieved in grids, which carry much of the entrenched kind of sequence – whether of events or exchanges in a conversation. These examples suggest that in IM memes the core of the meaning is in the IM (which assumes its easy identification and popularity), while the text builds another instance of the construction represented in the IM. In this section we focus on an example of a grid IM profiling a meaning so specific that the varying forms of labelling or incorporation into a meme format do not affect the interpretation too much. The example shows that the nature of the IM may be a crucial factor in the construction of meaning.

The meme we focus on here is known as *Drowning High Five* (DHF), first mentioned in Chapter 5. Its image comes from a comic by Russian artist Gudim, which he posted on Instagram, to see it become extremely popular. It represents a grid, telling a rather emotional story of a person drowning (see Figure 5.10). Another person extends their hand, as if to help, but only gives the drowning person a high five (an expression of encouragement or celebration), leaving them to drown. The meaning of the story is quite clear: people appear to show willingness to help those in need, but then reduce their help to a useless gesture. The grid grew into a well-known meme, instantiating a range of situations, via a range of templates.

Initially, the meme attracted attention as a *when*-meme, with TT saying *When your ex drowning*. This was an example of the usual sarcastic internet humour. But subsequent uses took a different direction, and the meme gained much of its popularity as a depiction of unaddressed mental health problems. The emergence of mental health meanings fits the story in the grid very well, because the situation described relies on a number of very common metaphorical concepts (cf. Dancygier & Sweetser 2014, Semino 2010b). *Drowning* is easily understood metaphorically, building on the source domain of an embodied state where a person cannot remain on the surface of the water and thus is in danger of remaining submerged and dying. *Giving someone a hand* is another metaphorical concept, referring to offering help. There are also the connotations of not being able to *stay afloat*, of *sinking under*, and so on. The cartoon is making the meaning quite striking by relying primarily on the metonymy of the *hand*, as well as on a number of embodied concepts of lack of control over one's body, disappearing from the surface, etc.

Most expressions depicting bodily states can be used metaphorically to represent mental or emotional states (MIND IS A BODY metaphors) – this is also the case with the DHF cartoon grid, which gets naturally interpreted as referring to serious personal problems, such as issues of mental health. In fact, most of the DHF memes we have seen, also documented on *Know Your Meme*, are about depression and similar issues. The most common form of building a more specific story is labelling, with descriptions, lines of Direct Speech, or both. In one example, the upper-left cell is labelled *Me drowning from my ever*

growing depression and anxiety, and then the lower-left (the High Five one) is labelled with a quotation: *'You have such good life compared to some, just be happy!'* The whole grid is also captioned in the space underneath, with a line *That's not how depression works*. Another example is labelled as follows: upper-left *Me: 'I need mental health support'*, upper-right *Doctor/MH professional*, lower-left is again a quote *'Hang in there'*, and lower-right just says *Me*. In our final examples the grid is not labelled, and it is now a matter of the image completing a *when*-meme TT: *when you abandon a friend in trouble, it feels like you have left them to drown*, or *when your friend makes a sad post and you don't know what to say, so you just 'like' it instead*.

These examples illustrate well that the relationship between form and meaning in memes can be driven by the IM, when it tells a story, especially one that is emotionally compelling. The disappointment and sense of abandonment evoked by the story are naturally felt and easily transferred to various domains of life. What is interesting, though, is that the actual form of labelling is not likely to matter as much and can vary, with the image and its metaphoric potential still driving the primary interpretation. The DHF memes thus form a category of instances where a person seems to be offering support but actually refuses to help. The powerful IM, whether understood literally or metaphorically, contributes most of the meaning, while the textual choices are quite open, and may feel superfluous. This also seems to be the case in the example where the MM added a line underneath the image, *This is not how depression works*, besides having labelled the cells in the grid. We assume that the intended meaning is something like *You can't help someone suffering from depression by pointing out the good sides of their life*, but it is also clear to us that the meme is overstated – the labelling alone, or the BT alone would have done the job. The story in the image and its metaphoric potential are doing enough.

To conclude, the DHF memes support the idea that the nature of the IM may be the driving force of the interpretation, and in such cases practically all forms of labelling or framing with TT will work well, while often being superfluous. In the final section of this chapter we will return to the discussion of how memetic components prompt meaning.

9.3 Recursion, or Memeception

Another instance of interesting formal variety is so-called memeception. The name of the form comes from the title of Christopher Nolan's movie *Inception*, which is a very complex example of mental space embeddings (see e.g. Lugea 2013), as characters plant an idea in a person's brain. The available definitions of memeception are very loose, but mention 'meme-within-a-meme', 'nested memes', 'meme about a meme', and so on. From a linguistic point of view, memeception can simply be seen as recursion – and if such a parallel can be

drawn, then memetic constructions appear to be even more similar to linguistic ones than we suspected.

One good example is the recursive pattern of the *Drake* meme. Drake is a well-known rapper, using vivid facial expressions and body postures. As we could see throughout the book, NEIs and IMs are selected as clear carriers of meaning, often via embodied action or behaviour. The most common *Drake* meme is a grid, such that the upper-left image suggests rejection of the idea or situation described in the upper-right cell (in one such example, the idea rejected is cheating on your girlfriend); then the lower-left image is an image of calm and the contented acceptance of the idea in the lower-right cell – in the same example, cheating on your diet, assumed to be a pleasurable even if not very useful behaviour.

In the recursive example in Figure 9.4, the right-hand cells, meant to describe situations one judges as good or bad, contain the repetition of the two memetic images of *Drake*. The embedding is then repeated again and again. There is no

Figure 9.4 The *Drake* grid meme as a recursive pattern.

clear meaning suggested, but the playful treatment of the memetic form itself again shows how MMs are very much aware of the rules according to which individual memes are constructed. In other words, memeception, even if not an intellectually enriching use of memes, is a kind of language game, similar to the nursery rhyme *This Is The House that Jack Built*, relying entirely on the repeated pattern of recursive relative clauses. Other examples we've seen, for instance in exchanges on the Reddit platform, are built cooperatively over a series of messages in which different MMs join in and complicate an evolving meme further by adding in characters, text and other formal aspects from other meme series, packing multiple memes and meme references into dazzlingly complex artefacts.

While memes are of course multimodal artefacts, we have argued throughout this book that they lend themselves to a linguistic (especially constructional) analysis. Memeception gives a strong confirmation to the idea that memes can behave like language forms, including processes such as recursion, which some have claimed as a crucial and unique property of language (e.g. Hauser et al. 2002).

9.4 Antimemes

Much of our discussion throughout has been focused on memetic constructional phenomena, and especially the relationship between meaning and form. Memetic constructions are form-meaning pairs, additionally carrying humorous meanings. An interesting additional form of memetic humour is that known as 'antimemes'. These examples rely on various meme formats and ostensibly follow the patterns, but they adjust the content in ways that take away the humour, or simply destroy the point of the meme. Our example in Figure 9.5, *When you're taking a shower*, starts out as a typical *when*-meme, but rather than provide an image which represents the experience of the shower figuratively, it uses an image combining the photo of the shower and a man who looks wet. Effectively, the meme says: *When you are taking a shower, there is water coming from the showerhead and you get wet*. The experience of the shower is thus not represented from any new angle and there is no comparison of experiences. In other words, while the form of the meme is standard, the meaning is not appropriate to the meme, while the standard humorous sense is absent and replaced with meta-humour.

Our next example is an anti-memetic form of the DBM. The form, as in the preceding example, is fully standard (the same IM and the labelling), but what the labels describe is what the image represents: two girls and a boy. Instead of using a standard meme font, however, the example uses a handwritten label text, with non-joined up letters quite widely spaced out, giving a somewhat naïve impression. To distinguish the two 'girl' labels, the one accompanying

Figure 9.5 *Man under the Shower when*-antimeme.

the presumed girlfriend (the girl in blue), on the right, is expanded by including a simplified emoticon version :O of the shocked face emoji 😳. This example does not even reach the meaning suggested by the image about being attracted to a new experience – it simply labels the components of the photograph. The meaning of the meme is thus lost, but in countering MVs' expectations as regards some clever, original application of the meme, it can nevertheless be experienced as amusing in its defiance of this expectation. The basic handwriting-like script used seems to underscore the dry, absurd sense of humour on the part of the MM.

Another antimeme we found rephrases the *bae come over* meme we saw in Chapter 6 (Figure 6.8). The meme typically includes four 'lines':

> 'Bae come over'
> 'Can't, getting my brakes fixed'
> 'My parents aren't home'
> [Image of a car lodged in the window of a small building]

While the meme's original humour is in the exaggerated representation of the lengths to which young people would go to spend some (unsupervised) time together, the antimeme in Figure 9.6 follows the pattern only in the first two lines – invitation and turning down the invitation in order to study for an exam. The third line, instead of giving another reason for the invitation to be accepted

Figure 9.6 *Bae Come Over* antimeme.

after all, acknowledges the reason for not coming over, and the fourth line is a picture of a young man dutifully engaged in studying for an exam. This change destroys the original meaning of the meme – about the desire to spend time with one's girlfriend overriding any other options. As in the cases above, the form of the meme is standard, but the meaning has been changed, becoming funny insofar as MVs recognize and appreciate its deliberate refusal to be conventionally funny. At least one older meme type, known as *Anti-Joke Chicken*, discussed in Zenner & Geeraerts (2018: 176–8), has been a kind of antimeme right from the start: its IM is the head of a chicken; its TT a typical joke setup (such as *Yo momma so fat*); and its BT a deliberate non-joke (e.g. *she has to wear large clothes*). Even this example, though, deviates from an expectation that a joke set-up is followed by a joke, and more generally, from a constructional expectation of IM memes that BT provides the 'point'. More generally, from the constructional perspective, antimemes seem to be incongruous in ways similar to failed linguistic constructions, such as *John baked Mary a cake that wasn't meant for her* or *Michael Jordan threw the basketball into the hoop by mistake* (Goldberg 1995, 2019; Lee 2001).

Antimemes are thus constructions which rely on a pre-existing memetic form, but fill the meaningful slots in a way that deliberately does not yield the expected effect.

Most of the examples in this chapter so far manipulate some aspects of memetic form to create a new effect. There are several types of formal alterations

we have seen: meme blends may extract one central phrase to use it in other contexts (e.g. *simply walk into Mordor*), or use aspects of the IM in another meme (consider DBM MC faces inserted into *Exit 12* memes), other memes may vary form without affecting the meaning, or re-insert the meme into its own structure to create a nested form, and so on. These manipulations demonstrate how salient memetic meaning is, and how easily it can be used to frame-metonymically carry a memetic concept into an altered form.

But antimemes are different. They do not change the meme's format or its components, they do not manipulate texts or labels, and they do not build links across different memes. However, they change the meaning, and we argue that the change depends on a shift in the meme's viewpoint structure. We will demonstrate the point by giving a detailed viewpoint analysis of the *Bae Come Over* meme.

In its typical form, the meme is structured as a conversation between a boy and a girl. The girl asks the boy to come over and spend time together in a pleasurable way, and the assumption is that the boy should be keen on coming. In the second line, the boy gives a reason for not being able to come – such as the malfunctioning car. The viewpoint set up in this way is that both MCs want the same thing, but there is an obstacle. In the third line, the girl reinforces the invitation by suggesting that there would be no one to supervise or watch the date (presumably making the boy jump into the car and drive regardless), while the final image shows the scary result of driving fast and with malfunctioning brakes. The resulting Discourse Viewpoint could be summarized as 'Boys would risk anything to see their girlfriend with no adult supervision.' Obviously, the scary image of the car inside the window of a building is an exaggeration, but that is also a part of the joke. The viewpoint of the meme is having a laugh at young people's ability to risk anything to get together when adults are not there.

The humour of the meme builds primarily on the shift from ordinary conversation about 'coming over' to the suggested crazy drive ending in a spectacular accident – all because one MC changes their mind abruptly, based on new information. In fact, it is interesting to see how many popular memes represent inconsistent behaviours such as 'changing your mind' or 'not being able to keep your promises/resolutions'. For example, there are several types of *Just One More* memes, which not surprisingly show the MC go through 'many more'. In one such meme a man promises at 11pm to stop watching YouTube videos and go to sleep in five minutes, and then is shown still watching Alex Jones at 3am. Not surprisingly, this one has also yielded an antimeme where the image shows the man sound asleep at 11:05pm.

Now, what the antimemes do in these cases is change the viewpoint structure to turn the event represented into an example of unemotional behaviour or simply into an uninteresting, ordinary event. Instead of prompting a Discourse

Viewpoint Space that reinforces the general point of *bae come over* memes, that boys will stop at nothing to get to see a girl alone, the antimeme keeps the 'reasonable behaviour' as the only viewpoint space. Similarly, in the *Just One More YouTube Video* memes, the meme pokes fun at people unable to stop wasting their time and not getting enough sleep as a result, while the antimeme shows them acting reasonably – but losing the humorous edge in the process. The shift of viewpoint that constitutes the 'core' of memetic discourse disappears from antimemes, and makes them funny only as a way to point out that without the shift of viewpoint and the resulting humour memes would be generally pointless.

As a final note, antimemes are not the only category of memes that alter the meaning of a meme, while maintaining it as a recognizable unit. *Know Your Meme* also distinguishes a related class called reverse memes – where the standard meaning is reversed, while the form is maintained. One simple example uses the image of Grumpy Cat and fills the TT and BT with positive messages. In a typical Grumpy Cat meme we might see TT such as *'Good Morning'?* followed by BT such as *No such thing*. In a reverse meme, the Grumpy Cat would say in TT *I had fun once*, and then add in BT *It wasn't too bad*. The humour in reverse memes thus depends on the assumption that the MV is used to seeing certain kinds of meanings in a meme (such as Grumpy Cat being grumpy) and will find it amusing to see the reversal of that expectation (such as Grumpy Cat being pleased). In this sense, antimemes and reverse memes are very similar (if not in fact the same), as both require familiarity with the meme (its form and meaning), and both set up an additional, higher discourse space where the standard meaning is altered, for a humorous effect to be seen in the Discourse Viewpoint Space.

9.5 Memetic Form for Form's Sake

Throughout the chapter we have been looking at memes which use pre-existing popular memes in ways which alter the form, the meaning, or both. We have also shown that these alterations rely on a number of operations resembling those that have been first discussed with language forms in mind, such as blending, framing and frame-metonymy, metaphor, recursion, viewpoint shift, and so on. In this section, though, we show how the multimodal nature of memes has changed the perception of their visual aspects and the importance of their form. In agreement with the spirit of memetic expression the focus on form is not an intellectual endeavour, but aesthetics and playful recognition of the role images play is definitely a large part of the interaction with memetic discourse. We focus here on the discussion of *Loss*, a very common meme relying on a minimalist approach to memetic form.

The *Loss* meme has its specific form but has no recognizable meaning. The idea of the *Loss* meme is not that the template can be used to make an unlimited number of memes of a certain type, as was the case with all our examples so far, but that making a new *Loss* meme relies on seeing or creating a visual arrangement which requires some effort to be put together. Because *Loss* memes do not need to use text, everything of importance relies on a clever, but non-obtrusive selection and arrangement of visual information. *Loss* is a very well-known and lasting meme, partly because of its unusual structure and the active involvement of both the MM (the person who puts four images together in a required way) and the MV (the person who should recognize the pattern even in the most awkward context). This sense of uncertainty about 'getting' it has been reflected in other memes, such as the *Is This a Loss meme?* version of *Is This a Pigeon?* meme, in which a clueless character is asking the *Is this X?* question, often revealing his ignorance.

The *Loss* meme derives from a grid extracted from a webcomic known as CTRL+ALT+DEL, by Tim Buckley. The four-cell grid depicts a sad situation, where a young woman has had a miscarriage. The cells show four subsequent stages of an event, and the meme schematizes the positions of story participants in each cell:

Upper-left / the husband enters the hospital / one upright figure; **upper-right** / the husband (standing) speaks to the receptionist (sitting down) / two vertical figures, one longer, one shorter; **lower-left** / the husband talks to the doctor / two upright figures; **lower-right** / the husband stands while his wife lies in bed (one upright figure, one horizontal figure).

According to meme lore, the webcomic was heavily criticized, because of its form, its content and its general appeal. The criticism went through various stages, until what emerged was a wave of artefacts mimicking the webcomic in various ways. Finally, the webcomic was reduced to a visual pattern suggested by the locations and body postures, and to some extent the dominant colour of the outfits worn, of the webcomic characters, as in Figure 9.7. For this and the remaining examples in this chapter, we particularly invite readers to pull up the 'Resources' section of the website [www.cambridge.org/languageofmemes] so as to see the images in colour and with finer detail.

This pattern became the *Loss* meme – every subsequent use of it is a composition of a four-cell grid, where visual elements are shown in an arrangement mimicking at least to a 'sufficient' degree the minimalist grid seen in Figure 9.7. The point of the meme is thus not to fill a ready-made template with new images and/or text, but to find four connected images in which the pattern can be recognized. The novelty of every new instantiation of the *Loss* meme and the interpretive effort sometimes required to see the pattern is likely what made *Loss* so popular (misleadingly, this is still the name of the meme). The examples below illustrate the variety of ways in which the *Loss*

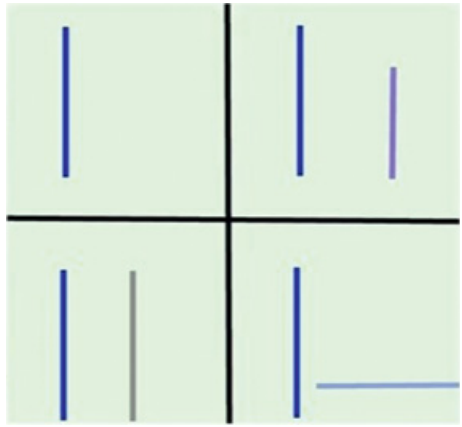


Figure 9.7 The *Loss* meme grid template.

meme has been approached, ranging from screenshots from an Indiana Jones movie, through rabbit ears (Figure 9.8) and numerals, to on-screen indicators of incomplete processes of charging, loading, and so on. There is no specific meaning, but the satisfaction emerging from composing *Loss* memes and recognizing images as *Loss* memes is what constitutes the point of the meme.

Some meme fans have also tried to use other memes in a *Loss* pattern, as in the *Drake* example in Figure 9.9, where the right-hand side cells are verbal depictions of the essential features of the right-hand images in the original webcomic, while the bottom-left image of *Drake* was duplicated to make sure that there are two vertical figures represented.

What is truly exciting about the *Loss* meme is the degree of ingenuity, taste, and aesthetic passion that it inspires – at some point it becomes difficult to distinguish where the memetic expression stops and the artistic one begins. One of our favourite *Loss* memes combines photographs, each with very different colour, style, and theme, where the *Loss* lines are recognizable only if one considers fine lines on a painted or concrete wall, clouds in the sky, and boats on the water (Figure 9.10).

It appears that the visual appeal of memes and the ways in which meme fans involve minimalist aesthetics is becoming a significant element of meme culture. Let us consider one more example of how a few stills from an anime become subject to aesthetic transformation, which then becomes a memetic form on its own.

Before we come to our next illustration, in Figure 9.11, we need to explain the meme that precedes it: the *Sorry, That Was a Strange Thing to Ask* meme, also known as *Erwin*, which arranges three panels vertically. As the *Know Your*

Figure 9.8 An example of a *Loss* meme.

Meme website explains, it comes from an anime series called *Attack on Titan*, where a character Erwin, the man in the top panel, asks a question (that is the 'exploitable' part of the template). The character he addresses, Eren, finds the question to be unexpected (and so, in the middle panel, says *Huh?*); in the bottom panel Erwin closes his eyes and says *Sorry, that was a strange thing to ask.* This looks like a rather unremarkable meme, except that it also appeared in a minimalist version, which does not carry any of the visual style of the manga, and in which the two characters are represented by coloured geometrical figures – Erwin is a green rectangle, Eren is a red triangle (Figure 9.11). The relative positions and sizes of the figures also mimic the positions of the characters on the screen. In the context, the question Erwin asks, about how far the abstraction can be taken, is truly a question about the future of memes and about the nature of memetic discourse.

Figure 9.9 *Drake* meme formatted as a *Loss* meme.

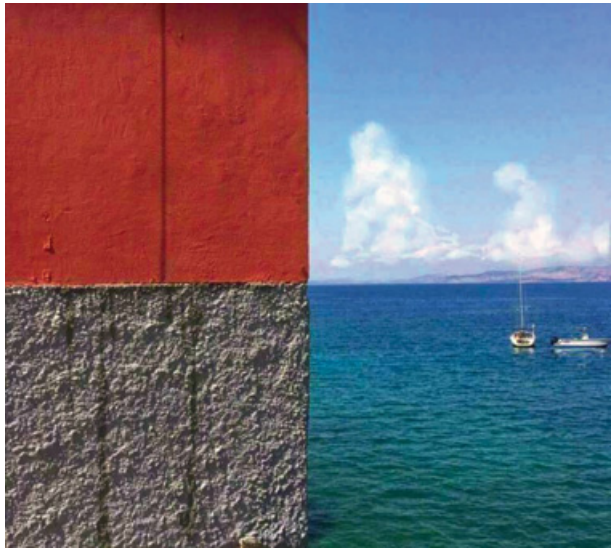


Figure 9.10 A minimalist aesthetics *Loss* meme.

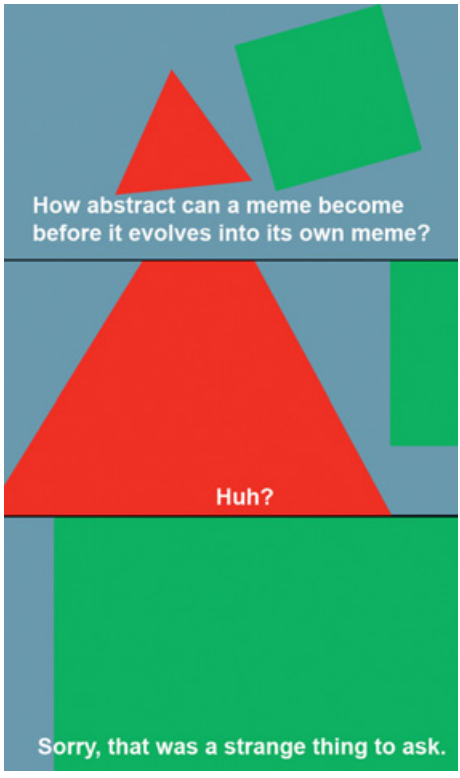


Figure 9.11 A minimalist abstract version of *Erwin* meme.

As the meme (posted by u/okabe0903 in r/Animemes on Reddit, 10 April 2018) in Figure 9.12 further suggests, the playfulness of memetic form can yield truly interesting usage. It is a grid, combining two now familiar abstractions – the *Loss* meme in the upper-right cell and the *Erwin* meme in the lower-right cell, but it additionally fills the left-side cells with an extremely minimalist representation of *Drake* – an orange square (appropriately, since he wears a bright orange jacket in the memes) whose position and size in the space abstractly reflect the location of the main dismissal/appraisal gestures in the original. What we see here, then, is a minimalist *Drake* meme, with *Drake* not approving of the minimalist *Loss* meme while approving of the minimalist *Erwin* meme. Importantly, none of this could be determined if the MV is not familiar with all three memes and the types of minimalist transformations that have taken place to make this possible.

The aesthetics of the whole idea is becoming an important part of the enjoyment of memes. On Reddit, where the minimalist meme appeared, we

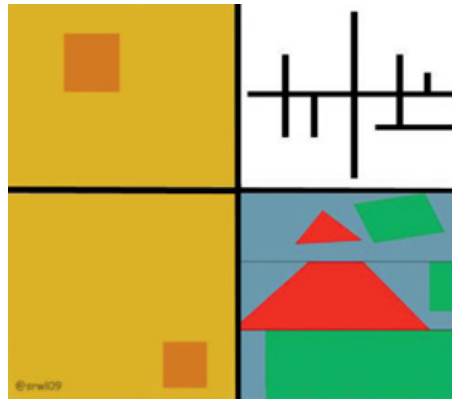


Figure 9.12 A minimalist blend of *Drake*, *Erwin*, and *Loss* memes.

found very interesting comments on the creation. First, Reddit User 1 says: *Mhh the Erwin doesn't look so good. That corner still looks good in colour, but the abstract meme would need to be more distilled and smaller, so it doesn't look like it got crunched into that space*. Then, Reddit User 2 answers: *Huh?* Finally, User 1 responds: *Sorry, it was a strange comment to make*.

The level of meta-humour here is becoming sophisticated. First, the minimalist version of *Loss* started the whole idea of composing rather than filling in slots in every subsequent *Loss* meme. Then the *Erwin* meme got its own minimalist version, then they were both blended into a *Drake* meme reformatted as a minimalist formula, and then the Reddit fans are commenting on the aesthetics by using the template conversation from the *Erwin* meme – a comment, a puzzled *huh?* from another person, and then an adjusted *Erwin* style response – in effect, these Reddit users are co-creating another instance of the *Erwin* meme by commenting on how the *Erwin* meme got used in a *Drake* meme alongside a *Loss* meme. The creativity of the whole process is remarkable. It makes us wonder whether memes really are what some people think they are – mindless and endless reproductions of simple and uninteresting templates. If there is one thing we have learned in the process of writing this book, it is that memes have an enormous creative potential and that the simplicity of form is not necessarily matched by simplicity of potential meaning. In fact, the simplicity of form is the reason why new and sometimes complex meanings are constructed so effortlessly and effectively. We expect memes to keep on surprising us.

10 Memetic Discourse on Social Media Platforms

The main focus of our project in this book has been on studying how meaning emerges in internet memes as multimodal and viewpoint-driven artefacts, focusing on the role played by constructional features, figuration, frames and blending. So far in this book, we've mostly considered these questions independently from the particular social media platform where the memes we're studying emerged and spread; this could form a whole separate study in its own right. In this chapter, we choose to complement our analysis with some brief explorations that do relate to broader questions of social media discourse.

We start the chapter by considering, across a number of sections, some online discourse patterns that are more specific to particular platforms. The memes discussed in previous chapters are typically 'platform neutral', in the sense that they are self-contained digital objects which can be shared, as a single object, anywhere online: on Reddit, Tumblr, Facebook, X/Twitter, Threads, Instagram, and so on, as well as in private communications via email or messaging services like WhatsApp or Telegram. Here we want to consider some more specific types of memes and online discourse patterns, made possible by specific affordances of a particular platform. Our focus will be on X/Twitter, as a hugely influential microblogging platform where the use of emoji allows 'minimalist' forms of visual information to be included with text, without the need for adding pictures as in Image Macro (IM) memes. We will also consider some examples from the popular short-form video sharing platform TikTok (Section 10.7), as involving a more 'maximalist' type of image-text multimodality which incorporates movement and sound.

The final section of the chapter (10.8) provides some glimpses of the kinds of exchanges internet memes are used in. Most of our analysis up to this point has centred on the meaning emergence, in the minds of meme 'consumers', of a single, finished product – the internet meme. To complement this focus, here we consider some of the many ways in which meme discourse often is not presented in a single online discourse move, but in fact emerges out of a negotiation and can thus be co-constructed by multiple discourse participants. This discussion also taps into the sense in which online communicators share

a repertoire of memetic knowledge, which they can very quickly call up metonymically, without necessarily having to produce the full forms.

10.1 Quick and Dirty Memeing: Platform Text and Image

The most typical form of internet memes – an image-text combination contained within a single image file – is ripe for sharing on any platform. Sometimes, rather than a self-contained image-text artefact being shared, a screenshot of a social media post (on X/Twitter, for instance) becomes the item shared around; a lot of the *Me/Also Me* examples discussed in previous chapters (Chapters 6 and 8) appear to circulate in this way.

Conversely, some meme types can easily be created without having to integrate the text and image in any real sense: by using the platform's possibilities for posting text (like a tweet or a Facebook update) and simply appending a ('pure', text free) picture, it is very easy to recreate the effect of *when*-memes in particular, which only rely on Top Text (TT) (i.e. the *when*-clause). Even labelling memes (Chapter 4) can be made this way, so long as a list of textual labels in the platform text (tweet, status update, etc.) can easily be mapped onto a sequential left-to-right ordering of objects (including people) in the accompanying picture. This provides a 'quick and dirty' way of creating labelling memes on the hoof, in response to a viral picture for instance, which on account of its recency hasn't made it into any meme generating websites (and may never, if – as so often – the viral moment quickly passes). An example that hit X/Twitter in November 2021 concerns a red-carpet picture at a première of the film *House of Gucci*, showing three main actors in outfits ranging from the more original or even outrageous to the more serious and professional. Multiple X/Twitter users took to tweeting out this picture accompanied by a list of three words or phrases, effectively labelling the three differently styled actors as, for instance, *poster presentation*, *oral presentation*, *keynote speech*; *Urban Outfitters sales assistant*, *store manager*, *CEO*; or meta-memetically, *this meme two days ago*, *this meme yesterday*, *this meme today*.

The same strategy can be used for a sequence of pictures (if up to four pictures are included in a single tweet), or indeed a composite image (as was the case in Figure 10.1), rather than a single picture with different objects. The example in Figure 10.1 (posted by @BantshireUni on X/Twitter, 24 April 2022) shows a composite image of four pictures of President Macron, running for re-election in the spring of 2022; in different arrangements and forms (separately or compositely), these pictures were enthusiastically 'labelled' in tweet texts around this time. The pictures show Emmanuel Macron in a formal outfit, unshaven in a hoodie, smiling with multiple shirt buttons undone revealing his chest, and in a pose of deep concentration with eyes closed and head resting against his crossed hands. These different poses and appearances are marked up

Figure 10.1 *Macron/Manuscript* grid.

with text in Figure 10.1 as *starting manuscript*, *hitting the deadline*, *manuscript submitted*, *reviewers' comments* in order to jocularly reflect how researchers typically experience the different stages of writing up a piece of research to a deadline – full of beans at first; exhausted at deadline time; briefly relaxed after submission; and finally down in the dumps on reading the reviewers' comments and requests for modifications. Very similar 'low effort' X/Twitter memes circulated in late 2023, based on a set of four pictures of actor Daniel Craig similarly displaying various styles of dress and stages of fatigue.

The combination of four pictures with a corresponding number of phrases given in the accompanying text could be interpreted, in terms of meme types

previously discussed, in two ways. One would be as a kind of *implicit* labelling – the pictures themselves are not labelled, but the different units of text appearing above them are understood to apply to the pictures in sequence, allowing images taken from one domain to be interpreted as depicting experiences from a different, unrelated domain. Apart from the different image-text integration, on this reading an important difference with more standard labelling meme forms (Chapter 4) is that it is not different components within a single scene that are being labelled, but different pictures altogether. Alternatively, this type of example could be seen as a highly condensed sequence of *when*-memes. Re-reading the case of Figure 10.1, for instance, we could expand the phrases provided into the following *when*-clauses: *when you're starting the manuscript / when you're hitting the deadline / when the manuscript is submitted / when you read the reviewers' comments*. Each condensed phrase in Figure 10.1 is then understood to be completed by the corresponding picture, showing what people *feel like* when they are at the writing stage described. What this creative vagueness between two readings suggests to us is that memetic ways of thinking travel quite comfortably across platforms, without necessarily needing to conform fully or clearly to previously established forms. Regardless of the interpretation chosen, Meme Viewers (MVs) need to make an extra inferential step to link the comma-separated words or phrases to the images, which increases their processing effort somewhat, but this is counterbalanced by the quicker and easier mode of production on the part of the Meme Maker (MM). Communicative need trumps full conformity or finesse.

A different platform-specific way of construing a meme relies on the use of emoji (studied among others by Evans 2017, Seargeant 2019, Zappavigna & Logi 2024) that are part of the built-in character set: these can provide a very minimal kind of visual on which memetic labelling can be based. It is to this that we turn in the next section.

10.2 Emoji in X/Twitter Labelling Memes

An example of an established labelling meme that has a direct X/Twitter counterpart is the *Handshake* meme, where two, or sometimes more, arms and hands are engaged in a firm handshake. The non-Twitter version appears to exist mainly in two flavours, 'epic' (with a painted representation of very muscled arms engaged in the handshake), and 'business' (using a picture of a more business-like handshake). The meme allows three positions for labels: two on the hands, labelling disparate groups or phenomena, and one on the handshake, cleverly identifying an unexpected, often humorous feature they share or agree on. The pattern is very well-established and is one of the clearest labelling constructions, alongside the *Distracted Boyfriend* and *Is This*

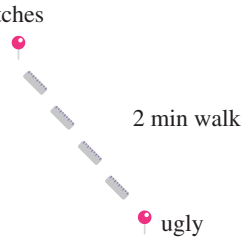
a Pigeon? memes. The availability of a handshake emoji makes it a very easy meme to transfer to X/Twitter in a more basic, pared down form in examples like (1):

(1) ukrainians 🤝 taiwanese

being accused of "manufacturing consent" for a "new cold war" bc [because] we don't want our countries to be invaded by a neighbouring superpower (@aurorachaang on X/Twitter, 15 February 2022)

More interestingly, new labelling memes can also emerge in ways specific to X/Twitter, independently of any pre-existing picture-based memes, using the limited resources of emoji and keyboard strokes (line dashes and vertical bars) to constitute a basic image to be labelled textually. This appears to be the case for the examples in (2) and (3). The case of (2) – it could be called the *Distance* meme – combines a quotative, here *be like* but in other (first person) examples simply using quotation marks, with a basic visual imitation of two points on a map (indicated by pushpins) and the distance between them (indicated by ruler emoji, and the text *2 min walk*). The example and others like it were posted by many different users over several months in 2019. Despite the positive evaluation expressed in the fictive quotation (*I'm far from ugly*), the short distance between the fictive speaker (*bitches*) to the destination that was supposed to be very distant (*ugly*) is nevertheless quickly covered (*2 min walk*). The basic opposition between desired situation or positive evaluation, and the reality falling short of the intended norm, is shared with the very pervasive discourse pattern opposing *Me* and *Also Me*, or *X* and *Also X* if not in the first person (see Chapters 6 and 8).

(2) bitches be like I am far from ugly:

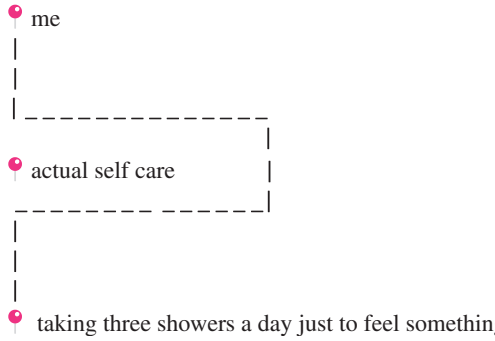


(@TDotPTZ on X/Twitter, 13 September 2019)

The *Detour* meme exemplified in (3) does not include a fictive quote, but uses the *Me* pronoun (discussed in Chapter 6) as a starting point of a route, including an apparent detour, on a map. By combining pushpins, dashes and pipes (vertical bars), and by labelling the three pushpins, here again with very minimal means the effect of a labelling meme is successfully achieved. The

person or people identified at the first pushpin (in example (3), *me*) do not take the predictable, obvious route to the desired destination (here, *actual self care*), but instead make a bizarre detour to an altogether less valid or sane destination (here, *taking three showers a day just to feel something*). To some degree, it could be suggested that the meaning achieved in this meme is not dissimilar to that of the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme discussed in Chapter 4, in which the distracted boyfriend fails to properly appreciate the obviously good option (his actual girlfriend) in order to focus attention on a momentarily more attractive seeming, fleeting alternative possibility (the passing girl).

(3)



(@imskytrash on X/Twitter, 13 January 2019)

Both examples (2) and (3) take an ironic, somewhat whimsical view of perceived personal shortcomings as measured against some ideal or norm (*Distance* meme) or in trying to achieve some desirable goal (*Detour* meme). Although visually much simpler and more schematic, in their essential features these examples can be seen as extensions of labelling memes. The frames evoked are much more skeletal than in the more typical cases of actual pictures, full of detail, that we discussed in Chapter 4. Even so, pushpins and routes indicated from one point to another are sufficient to call up the frame of map reading and route planning needed to interpret the visual, and apply it to the topics discussed. As with the examples in the previous section, these kinds of examples suggest that memetic ways of thinking about experiences carry through into other forms – 'simpler' in the sense of not needing to use actual pictures, but nevertheless newly 'creative' in adding new form-meaning combinations to the existing repertoires (like *Me/Also Me*, DBM, *Exit 12*, etc.).

10.3 Textual and Visual Formulae on X/Twitter

Other memes that are specific to platforms like X/Twitter use visual components in a less 'grammatical', schematic way than the *Distance* or *Detour*

examples discussed in the previous section. Instead, using a combination of brackets and lines or of emoji, they directly depict shapes like a rabbit holding up a sign, a house, a cup of tea or a circle of candles, and then text typed inside these shapes. Thus, the rabbit's sign expresses the tweeter's viewpoint (e.g. *Abolish the CIA*); the house is accompanied by text stating the tweeter's belief starting *in this house we believe in* (see Figure 10.2 below); the steaming cup of tea presents today's *tea*, by which is meant today's 'take' or opinion (e.g. *People who don't smoke deserve fresh air breaks*); and the circle of candles is used to summon something desirable to the tweeter (e.g. *a railway from Strabane to Derry*). The latter two examples may or may not be accompanied by a phrase like *today's tea* and *summoning circle, hope this works*.

The *house* example in Figure 10.2 (posted by@IlhanMN on X/Twitter, 9 November 2019) achieves special resonance because it plays on the meaning of 'house': while the format can be used by anyone, when it is used by a US representative, 'house' adds the potential meaning of *House of Representatives* to the meme-conventional, formulaic use to embellish the expression of a viewpoint. In addition, that the viewpoint being supported in this example pertains precisely to the policy area of housing (specifically, endorsing 'housing for all') further stresses a kind of 'de-automatization' of the memetic idiom (Brône 2008). Instead of just interpreting the idiom as a standard way to introduce a favoured viewpoint, the literal, compositional meaning of the

Figure 10.2 *In this House* X/Twitter formula.

idiom (both textually, *in this house*, and visually, in the depiction of a house) is brought to the fore again.

These various examples (sign-holding rabbit, house, tea, summoning circle of candles) in the end are visually more appealing ways of expressing support for some position or policy, compared to presenting it merely textually. The role of the visual components is less schematic or 'grammatical' compared to the distance or pushpin examples discussed in the previous section, but a degree of conventionalization in both form and meaning is clearly involved, the shapes and possibly accompanying phrases immediately calling up the relevant frame of opinion- or desire-expressing. The image component arguably functions as an attention-getter; often supporting a formulaic phrase that may be literally mentioned or else implied (*in this house, summoning circle*, *hope this helps*, *today's tea*), but not necessarily (as with the sign-holding rabbit, which has no phrase accompanying it). They qualify as memes given the regularity of the forms combined with the predictable meaning prompted for (broadly, the tweeter's opinion or desire), but they rely comparatively little on frame evocation or blending.

10.4 Depicting and Responding to Attitudes in Fictive Interactions on X/Twitter

From clearly definable memetic patterns, this and the next section broaden the scope to include some exchange patterns on X/Twitter that include a very strong fictive component – and to which, in our initial examples in this section, emoji offer a significant meaning contribution.

The tweet in (4) below repeats the use of the *Me* Verb-*ing* pattern introduced in Section 6.4.1 to present the *me* as talking about two different topics. Different from typical *Me/Also Me* examples, here the meaning is not centred around 'inconsistent' behaviour (failing to follow through on an initial stated intention), but on a gentler kind of contrast. In (4), the communicator jokingly captures the different experiences of talking about a serious topic (*my dissertation*), and talking about a popular culture topic she has strong views on (in this instance, a viral video of Professor Robert Kelly being interviewed on the BBC when his children and his wife burst in behind him). To achieve this, the two lines of text are each combined with a line of characters which visually recreate a schematic version of audio controls: a play button and a slider accompanied by an indication of the total duration of the (faux) audio clip. No actual audio clip is included, and so no specific talk is depicted, making these two pretend audio excerpts examples of a type of fictive interaction similar to examples where placeholders like *Blah blah blah* are used (Clark & Gerrig 1990: 780). The crucial clue in terms of overall meaning of this piece of discourse is in the one point of difference between the two fictive sets of audio controls: the

duration in the second case is very significantly longer. While only using text and some of the very basic imagery afforded by emoji and lines, this example does successfully call on the further modality of sound merely through visual evocation. Our frame knowledge about audio applications on our electronic devices combines with our familiarity with the *me* (fictive) speaker pattern to prompt a coherent discourse interpretation of a deceptively 'simple' visual-textual artefact.

(4) me talking about my dissertation

▶ ○ ——— 00:17

me talking about why the BBC Dad video is neither "pure" nor "heartwarming"

▶ ○ ——— 11:27:03

(@sophie_e_hill on X/Twitter, 29 December 2019)

For comparison, the tweet in (5) does not need to invoke two contrasting experiences to make its point – though versions contrasting two parts with different numbers of comments, retweets, and likes do exist, ultimately to make the same point: stupid views attract more attention than carefully thought out views. The visual component is very minimal, and tightly bound to the specific platform, using emoji to evoke the main modes of interacting with viewpoints on X/Twitter, namely commenting (the speech bubbles with a count of 200), retweeting (the returning arrow with an 8,000 count), and simply liking (the heart emoji, indicating 25,300 likes). The overall Discourse Viewpoint here is that a *factually incorrect reactionary sentiment articulated in vaguely progressive language* is the type of tweet that produces very high levels of engagement. The language used here is an example of a broader phenomenon, used in some comedy sketches too,[1] whereby any specific statement is abstracted into a fictive, schematic, ironic description of the general type of statement or attitude being targeted; we discussed a similar (but purely textual) case in which the *X/Also X* pattern was used to characterize (hyper)partisanship on X/Twitter in Section 8.3 (example (2)).

(5) Factually incorrect reactionary sentiment articulated in vaguely progressive language

💬200 🔁 8,000 ❤️25.3k

(@JoePostingg on X/Twitter, 26 March 2022)

[1] Internet comedians Larry and Paul used this technique to great effect, for instance in the parodies of UK Government COVID-19 briefings ('emotionless greeting', 'three part slogan', etc.). See examples on their YouTube channel, www.youtube.com/c/larryandpaul.

One of the most elaborate uses we've collected of a fictive interaction being combined with the depictive power of emoji in X/Twitter discourse is that given in Figure 10.3 (posted by @eberlmat on X/Twitter, 8 October 2019); see the 'Resources' tab on the website [www.cambridge.org/languageofmemes] for a clearer colour version of the image. It was posted in October 2019, a few months after Boris Johnson took over from Theresa May as UK Prime Minister, and wrangles about the eventual Brexit deal (or a possible 'no deal' scenario) continued. The tweet adopts the dialogue or interview format, reproducing at some length various conversational moves between the alternating

Figure 10.3 Emoji: Brexit wrangles between UK and EU.

interlocutors, the UK (identified by the Union Jack emoji) and the EU (represented by the EU flag).

This interaction is fictive in more ways than one – the EU or the UK aren't actual speakers, and even if they were, people don't speak in emoji. Very extensive and involved discussions at both technical and diplomatic levels are condensed here into extremely concise depictions. The UK government's attitude remains consistent (or indeed intransigent) throughout, and is stereotyped in terms of the unicorn, cake slice and four-leaf clover emoji, frame-metonymically evoking the charges that the UK believes in unicorns (impossible, unachievable goals), wants to 'have its cake and eat it' (echoing a statement by Boris Johnson that his policy on cake is pro having it and pro eating it), and thinks it will just get lucky in negotiations. The EU's position is shown as evolving over time over the course of negotiations. First, there is a lengthy technical response, and here the tweet cleverly summarizes visually a more detailed chart produced by the EU Commission back in late 2017, detailing which kinds of relationship models are available to the UK post-Brexit depending on how many of four main 'red lines' it wanted to maintain, going from a close relationship outside of the EU as represented by Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein, all the way to a 'no deal' Brexit and trade regulated only by the World Trade Organization.[2] The most striking detail in the way in which the emoji version in Figure 10.3 abstracts away from the original's level of detail is in its representation of the 'no deal' scenario by means of the 'pile of poo' emoji. The next responses boil the EU's response down to the clock emoji (referencing Chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier's repeated reminder that 'the clock [was] ticking'), and finally to the facepalm emoji, suggesting the EU's despair at what it saw as the lack of movement and serious engagement on the part of the UK. While the tweet is rich in content and visually very appealing, it does not, as such, use any text, and apparently not a lot of editorializing. Of course, the choice to represent 'no deal' as a pile of poo, and to present the UK's stance at every turn as unchanged, merely counting on luck and on chasing impossible goals, reveals the overall Discourse Viewpoint adopted by the X/Twitter user: the UK is unprepared and unreasonable, while the EU is prepared and has time and reason on its side. Using minimal means, the tweet conveys quite a complex message and a strong viewpoint, at least to the viewer/reader sufficiently clued in to understand the references to the surrounding political discourse.

The examples we've seen thus far in this section relate to, but also deviate to various degrees from, the *Me/Also Me* and related memes introduced in Chapter 6, and expanded on in Chapter 8. They present more idiosyncratic 'riffs', one might say, on the same underlying memetic ideas. If an example like

[2] The original slide presented by Michel Barnier to the Heads of State and Government at the European Council on 15 December 2017 can be found on the European Commission website.

me talking (4) still plays on contrasting attitudes, for instance, it does not have the formal and semantic consistency of *Me/Also Me* (which serves to point up and ironize a Meme Maker's failure to do as intended). Examples like (5) and Figure 10.3 still fit into the overall play on the conversation frame, but beyond this it is difficult to identify a strong form-meaning pairing that we find replicated with consistent meaning attached. What we suggest instead is that this broader range of usage begins to show how clearly identifiable meme templates can influence discourse usages in more diffuse ways, in a sense 'memeticizing' some discourse genres more generally.

We now turn to examples that include pictures in fictive interactions. Our first example shows how an image can prompt specifically for fictive speech act memetic discourse. The image we discuss here shows a COVID-19 self-test, in wide circulation by the end of 2021 in many places, but one in which the second line (indicating a positive test (T) result and so the presence of an infection), is added in pencil (the image shows the pencil 'in use', adding in the fake second line). The pattern associated with this is one in which people in their tweets added a line of text, typically enclosed in quotation marks (as in examples 6–7 below), and shared this line of text alongside the picture; the text identified a type of invitation or request which the fictive speaker did not want to accept or accede to. A positive self-test for COVID-19 thus provided an easy way out of a chore or an unwelcome invitation. The image responds to the text visually, as a token metonymically representing a verbal response such as 'I can't, I have COVID-19'.

(6) 'Can you set the table please' (@Stephenlough95 on X/Twitter, 24 December 2021)

(7) 'Do you want go stratford for boxing day sales?' [*sic*] (@Mikechrs961 on X/Twitter, 26 December 2021)

At the time, COVID-19 self-tests were highly salient in countries like the UK (where examples 6–7 are taken from), whether in case of specific symptoms, as a regular routine, or in preparation for a social gathering. The picture on its own already constitutes a visual joke, in not taking the testing procedure seriously by pencilling in the all-important second line; complementing it with fictive requests or invitations offered online discourse participants opportunities to ridicule or vent about minor daily frustrations or dislikes. In this way, an important part of the Discourse Viewpoint expressed in these examples is one of negative emotional stance vis-à-vis the targeted requests and invitations: an intense dislike of helping out with household chores like setting the table, or of going down to Stratford for the Boxing Day sales.

We note that this example is perhaps peculiar, in the sense that the image used in this pattern does not depict potential conversationalists – there's just the

inanimate object of a self-test being tampered with a pencil. Many other examples circulate where online communicators think up fictive speech acts to accompany a picture showing at least one (potential) speaker, or even a clear interaction. During the Rishi Sunak premiership in the UK, for instance, various widely re-used pictures showing Sunak and others were used in the UK twittersphere to imagine things he might have said, so as to reveal the tweeter's criticism of new twists and turns in the policies proposed by the Prime Minister's party, or simply to express ridicule, as in these examples:

(8) 'You received £30 from your daughter for your birthday, so we've cancelled your pension & deported your carer' (accompanied by a picture of Sunak addressing an old-age pensioner on a bus) (@TheHarryHaz on X/Twitter, 4 December 2023)

(9) 'I'm sorry to tell you that Santa won't be coming this year as Mrs Claus doesn't meet the minimum earning threshold for a partner of a migrant worker' (accompanied by a picture of Sunak sat around a small table with school children in a classroom) (@DachshundColin on X/Twitter, 4 December 2023)

(10) Margaret. Are you available to help? (accompanied by a picture of Sunak and three aides bending down to look at a pothole; the reference is to the late former PM Margaret Thatcher) (@DachshundColin on X/Twitter, 13 November 2023)

Even 'apolitical' pictures can be used for political commentary in this way: a still from the 1951 film *Scrooge!* showing lead actor Alastair Sim leaning out of a window is a popular case in point in UK X/Twitter discourse. In the film, based on Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge addresses a passing boy and asks him to go and order the large turkey he'd seen in a shop window nearby; in the meme version often reused, the opening phrase *You boy* forms part of the pattern, but the question asked fictively to the invisible addressee (/MV) typically echoes a political talking point of the day. In the example in (11), for instance, reference is made to then UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman's description of rough sleeping as a 'lifestyle choice', contrasting this crude characterization with a more sensible one:

(11) 'You boy! Are you sleeping in a tent because of a lifestyle choice or because of broader systemic failings that led to you having no home and being forced to sleep rough?' (@RufusTSuperfly on X/Twitter, 4 November 2023)

Conversely, pictures showing someone from the world of politics can be marked up with a fictive quote to make a non-political point: one example we collected, for instance, adds the quote and hashtag in (12) to the famous picture of US Senator Bernie Sanders, on a lone chair, with a surgical face mask, wearing a thick winter coat and mittens, arms crossed and looking unmoved, at the inauguration of Joe Biden as 46th US President in January 2021:

(12) 'This could have been an email'. #BernieSanders (@lamangayidova on X/Twitter, 20 January 2021)

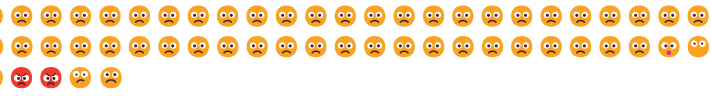
Echoing an oft-shared frustration about time-consuming or otherwise inconvenient meetings that could simply have been handled over email, the combination of the fictive speech and the viral picture provides a comical and recognizable reinforcement of this frustration. We will explore the use of the *Sanders in Mittens* image more fully in our concluding Chapter 12.

In their combination of pictures of people with fictive quotes invented to match them, examples such as those in (8–12) can be viewed as a quick and easy microblogging counterpart of the kinds of dialogue memes (with lines of discourse incorporated into paintings or stills from films or series, sometimes as subtitles) discussed in Chapter 8. The examples we found suggest they are perhaps more restricted to specific discourse communities (such as 'UK/US politics X/Twitter') and unlikely to break through into global memetic patterns. But at the same time, they again suggest that memetic ways of thinking influence the forms of discourse even where the threshold for full or (potentially) global meme status is not met.

10.5 Embodied Emotions and Attitudes Expressed by Emoji

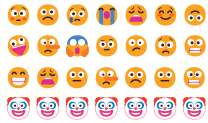
To continue and complete our discussion of emoji used in X/Twitter discourse, we should briefly mention the broader online discourse usage of face emoji which embody emotions (happy, sad, angry) or other experiences (sleepy, sick, etc.). This need not be in strictly patterned, recognizably 'memetic' ways, as illustrated in the striking exchange reproduced in (13–14) below. Here we see a tweet sent by then Chairman of the UK Conservative Party (James Cleverly) in (13), and a direct response to his tweet by Labour MP Angela Rayner in (14). The context is the summer of 2019, a day after Boris Johnson had taken over as Prime Minister from Theresa May. Citing a ban on taking photos in the House of Commons (the chamber of elected representatives in the UK Parliament), Cleverly uses rows of mostly 'sad face', and a few 'angry face' and 'astonished face' emoji as an *artist's impression* of the embodied emotional responses on the opposition benches. In her response, Rayner uses a wide array of emoji to suggest the backbench Conservative MPs running through a whole gamut of emotions and attitudes (shame, crying, sadness, lying, madness, etc.), and depicts the front bench of senior ministers as a series of clowns not to be taken seriously. In both examples, an introductory line of text is followed by a depiction, with the effect of portraying the other side in an unflattering light:

(13) I'm not allowed to take photos in the chamber, but here is an artist's impression of the Labour benches.



(@JamesCleverly on X/Twitter, 25 July 2019)

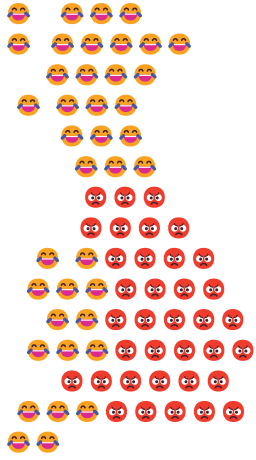
(14) Allow me to do the other side



(@AngelaRayner on X/Twitter, 25 July 2019)

Face emoji, like those used in this exchange, are simple yet very effective in how they can instantly call up a range of attitudes and emotions. Of course, they are small and very schematic representations compared to actual human faces, which are often more nuanced and difficult to read. Nevertheless, the emoji use in (13–14) arguably comes closest to a 'pure' depiction of a number of human emotions and expressions in character form. A similar example is (15), posted following a draw in the Scotland v England game in the European football championship in June 2021. The draw was considered a particularly bad result for England at this stage in the competition. The tweet blends the geographical outline of the UK with the people inhabiting the different regions of the UK, represented in condensed form by means of however many people fit into the corresponding areas. England is shown as frustrated and angry (😡), while people in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and even Cornwall find the situation hilarious (😂). While not exactly modelled on the frame of a conversation, the example still comes close to fictive *interaction* more broadly conceived, as a number of cry-laughing faces and angry-frustrated faces fictively embody the overall emotional response to the sporting event across different regions within the country.

(15)



(@MULLET_FAN_NEO on X/Twitter, 19 June 2021)

An interesting use of emoji in dialogue format is that which follows quotative *be like*, often to call out inconsistent behaviours in ways similar to the *X/Also X* pattern discussed previously (in Chapter 8). In the example in (16), the fictive interaction is structured into two clusters, one showing schools not caring about important forms of discrimination (hence the 'shrug' emoji), the other showing schools enforcing petty rules about behaviour and dress code (hence the 'anger' emoji when students chew gums, wear hats, or wear shoulder-revealing shirts).[3] The Discourse Viewpoint emerging out of the juxtaposition of these two clusters is one that calls out hypocrisy in the policies enacted by schools, prioritizing the wrong things.

(16) schools be like:
bullying: 🤷‍♀️
racism: 🤷‍♀️
homophobia: 🤷‍♀️

chewing gum: 😡
wearing hats: 😡
shirts that show your shoulders: 😡
(@ambermariexoo [dead account] on X/Twitter, 12 September 2019)

Example (16) of course recalls our discussion of *Be Like* memes in Chapter 7, pointing up behaviour on the part of the plural entity identified in the subject NP as stereotypical and misguided. In one sense it exemplifies a counterpart on X/Twitter of the meme construction described in more detail there – but one in which the visual component is much more basic than in the picture-based meme. At the same time, it is interesting to note, once again, the potential for internally fairly complex depictions to follow the *be like* quotative phrase. In Chapter 7, we mentioned examples featuring a whole cartoon, and discussed an intricate example involving French politicians' views and responses to them (Figure 7.4). Here, six stances, stacked neatly into two opposing clusters, come within the scope of the quotative frame. This allows the author of the tweet both to highlight a general criticism (schools have their priorities all wrong), and to also single out and put on record their views on specific examples. Indeed, the tweet's author signals their disapproval of bullying, racism, and homophobia (by implying that schools are wrong to shrug at their occurrence), and their indifference to things such as chewing gum, wearing hats and shirts that show your shoulders (by implying that schools are wrong to act vigorously against these). In the next section, we move away from the focus on emoji, but continue to consider ways of 'stacking' stance (Dancygier 2012b) in a platform-specific way.

[3] For a range of other uses of *be like* on X/Twitter, see Wikström (2019).

10.6 Quote-Tweeting as a Stance-Stacking Practice

A pervasive discourse pattern worth highlighting in the context of a discussion of platform-specific affordances is the use of quote-tweeting – even if this is not in itself a meme, it often involves image-text combinations in ways which suggest a memetic mode of communicating, and sometimes gives rise to more clearly identifiable form-meaning patterns as well, as we will show. X/Twitter and similar microblogging sites revolve to a large degree around interactions that go beyond mere 'liking' and straightforward responding to a tweet: so-called quote-tweeting, in which the 'current' tweeter adds their own comment which is positioned above the embedded, quoted tweet, is central to engagement on the platforms which provide this functionality. At a basic level, this involves real, entirely literal (rather than fictive) quotation, as in fact the original tweeter's message is contained within the embedding, current tweeter's tweet. The format, however, allows the current, quoting tweeter to include clear as well as subtle expressions of stance, textual as well as visual. Consider the example in (17), in which one UK political journalist, Dominic Penna of *The Telegraph*, quote-tweets another, Jim Pickard of *The Financial Times*:

(17) The EU: 'Do not waste this time'
The House of Commons just before a long summer break:

> @PickardJE · Jul 25, 2019
> Jacob Rees-Mogg, new leader of the Commons, is discussing with John Bercow, the Speaker, whether the origins of the word 'archaic' derive from Ancient Greece or nineteenth-century France

(@DominicPenna on X/Twitter, 25 July 2019)

By adding in his own tweet text, the quoting tweeter (Penna) imposes a conversation structure in which the quoted tweet (given in the box in (17)) demonstrates the response of the UK side (specifically, the elected house of its Parliament, the House of Commons) to the EU's reminder that a further extension to an agreed on Brexit deadline should be used wisely (the quote in fact is of then President of the European Council Donald Tusk, in April 2019). The overall Discourse Viewpoint that emerges is that, despite receiving an admonition not to waste time, the UK Parliament is, in fact, doing just that.

Various other forms which the quoting tweet's text may take are reviewed in more detail in Vandelanotte (2020: Section 3); they include other uses of the conversation frame, deliberately sarcastic paraphrases of the quoted tweet, and ironic echoes, sometimes of considerable internal complexity. Prior to the inclusion of images (including GIFs and video clips) being

made possible in quoting tweets in the course of 2019, some interesting usage also reviewed in Vandelanotte (2020: Section 3) showed metonymic evocations of existing GIFs or sound effects, as in *this-is-fine.gif* (referring to a famous image of a dog sitting in a room surrounded by flames) or *Sad_trombone.wav* (referring to a sound file ('wav') of a descending trombone sound often used to indicate failure). This could even extend to fictive evocations, with no actual corresponding GIF, as in the example of *Karl Popper paradox of tolerance dot gif*.

What makes quote-tweeting so rich in stance meaning is the built-in slot it contains for the quoting tweeter's 'stance follow' (Du Bois 2007), allowing ample space for their positioning with respect to the quoted tweet. In this way, we can see quote-tweeting as a platform-specific stance stacking construction which, compared to ordinary Direct Speech constructions, offers far more space for the multimodal expression of stance. The corresponding structure in purely textual Direct Speech is, essentially, the reporting clause (*she said*, *he was like*), which in English does occasionally see adverbial modification of the verb, enabling the current speaker's stance to be marked (e.g. *he foolishly said*). The stance-marking in quote-tweeting can be much more extensive and varied compared to this basic grammatical option.

One specific, purely visual type of quote-tweet content is worth highlighting here, as it seems to be an emerging meme in its own right at the time of writing. The pattern consists in a picture of a famous person, altered to contain a partial speech bubble opening from the person's mouth downwards towards the quoted tweet; the bubble isn't closed to allow the illusion that it continues, and encapsulates the quoted tweet. In one such example, for instance, a person vents their frustration at badly run trains (and at Britain in general) by tweeting *I hate trains and I hate Britain*, and another user quote-tweets this with a picture of the Prime Minister of the day, Rishi Sunak, with added speech bubble (@p_crosland on X/Twitter, 4 November 2023). Part of the comic effect derives from Sunak's well-known avoidance of trains (often using helicopters to cover fairly short distances); another of course from the clash with the default assumption that he is duty bound to love, not hate, Britain. In a sense, this type of combination inverts the *Said No One Ever* meme discussed in Chapter 7: here, one user's tweet is recontextualized by another tweeter as the kind of thing the depicted person might say.

In the process, the quoted tweet can be very dramatically taken out of its original context, as is the case in the example in Figure 10.4 (posted by @stepheniscowboy on X/Twitter, 30 November 2023). Here, a tweet reading *9/11, not too bad*, in its original context, was a comment about how many players someone correctly predicted were going to be included in the selection for a football match (so 9/11 reads *9 out of 11*, not the date *9/11*). By quote-tweeting this out of context with the image as shown in Figure 10.4, the quoting

Figure 10.4 *Speech Bubble* meme: Osama bin Laden.

tweeter performs an extreme form of what to some extent speech and thought representation always involves – a fitting to a different, current context. Only that fitting is deliberately incongruent here, opting for a reading of *9/11* that is not just decontextualized but wrong, and thereby enabling a re-reading of the quoted tweet as Osama bin Laden's mildly appreciative appraisal (*not too bad*) of the outcome of the 9/11 terror attacks that shook the world.

The use of these *Speech Bubble* images allows their users to make a joke at the expense of the depicted person. In a superficial sense, the image might seem quite a literal visualization of what it means to 'quote a tweet' (as if adding a visually realized reporting clause like *Bin Laden said*), but the deliberate selection of an alternative, fictive speaker of the quoted material subverts the meaning to comic effect. The consistency of formal and semantic aspects of this pattern, repeated across a growing number of examples, suggest this particular variant of quote-tweeting has become a meme in its own right.

10.7 TikTok Variations on Familiar Themes

In this section, we briefly consider some TikTok variations on meme types and meaning construal mechanisms already touched on in examples of internet memes and X/Twitter discourse. If we have not used TikTok as one of our main data sources, this is because a large share of its popularity stems from short dance performances to popular music, or other types of entertaining performances and stunts, that are not immediately relevant to our interests. However, many creatives do move beyond the mere showing off of dancing moves to popular tunes (or lip-synching to conversational audio clips), and it is worth pointing out some parallels and interesting extensions compared to the more standard forms as we have tried to document and analyse them so far. There is,

for instance, a rich variety of TikTok versions of *when* and *Me/Also Me* memes, as exemplified in (18–19):

(18) When my doctor asks me if I've had more than 3–5 drinks this week
[*Performance*: TikToker lip-synching to a short extract from the song 'Double CC's' by City Girls saying 'Em . . . I'm a motherfuckin' (*sic*) City Girl']
(@googlyb3ar on TikTok, 28 September 2023)

(19) Me: nah I don't listen to Taylor Swift like that
Also me: [*Performance*: TikToker lip-synching and dancing to an extract from a Taylor Swift song]
(@pokemonmasterzo on TikTok, 10 August 2023)

In the example in (18), the performer is leaning against an examination table in a doctor's surgery; the on-screen text presents a *when*-clause, which is not completed by further on-screen text, but by the performance of a short piece of song lyric about being a *city girl*, implying that yes, more than three to five drinks have been had. Owning up to your drinking habits in a conversation with your GP in a sense feels like admitting to being a city girl which, as the lyrics to the song go on to explain, involves liking expensive things including Chanel bags. In the case of (19), we first see the performer lip-synching to the on-screen text *nah I don't listen to Taylor Swift like that* (accompanied by apologetic headshakes) while in the background a quieter part of the Taylor Swift song *Wildest Dreams* is playing. As the loud part of the refrain (starting *Say you'll remember me . . .*) comes on, the performer's head dramatically turns as he launches into a passionate lip-synching and dancing routine, which even includes two brief insets in the top corners of the screen, showing his face performing the backing vocals; the effective use of the sunlight at sunset moreover reinforces the song's lyrics (. . . *staring at the sunset*). We recognize the overall humorous effect from the examples of the *Me/Also Me* pattern discussed previously in Chapters 6 and 8, with the depiction following the *also me* part contradicting the *me* part.

In the two examples just discussed, we started from the on-screen text, which showed forms we can easily recognize from meme types discussed previously. A different approach is to start from an audio clip which comes to form the core of a popular TikTok meme. This could be considered a Sound Macro equivalent to the IM memes first discussed in Chapter 3. What we mean by Sound Macro memes is that a particular audio clip forms the constant formal backbone of a meme, similar to the role of the visual component in IM memes like the *One Does Not Simply* meme. In one example, a sound excerpt from a red-carpet interview with actress Julia Fox resurfaces in various re-uses. The quote responds to a question about her make-up, leading Fox to comment *I actually did it myself . . . yeah . . . (interviewer: nice!) yeah! . . . thank you . . .,* in a long drawn-out delivery with the two tokens of *yeah* in particular going up in pitch.

Apart from TikTok clips providing a straightforward imitation for comic effect, other clips take the original audio, show a different person lip-synching to the audio excerpt, and combine this with text. Consider these examples of the on-screen text being shown during the acted out performance of the audio recording:

(20) 'Who sabotaged your progress?'

(21) That time I went through his phone and ended up single.

Example (20) uses a fictive quote, to which the recorded portion then provides the answer (basically, I only have myself to blame). While this works in a very natural way in the memetic, TikTok context, it remains remarkable how a line of displayed (non-performed) text, shown simultaneously with the spoken text, is integrated by viewers as a question-answer pair, ultimately expressing a Discourse Viewpoint of self-ridicule. The meaning that emerges in (21) is essentially the same, but here the TikTok clip is a variant of the *when*-meme construction illustrated in (18) (with the phrase *that time* equivalent in meaning to *when*; cf. Lou 2017). Across these and similar examples, the sound recording is the formal ingredient that does not change, supported by a visual performance of the quote which varies according to the performer, but not in a way that effects any meaning changes. That is left to the on-screen text, which fills in different possible situations and experiences in which people may only have themselves to blame for negative outcomes of their actions or attitudes.

If this example illustrates a TikTok-specific, 'sound' extension to IM memes, some TikTok videos share some features with labelling memes – although just as the macro element in our previous example was aural not visual, here what is being labelled is similarly in the audio track, rather than in the visual scene presented. The example in Figure 10.5 is a simple iteration of this type of 'sound labelling' (posted by @jackieamoako on TikTok, 12 April 2022). The audio recording in this example (re-used in a large number of artefacts similar to Figure 10.5) is of a woman saying the line *It's just never been my thing . . . not into it, so . . . not approved by me*. The source of the audio quote is a video clip produced for fashion magazine *Harper's Bazaar* featuring American media personality Kim Kardashian who sits in judgement over a number of fashion trends, including (in this particular instance) bucket hats. The text labelling in the TikTok trend provides a random list of things TikTok performers dislike or are not approved by them. Across the different clips using this sound recording with text added to itemise dislikes, performers lip-synch to the text and perform hand gestures supporting the performance – including, for instance, shoulder shrugs, head shakes, disapproving gestures (like *stop* manual gestures, and *no no* finger gestures), or in some cases, some general pointing towards the on-screen text. The very short duration of these clips (around five seconds) makes

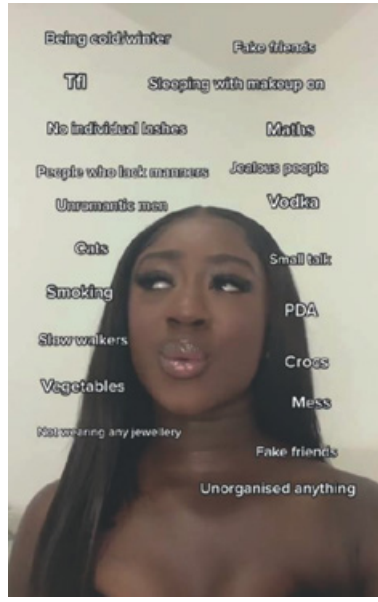


Figure 10.5 *Not Approved by Me*: labelling the audio of a TikTok clip.

it virtually impossible for viewers of the clip to actually read the various disliked items, but then enjoying the joke does not require viewers to exhaustively note each specific item.

There is a superficial, visual resemblance to the labelling memes discussed in Chapter 4, but importantly, it is not the different areas of the image that are being labelled. Rather, the labels are meant to apply to key passages in the audio excerpt (*not my thing, not into it, not approved by me*). What this lacks in figurative mappings compared to labelling memes, it perhaps makes up for in the ironic echoing effect of a 'fake' speaker lip-synching to a recorded quote.

A related example type is one which adds the specific video modality affordance of movement, but again uses labelling in a way that is different from straightforward labelling memes like *Distracted Boyfriend*. This example type labels the left and right hand spaces of the video by means of permanent textual labels at the top left and right of the video window. The music played is 'Yakko's World', a track from the 1990s cartoon series Animaniacs in which the character Yakko lists the countries of the world to the tune of the Mexican Hat dance. The TikTok performer jumps from the left to the right area (or vice versa) in order to indicate which sub-grouping the country named in the song

Figure 10.6 Left vs. Right: labelling the space in a TikTok clip.

belongs to. One example is shown, mid-jump, in Figure 10.6 (posted by @deeeyen on TikTok, 12 July 2020).

Part of the point made in the performance is that the list of countries where same sex marriage is illegal, is so long: this is clear implicitly due to the relatively long periods where the performer remains standing in the left-hand area, but it is also signalled in other embodied ways, by looks of boredom and even, in the second part of this particular example, by the performer starting to file his nails. The point is further underscored by briefly textually listing, in the relevant area of the image, those relatively few countries where same sex marriage is legal as they are mentioned in the song. Other examples used the same labelling-and-jumping format to separate countries where being gay is legal or illegal, or countries which had been 'invaded by the British' or not.

In this type of video, the movements in the recorded video space abstractly reflect elements in the referent space being talked about, in a way that shares something with the way in which in co-speech gesture and sign language, the gesture space in front of the body can be divided up in two areas abstractly reflecting two things being compared (e.g. Winston 1995). The overall Discourse Viewpoint that the performer associates with is easy to piece

together, from clues including the colour of the labels (green is positive), the embodied behaviour described above indicating frustration at all the countries on the wrong side of the divide, and the surrounding discourse, for instance the accompanying text posted above the video, *pride month might be over but we got work to do* ✌ and hashtags including #pridemonth2020 and #lgbtbrasil. Even if the content of the clip could be given a purely objective reading, stating facts, integration with visual and embodied elements and the discourse context make it clear that the performer wants to see all countries moved to the 'green' list of countries where same sex marriage is legal.

While our examples here have been necessarily selective, we hope they have given a flavour of the added forms and meaning dimensions that can come into play on the TikTok platform. Existing modes of memetic meaning-making become enriched and adapted to fit the video affordances of the technological environment – allowing essential patterns to work through in communications taking on different forms and addressed to different audiences. To round off this chapter, we consider aspects of the intersubjective awareness of memes and of shared or co-constructed meme discourse patterns in the next section.

10.8 Meme Awareness and Co-construction

In this section, we highlight a few of the ways in which memes are embedded in ongoing flows of social media discourse and engagement, in order to complement our predominant focus on the meme as (finished) artefact. A first example concerns a specific class of exchange-initiating memes. The simplest posting of a meme implies an expectation of at least some form of engagement (likes, responses, etc.), but some memes are more explicitly exchange-oriented than others. For instance, one version of the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme we collected shows empty slots for labels, and comes with the TT instruction *You know me pretty well. Make this meme specific to me*, inviting followers on the platform to share their analysis of perfectly good things the original poster tends to lose sight of (e.g. *saving money*) in favour of competing good things which happen to present themselves (e.g. *buying enamel pins*; examples from a post by @AnxiousBiQueen on X/Twitter, 18 April 2020). Similarly, various examples circulate of the *Political Compass* meme (discussed in Chapter 5) or of other grids, arranging different statements or characteristics on the grid, and showing (by means of ticks or highlights added using image editing software) which of these the poster sees as applying to themselves; the implicit (or explicit) invitation is for others to likewise analyse themselves by adding ticks or highlights on a copy of the original. Another common form of explicit invitation to participate consists in posting pictures accompanied by the message to *tag yourself*, often with an added self-identification (*I'm* . . .). In one such example, for instance, a picture of international maritime signal flags with

their associated meanings (e.g. *man overboard*, *keep clear of me*, *I require a tug*) is shared with an invitation to identify yourself in terms of one of the phrases you feel (or comically pretend) applies to you.

More spontaneous forms of co-construction of memes – sometimes accompanied by metadiscourse around the memeing process – can also be found. Often this takes the form of one X/Twitter user providing an actual meme artefact in response to a descriptive prompt provided by another. In one thread of tweets exchanged in late January 2022, the initiating tweet said *The exact moment the German health minister became legendary on philosophy Twitter*, and appended four stills from a speech by the German health minister Karl Lauterbach, addressing the German federal parliament (@tonyjballas on X/Twitter, 27 January 2022). The stills contained the subtitles given here in (22); they link a plea for COVID vaccination with a philosophical thought maintaining that *freedom is the recognition of necessity*. The gesture the minister makes with his right hand happens to closely resemble the gesture made by the character Boromir in the *One Does Not Simply* (ODNS) meme discussed in Chapter 3. Among the many replies to the initiating tweet is that given in (23), describing the idea of a *Boromir x Hegel x Pandemic crossover* meme, which in reply to (23) was provided by another X/Twitter user, who added the signature *one does not simply* phrase to the final of the four stills in the originating tweet, as shown in Figure 10.7 (@QSuber on X/Twitter, 27 January 2022).

(22) We regain freedom through vaccination. It is the virus that confines us. Hegel once said, and in this respect he is right: freedom is the recognition of necessity.

(23) I just know there's a 'One Does Not Simply' Boromir x Hegel x Pandemic crossover meme to be made here but I'm not smart enough to figure out what it is. (@__else__ on X/Twitter, 27 January 2022)

Figure 10.7 Co-constructed ODNS meme blend.

Across these consecutive discourse moves, then, we see a joint elaboration of the humorous potential of the initiating tweet, which focused on the specific enjoyment by an in-crowd of philosophers of a Hegelian reference in a policy speech. The response in (23) explicitly brings in the memetic potential of the visual presentation of the stills from the speech, which others in direct responses to the originating tweet had also responded to by adding canonical ODNS memes (with the Boromir image, and texts like *ODNS understand Hegel* or *ODNS regain freedom*). Finally, Figure 10.7 completes the comic extension into meme space by creating a suitable artefact.

The initial spark that led to a co-constructed meme artefact in the example just discussed was in the visual similarity of the manual gesture made by the health minister with that which meme users know from the ODNS meme. A different, perhaps more limited type of co-construction can sometimes be observed where a tweet describes, verbally, a meme response to some topic under discussion, and another X/Twitter user rushes in to provide the actual meme. Example (24) provides an example, in which the former head of the UK's Government Legal Department reflects on the incompatibility between different UK government objectives. One objective was to deport 'irregularly arrived' migrants who want to claim asylum in the UK to Rwanda. This clashes with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), participation in which is required by the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) which brought peace to Northern Ireland. Another tweeter obliges by providing a suitable version of the *Two Buttons* or *Daily Struggle* meme, given here in Figure 10.8, using the ECHR and GFA abbreviations just referenced (@D_R_Southall on X/Twitter, 15 June 2022). The typical Discourse Viewpoint in most examples of the two buttons meme is that the choice should be obvious, and the operator sweating over the choice between them in fact should have no difficulty making the right choice (the original comic presented a choice between *be a dick* and *don't be a dick*). Assuming that the meme provided by the helpful tweeter follows this general meaning pattern, presumably what is presented as the obvious choice here is to stay in ECHR (and not deport asylum seekers to Rwanda) rather than to blow up the GFA. A Bottom Text (BT) (not usually featured in the *Two Buttons* meme) was also supplied, referencing the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson's so-called 'cakeism', in which he tries to have his cake and eat it.

(24) I don't do 'memes' but this needs that one of the astronaut or whatever it is sweating over a choice of 2 buttons (@SirJJKC on X/Twitter, 15 June 2022)

Other than these kinds of examples where communicators cooperate to bring about a meme, there are more competitive kinds of 'memeing', similar to verbal duelling (Partington 2006: 171f), in which several participants in an online exchange vie with each other to come up with the cleverest or funniest

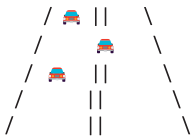
Figure 10.8 Co-constructed *Two Buttons* meme.

iteration of the initial artefact. When a gay version of the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme was posted to X/Twitter (having circulated on Reddit previously), showing a groom distracted from the bride he is posing with to look at a buff man passing behind them in the sea, the initial tweet's text said *Is . . . is this an improved version of the 'Distracted Boyfriend' meme* (@skylxrksays on X/Twitter, 1 October 2018). This was a comment on the existing labelling meme (discussed in Chapter 4), but did not itself include any labels. In the many responses to the tweet, however, different users offered up their labelled up versions – perhaps the most cleverly self-reflexive being that in which the bride in the picture was labelled as *my wife*, and the passing beefy man in the background as *the wife in this pic* (Figure 4.8).

Slightly different still are cases where online discourse participants *echo* a previous discourse move, rather than complete it in some way. In the exchange in (25–26), we see a use of the dialogue pattern discussed in Chapter 8 featuring what we there called a 'non-quotation' or empty discourse move (*No one:*). The next 'discourse' move again involves an example where no real discourse is involved, but a depiction is given of a type of behaviour (cf. Chapters 6 and 8), using the minimal means provided by emoji combined with different kinds of lines (slashes and pipes). The overall effect is clear: we understand that we need to blend the *me* phrase with the one car out of three

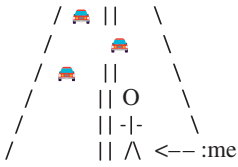
depicted which is not bearing to the right side of the road but is dangerously veering towards or even across the middle of the road, because the driver is tweeting while driving. The response in (26) echoes the depiction of (25), introducing it not as a *me* move but a *Chris* move (the name of the initial tweeter), but altering it to include a depiction of a human figure (as a kind of stick figure composed of dashes, strokes and an *O* for head), labelling it as *me* with a connecting arrow, and placing this *me* dangerously in the way of the oncoming car driven by *Chris* – and finally adding the rather troubling line *don't stop now, babe!*, one presumes in jest. (In a further response, posted by @anxious__twink on the same day, a third person joins the exchange by adding a picture of the interior of a car with a child screaming on the back seat and the tweet text *Me screaming as I watch my life flash before my eyes*.) The change of perspective in (26) views the same scene as that depicted in (25), but from a different vantage point, introduced into the scene. The initial discourse move in (25) was essentially a humorously intended way of highlighting dangerous driving because of distractions behind the wheel – self-reflexively here, the distraction consists in tweeting. (26) in a sense subverts this opening move by turning it into an imminently lethal crash event, while still apparently making light of it (*don't stop now, babe!*), lending a somewhat absurd air to the overall move. In all this, the discourse participants are interacting with much more attention to each other's input than by merely liking or even retweeting a tweet, in this way strengthening intersubjective solidarity and affect.

(25) No one:
Me tweeting while driving:



(@mych3micalswift on X/Twitter, 3 August 2022)

(26) chris tweeting while driving:



don't stop now, babe!
(@_kxdyn on X/Twitter, 3 August 2022)

Needless to say, the kinds of engagements we've illustrated in this section rely on meme users' meme knowledge for one thing, and also their willingness to trust at least some online communicators within their social media sphere to

engage with them to jointly construe discourse. Mutual trust and mutual knowledge enable something as short and – for the non-meme proficient – enigmatic as (27) to serve as a compliment in an exchange:

(27) You're the dude on the right in the meme (@bchadwickfrance on X/Twitter, 28 July 2023)

This was posted in response to a tweet which read *We love a view from a bus* accompanied by a summery picture of Hong Kong, apparently taken during a bus ride. The combination of *bus* with *the dude on the right in the meme* will, for proficient meme communicators, likely be sufficient to metonymically prompt the relevant *Two Guys on a Bus* meme. This is a labelling meme in which a sad looking man on the left-hand side of a bus is looking at a dark rock wall, whereas a happy looking man on the right-hand side enjoys a sunny view of a mountainous landscape. By integrating the *bus* reference with the meme (27) prompts for, we can understand that the message of (27), while ostensibly 'only' a kind of meta-discourse about a meme, serves as a kind of compliment, suggesting that the original tweeter has an optimistic attitude to life (in fact, this is expanded further down in the exchange, where the author of (27) adds *You're always so enthusiastic about things, which I love*). This friendly exchange can perhaps serve to illustrate to what extent a person's meme repertoire can be tightly incorporated within their communicative and linguistic arsenal serving important social functions.

More generally, many of us will have noticed how, perhaps more than memes proper, *meme-like* uses of images have become part of exchanges on various platforms (X/Twitter, private or group WhatsApp exchanges, comments on Facebook posts, etc.). Instead of replying with a sentence, people will respond with an image (often an animated image, or so-called reaction GIF; see e.g. Miltner & Highfield 2017). You might post an odd picture – as a colleague of ours did on Facebook some years ago – showing a crock pot plugged into the corner of an office and using a *when*-like structure to accompany the image (*That time you got to your office and there was a crock pot plugged in the corner*). Then you'll find that other people might respond, non-verbally, by posting pictures suggesting potential reactions to the unexpected presence. One response, for example, is the movie screenshot of the black monolith being approached by apes in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, suggesting that the odd crockpot looks ominously and mysteriously out of place. The next response is William Blake's illustration for *Paradise Lost* depicting the temptation and fall of Eve (in which a snake feeds Eve the apple) – implying that the strange pot full of food is equally (and perhaps also dangerously) tempting. In a sense, the initial prompt does not strictly involve a *when*-meme – after all, the Facebook poster's text literally describes what is in the picture. However, the existence of *when*-memes apparently creates the discourse conditions in which

this becomes a viable conversation starter (see also Chapter 11), and the image responses provided by other discourse participants *do* end up adding the multimodal simile meanings typical of *when*-memes: 'when there's this incongruent situation of a crock pot unexpectedly sitting in the corner of the office, it *feels as ominous as* the weird monolith must have felt to the apes, and *as tempting as* the apple offered by that mischievous snake'. Across the different discourse moves, a meme has been co-constructed, effortlessly, even if, conceivably, no one taking part in the exchange was consciously trying to make a meme. This seems to be the way of the world now.

10.9 Memetic Transfer and the 'Memeticization' of Online Discourse

In this chapter, we have illustrated a range of online discourse patterns which relate – more or less closely, depending on the case – to meme types discussed in preceding chapters. When we're looking to identify internet memes, we expect to find a reliable pairing of formal elements with a given meaning, and sufficient repetition of the pattern, showing creative variation, to consider something as a relevant 'group of digital items', in the sense of Shifman's definition (2014: 41) quoted in our opening chapter. In considering not just artefacts in isolation, but in the way they are used on a few specific platforms – X/Twitter and TikTok – we've seen simple as well as complex scenarios of extension and adaptation.

Some involve fairly straightforward, direct transfer of an existing meme to another platform, as in the X/Twitter version of the handshake meme: a single emoji (🤝) replaces the picture used in the original labelling meme, and text is arranged appropriately to reflect the three 'points' that need labelling (the two hands, and the point where they meet). Memes specific to X/Twitter such as the *Distance* and *Detour* memes add more visual complexity: using a combination of emoji and lines, they build up a skeletal version of a visual scene that is labelled up with text. This has given rise to genuinely new labelling memes, which exploit specific affordances of the platform. TikTok examples we considered tend to similarly combine recognizable aspects with platform specific features, in adapting *when*-memes, *Me/Also Me* memes and labelling memes to include audio and video; we also considered Sound Macro TikTok artefacts as a kind of aural counterpart of IM memes, as in the *I actually did it myself* quote used in new combinations with fictive questions (20) or with a *when*-meme text (21). The emergence of new(ish) forms can give rise to usage we could consider 'vague' between two 'meme-conventional' readings, as we suggested for our 'four faces of Macron' example in the *Macron/Manuscript* grid (Figure 10.1): a kind of labelling across a sequence of pictures, rather than of elements inside a single picture; or perhaps a sequence of condensed *when*-memes.

Some of the patterns we highlighted are highly formulaic, as with the *in this house we believe in* formula, distributed across a skeletal visual representation of a house built up using just the standard character set. Others showed much looser forms, inspired by, for instance, *Me* Verb-*ing*, *Me/Also Me*, or *Be Like* memes, but also more broadly combining text and image (or emoji) in fictive interaction patterns that lack the form-meaning consistency to qualify as memes per se, as in the attitudinal use of emoji in an exchange between British Members of Parliament discussed in Section 10.5. Nevertheless, the interweaving of the visual and the textual even in these looser discourse styles seems to owe something to the pervasive influence of memes. In addition, existing engagement patterns such as quote-tweeting can in turn give rise to more stable (if potentially short-lived) meme forms, such as the particularly devious pretend-quotation pattern involving speech bubbles added onto a picture of a pretend speaker (as with Osama bin Laden in Figure 10.4).

Overall, the easy travel across platforms and modes of memes and meme-based patterns suggests to us a kind of memetic mindset in which discourse takes shape online, even where this does not necessarily involve fully formed or identifiable memes. This broad kind of memeticization, as we might call it, also informs our analysis of meme-inspired advertising in the next chapter: our most interesting examples don't so much directly borrow a fully formed, recognizable meme to reuse it in an ad, but they partly borrow from existing meme codes and adapt these creatively to suit the persuasive goals identified.

11 Memes and Advertising

The popularity of memes has many sources, including their clear construction of the message, their reliance on well-established forms (pictorial, textual, or structural), and their persuasive goals. None of these features would be effective, though, without the memes' appeal to the rich repository of cultural, social, and communicative practices shared by Meme Viewers (MVs). In other words, memes are so effective in communicating the Meme Maker's (MM) intentions because the forms selected are a tip of a veritable iceberg underneath. In that context, the popularity of memetic discourse should not be surprising. It is not uncommon to read a social media post where reference is made to some important, troubling, or otherwise attention-getting event, where the person posting evaluates the importance of the event by referring to (sometimes) hundreds of memes it has prompted. Somehow, it is less common to see consumers of information evaluating the importance of an event by considering the number of textual (and so possibly more in-depth) commentaries in the press. Memes have become a form of public discourse.

It is not surprising, then, that this simplicity and effectiveness – large communicative impact with minimal message-crafting effort – has proven attractive to advertisers, as shown for instance in Milner's (2016: 204–6) discussion of memes used by Dr Pepper in 2013 (including, e.g. a SNOE meme featuring a picture of orange soda cans with Top Text (TT) *too much orange soda* and Bottom Text (BT) *said no one ever*). In this chapter, we will consider ways in which advertisements use memetic templates or construct simple visual templates relying on some memetic conventions. We will start by looking at a well-publicized case of using the *Distracted Boyfriend* formula as an ad. Then we will discuss several examples of advertisements for popular painkillers, to show how memetic forms inspire advertising campaigns focused on two crucial aspects of anti-pain over-the-counter drugs – the construal of their effectiveness and the comparison between different market options.

11.1 *Distracted Boyfriend* Memes in Advertising

The *Distracted Boyfriend* meme (DBM) discussed early in the book is one of the most popular labelling memes. As we have shown in Chapter 4, the meme

uses a photo of a very simple dynamic scene in which a man walking beside his girlfriend (girl in blue) turns back to look at another girl (girl in red). This original scene can easily be understood in terms of a 'change of preferences' or 'disloyalty' situation, in which the girlfriend feels insulted by her boyfriend's clear interest in the passing girl. As we argued in Chapter 4, the literal scenario represented in the photo used as the meme's macro (about attraction and betrayal) has been used memetically to stand for the meme's constructional meaning, which could be summarized as 'Meme Character is in a good situation but suddenly feels an impulse to make a change and engage in another situation of the same category' – as in change the girlfriend, the political orientation, academic preferences, favourite food, and so on, depending on what the labels are suggesting. The meaning would thus seem very well suited to advertising, which aims at prompting consumers to choose the advertised product over the one offered by competitors. However, we might also note that the DBM formula leaves very little space for a genuine appeal to prospective customers, which is a clear down-side.

Interestingly, there is an example of an ad using the DBM template that has caused quite a stir, in ways which reveal the importance of the constructional treatment of labelling memes that we proposed in Chapter 4. The meme was used as an advertisement by Swedish internet service provider Bahnhof in 2018 (posted to its Facebook account @B4hnh0f on 4 April 2018). It sparked a controversy in which the advertising regulator ruled the ad was sexist, as it objectified women and stereotyped men. In the ad, the girlfriend is labelled as *your current place of work* (*din nuvarande arbetsplats* in the original Swedish); the boyfriend as *you* (*du* in the original Swedish), and the passing girl as the company being advertised, Bahnhof.

In their response on Facebook, Bahnhof explained that all they wanted was to represent themselves as an attractive employer, and that the genders represented in the macro are irrelevant to the point of the ad. They also argued that those familiar with meme culture would not view the ad as the ombudsman did.

It is not our intention to take sides here and suggest anyone's perception of the DBM as such and the ad in particular as right or wrong. But we want to point out that the responses from the ombudsman and Bahnhof are clearly incompatible while referring unquestionably to aspects of the ad's meaning. The striking difference emerges because the two responses address different layers of the memetic meaning – regardless of the advertising function the meme is meant to play here. The ombudsman's response looks only at the meaning of the Image Macro (IM) – a boy offends a girl while showing his attraction to another girl. What the ombudsman says does not in any way distinguish between girls and workplaces and focuses on the image – the form of the construction. Bahnhof, on the other hand, considers the constructional meaning (the idea of making a choice between a familiar thing and a new attractive option), which is shared

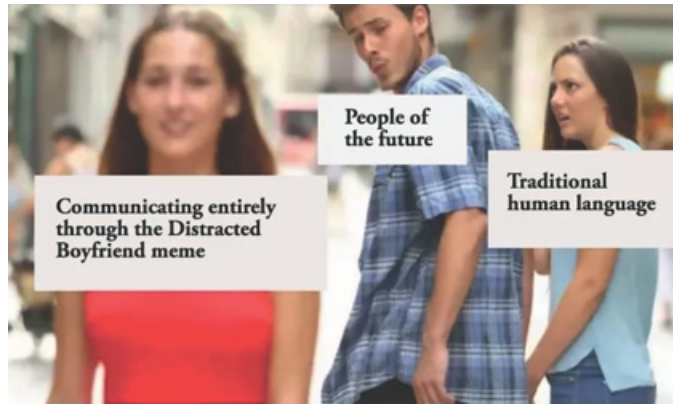


Figure 11.1 *Distracted Boyfriend* meme commenting on its own popularity (Credit: Antonio Guillem/Shutterstock).

by all *Distracted Boyfriend* memes, regardless of the context in which they are used and the nature of the labels provided. For comparison, we can consider the version of the meme in Figure 11.1 (first discussed in Section 4.3).

If we were to rely on the ombudsman's reasoning, we could object to the reference to future generations as male and ready to abandon existing forms of communication. We would also not assume that users of 'traditional human language' (whatever that means – verbal/textual only?) are necessarily construed as female, and already being resentful about the possible change. And, perhaps most importantly, we would miss the jocular comment on the increasing popularity of DBM, which, while indeed observed some years ago, seems to have waned away by now – the internet does not favour one form of communication for too long.

Below, we consider examples of advertising where memetic formulae are not used as ready-made templates, but where ads are inspired by selected aspects of memetic form. For consistency, we will focus on several advertising campaigns promoting popular over-the-counter painkillers.

11.2 What Do Painkiller Ads Really Promote?

In this section we consider the connections between memetic forms and choices made in several campaigns promoting painkillers. The cases we consider are not, unlike the example above, cases of 'memes used as ads'; rather, they construct appropriate advertising forms by evoking specific aspects of memetic forms, especially those used in *when*-memes and *Sections of* memes. Our interest here

is in how the selected form of the ad uses memetic strategies and how these forms serve the meaning of the ad.

Painkiller ads are a very interesting example for several reasons: they require a representation or evocation of an embodied state triggering the need for using a painkiller, while they also need to describe the effect of the drug and, at least in some cases, draw comparisons between drugs. We will show here how various types of ads render these meanings, and which aesthetic choices may be seen as memetically inspired. Overall, we look at five types of ads:

1. ads relying on innovative visual blends (Figure 11.2);
2. ads that exploit the general memetic combination of image and text (Figure 11.3);
3. ads that adopt some of the conventions of *when*-memes (Figure 11.4);
4. ads which use Direct Discourse to evoke experiential meanings (in ways we also find in memes) (Figure 11.5);
5. ads which use a format similar to *Sections of* memes to suggest appropriate strength of the painkiller (Figure 11.6).

Pain as an embodied experience is difficult to describe literally, and so it is common to describe the nature and severity of pain figuratively, via other experiences. Commonly, pain is described via expressions depicting embodied experiences which are construed as causing pain (*burning pain*, *stabbing pain*, *pounding pain*, etc.), and visual advertising often relies on the same pattern. For example, in the ad in Figure 11.2 (from the campaign *Aspirin for WorkAche*), the wooden mallet a craftsman can use to hit a chisel or a nail has a 'head' representing a face squinting because of the pain resulting from the 'pounding' – a pounding headache. This ad thus describes the cause of pain, while also

Figure 11.2 An ad from the *Aspirin for WorkAche* campaign.

depicting the experience of pain in the facial expression on the mallet. The potential use or efficiency of the drug is not clearly represented.

This example is not overtly memetically inspired, while relying very effectively on a visual blend of a person and a mallet and on a clear visual representation of a facial expression of someone in pain (reminiscent, perhaps, of the simplified forms emoji take). Many advertising campaigns depend visually on informative and ingenious blends, which help the advertiser depict aspects of the targeted situation. These advertising techniques rely very heavily on the components and framing of the central image – in this case, the mallet/person blend.

Our second example is an Advil ad from the *What Pain?* campaign (Figure 11.3). The example we chose shows a man in his office, wearing a suit and generally looking professional, in a rather challenging posture, stretching his leg in a way that precludes any issues with his joints, especially his knee. The centre of the photo is further covered with a question, in large yellow capital letters, *WHAT BUM KNEE?*. Additionally, there is an image of an Advil pill superimposed over his leg, close to the knee joint. The whole design resembles many memes, where an evocative photo is labelled by text, often in the usual meme font (white, capitals, with dark edges), superimposed over the object or person represented. The difference in colour of the font and the positioning of the text appears to be much less important than the specific type of a link between the text and the image. Memetic conventions assume that the text (when not clearly positioned as TT or BT), applies to the part of the image it is superimposed over – as in the labelling memes

Figure 11.3 An ad from Advil's *What Pain?* campaign (Courtesy of Haleon).

discussed in Chapter 4. If the text is an example of Direct Discourse, it evokes a conversational exchange in which the memetic role of the object or person labelled is defined by the nature of the conversation. In the case of this ad, the text is a question, *What bum knee?*, which thus has to be read as communicated by the man represented, in (presumed) response to an observer who has been aware of knee pain issues and now sees the man stretching the joint without difficulty. The conversational exchange evoked would thus assume a concerned person asking about the pain they had been told about, and the man in the image wondering what pain they are referring to, because meanwhile Advil took all the pain away. In other words, the man used to suffer from knee pain, but was able to forget about it thanks to Advil. This correlates with numerous memes (such as *What If I Told You*, or various labelling memes) in that the Direct Discourse snippet is understood as spoken by the person in the image, as a part of a standard conversation. Importantly, the point of the ad is the positive effect of Advil treatment. And, like in many memes, the ad relies on the viewer filling in all the missing framing, including the assumed narrative of previous suffering and current Advil-induced improvement.

We should note, however, that there is also a category of memes where the targeted meaning is similative. *When*-memes, as described by Lou (2017, 2021; see also Chapter 2 and Section 6.3), use images to represent how a given situation 'feels' to someone ('X feels like Y'). These memes prompt similative meaning in ways parallel to linguistic expressions of simile, for example, *The migraine felt like my head was being pounded with a mallet*, while relying on the evocativeness of the image or on the representation of meaningful body posture, facial expression, or gesture.

Our third case of reliance on memetic conventions in ads is thus focused on *when*-memes, first discussed in Lou (2017). *When*-memes are special for several reasons. First, they seem to be a meme type that is little affected by time-induced slumps in popularity of certain memes. Other meme types may wax and wane, their formal patterns becoming more diffuse, but the formula of *when*-memes remains essentially unchanged. The meme consists of a TT *when*-clause, often using the second person *you* pronoun, describing a situation which is likely to affect a person involved in it in an emotional or experiential way. The second part of the meme is an image, often one which appears not connected to the *when*-event at all, which evokes the nature of the experience or the emotion targeted. In the *Bored Monkey* meme (Figure 6.2) discussed previously, the troubling experience of not being able to access one's phone is represented via the body posture and facial expression of a monkey sitting on a bench. The viewer will easily interpret the image as suggesting boredom, lack of energy, or lack of goals to achieve.

As regards the linguistic construction used in the meme, it is the generic temporal construction which suggests first of all a correlation between two events, one described in the *when*-clause (e.g. *When you ask for a refund*, . . .),

and the other, described in the main clause, which depicts the predictable consequence of the situation in the *when*-clause (*. . . they get very upset*). There are varieties of such a construction, but the standard pattern is such that one event triggers the other. In *when*-memes the nature of the equivalent of the main clause is restricted to feeling a certain emotion or experiencing a certain state of mind. But the content of emotions and experiences cannot be depicted directly, so the construction uses an evocative image instead, which turns the whole construction into a simile – *When X happens, you feel like Y* (see Lou 2017, 2021 for a more substantial discussion). In the case of the phone-deprived MM, the image represents a body posture and facial expression which suggest the emotion attributed to MM. It is not relevant that the image does not represent a human being, a phone, or any other situational features – it represents the relevant feeling (boredom and inaction), which is attributed to the referent of *you*.

Standard meme templates have been used in advertising, and the *when*-meme formula seems to be popular, if only because it leaves room for an attractive image to frame the object advertised. For example, Gucci ads for a line of watches, discussed in Wiggins (2019: 91–2), feature several examples of *when*-memes (indeed, the campaign came with its own hashtag, #TFWGucci, referencing 'that feeling when'; see the Spring/Summer 2017 #TFWGucci campaign page on *Gucci.com*). In one of them, the TT says: *When you got that new watch and have to show it off*, while the image shows an arm, clad in a brown sleeve, but with a hole torn out where the watch is, so that it is clearly visible. The image thus presents the watch owner as so keen to show the prized possession that they would damage their clothes to make the watch visible. There are several such memes in the campaign, though in our opinion some of them are rather less effective, if only because the small watches are not clearly visible against a complex (though attractive) background. It's also been remarked that an appeal to streetwise 'coolness', which memes might help aspire to, does not suit a luxury brand especially well (McCrae 2017, Wiggins 2019: 92).

Returning to painkiller ads, we will now consider an Advil campaign which uses a *when*-clause in a way that seems to us clearly inspired by *when*-memes. The ad in Figure 11.4 is almost filled with the sentence: *When your head is pounding, eyes are squinting and the only thing you can think of is curling up in a ball and telling the world to shut up for a second*, which profiles an experience, as we would expect in a *when*-meme, but there is an image of the Advil logo at the bottom of the page, so, in effect, the evocation of Advil as a product completes the sentence. The logo can play many roles, but it certainly evokes Advil in the context of a headache, so it might be read as something equivalent to *you can reach for Advil, take a pill, and start feeling better*. What is particularly interesting here is the way in which the introductory *when*-clause describes a complex situation which

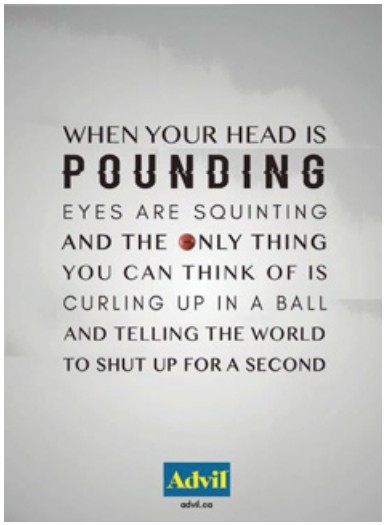


Figure 11.4 An ad from Advil's *When X* campaign (Courtesy of Haleon).

includes pain, but also tiredness and desire to hide from all the stimuli we typically deal with. The logo is suggesting that the painkiller does not just remove pain, but also soothes the attendant oversensitivity. In other words, the Advil logo stands not just for the pill and its painkilling function, but also for the overall calming and soothing effect of getting rid of stress brought about by trying to function socially with a bad headache. In this respect, we might argue that the logo does what the image in a *when*-meme does – profile an experience. But the experience is not correlated with the content of the *when*-clause, it is, rather, a response to the tough situation the *when*-clause describes. In other words, the *when*-clause and the Advil logo form a construction resembling memetic constructions, but this specific construction is not similative, instead mimicking the ordinary linguistic construction, such as *When you have a headache and you feel exhausted because of it, take Advil (and you will feel better)*.[1] This means that the ad relies on much of the pattern and meaning of a *when*-meme, without fully being a *when*-meme.

Advil is not the only painkiller featured in an interesting advertising campaign. Bayer Aspirin has also been coming up with intriguing ways to advertise, while relying on some memetic conventions. In this respect, two types of ads have been published (though not worldwide) to help customers choose

[1] We previously discussed a similar example of a radio commercial for an optician's (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017b: 590), where the understood 'completion' of a series of *when*-clauses is similarly 'problem-solving' ('when embarrassing situations arise because of poor eyesight, then you should go to the optician's').

between the ordinary aspirin (Aspirina) and a much stronger variety called CafiAspirina. These campaigns are remarkable for two reasons: the graphic form in some closely resembling *Sections of* memes (first discussed in Section 4.5), and the presentation of aspirin pills without any reference to actual pain. Bayer advertisers have apparently assumed that consumers suffering from embodied pain will know that Aspirin will alleviate it and, as a result, many of Aspirin's recent ads focus on emotional well-being as the main target. There are two (aesthetically similar) campaigns where Bayer advertises the two painkillers based on their being appropriate to the severity of emotional distress (rather than the severity of pain). In both cases, the customer is asked to choose the right aspirin for themselves.

The first type of ads depends on representations of Direct Discourse. In the example in Figure 11.5, we see a very conspicuous line of Direct Discourse (including quotation marks), which is not naturally evocative of either pain or serious distress: *'Dad, can I borrow some money?'*. As it stands, such a line does not set any alarm bells ringing. The two images below the line show two containers of aspirin – one marked green (the colour typically not associated with an emotionally stressful situation), the other marked red – which usually marks 'alarm' (it is the colour of choice for alarm buttons, fire alarm triggers, etc.). The green and red boxes are also

Figure 11.5 An ad from Bayer's CafiAspirina campaign.

accompanied by green and red lines of text: *Your 15-year old son* (green) and *Your 45-year old son* (red) – the clear suggestion is that the stress caused by a teenager in need of money is lower than in the case of an adult, supposedly capable of managing their own financial affairs without relying on a loan from their father. The whole design seems to suggest that the two aspirin pills are both capable of alleviating stress, and the level of the stress determines which type of aspirin is to be selected. In another ad in the campaign, the text is *We need to talk*, and the choice of the pill is determined by the speaker – if the line is said by your wife, Aspirina should suffice, if it is said by your jail mate, CafiAspirina is required.

Both ads represent snippets of Direct Speech (*Dad, can I borrow some money?* and *We need to talk*), which demonstrate/depict (Clark & Gerrig 1990, Clark 2016) a situation where there are specific emotional demands placed on the addressee of the text/viewer of the ad. The viewer is then expected to consider the potential stress connected to the need to respond to the discourse, weigh the potential level of stress in correlation with the two fictive speakers suggested in the ad, and then choose the Aspirin variety that is likely to alleviate the level of stress induced by the situation. Note that these alternative potential speakers are identified directly underneath the apparent quote in a way similar to how famous speakers are sometimes identified underneath (real or attributed) quotes; they are all the more 'fictive' in that most people with sons don't have two that are thirty years apart in age. Importantly, the entire process is presented as not involving any bodily pain and pain remedies; rather, the issue involved is stress, and adequate stress relief. Aspirin is thus redefining the default meaning of *pain*, and consequently, the nature and role of painkillers.

Our final (fifth) example is another Aspirin campaign asking customers to choose the drug adequate to the stress level.[2] The ads resemble the ones we looked at above, in terms of font, the choice of drugs, and the colour coding of the options. But they rely on the so-called *Sections of* memetic convention which we discussed in Chapter 4 (Section 4.5). As we saw in the example in Figure 4.12, concepts represented by words are divided into parts, with corresponding emotions linked to specific sections and interpreted temporally. In the example, the word *UNIVERSITY* had a brief initial part with positive and hopeful feelings identified as *I did good in high school I think I'm smart I'll do good in uni*, but then a very long part, already starting towards the end of the letter *U* and covering all of the remaining letters, where the feeling has quickly become *I do not belong here I'm the stupidest person to walk the face of this earth*.

[2] We want to thank Emma Riek for drawing our attention to this example.

Figure 11.6 A *Sections of* CafiAspirina ad.

Something quite similar is done in the *Boss's Jokes* ad in Figure 11.6. The ad is basically textual, with the exception of the two lines, one red, one green, which bracket a section of the text in the centre, printed in a large font. What the ad relies on is the arrangement of textual pieces and the evocation of the relevant frames. The intended meaning is confirmed in the small-print line at the bottom*: If it gets stronger, we get stronger*, though the line does not specify what the two correlated scales of 'getting stronger' really refer to. We are taking it to mean that Bayer has a response to stronger negative emotions, by offering a stronger drug.

Unpacking the meaning of the ads requires several steps. The other two ads in the campaign are identical, except the central text (*Ex-wife's lawyer* and *Teenage daughter's boyfriend*).

They all rely on some evocations: the Bayer logo, but also the words Aspirina and CafiAspirina, which evoke not only the Bayer brand painkiller, but also rely on a categorial metonymy (the name of one brand of painkiller stands for any painkiller, so that one can suggest that a person suffering from a headache take 'an aspirin' – meaning, any painkiller); this explains why *pain* is the word which is never used in the ads.

The two *Sections of* lines shaped like brackets are of different length and (unlike in the meme examples) they partly overlap, thus covering the central

phrase to a different degree as in the example above. They indicate the scope of two drugs being compared (Aspirina and CafiAspirina) in alleviating pain (somewhat in the sense of expressions such as *Aspirina does not go/stretch as far as CafiAspirina*). The length of the line suggests the degree to which the drug alleviates pain/stress – the longer the line, the more 'stress' is taken care of by the drug: Aspirina is sufficient to help you face the boss; but if you have to deal with (and pretend to be amused by) the boss's jokes, you need CafiAspirina. This correlation is not stated but it is inferred on the basis of our knowledge of painkillers and the standard schematic representation of increased value (of any kind) being represented by the length of the line. Additionally, the bracket-like ends of the lines indicate the scope of the drug with respect to the source of frustration.

The most important aspect of the ads is the role of the centrally positioned phrase in large font. In each ad, the phrase evokes a situation which may cause stress (as in, feeling obliged to laugh at bad jokes, having to respond to frustrating demands of a divorce, or being reluctant to accept the teen daughter's boyfriend). Each of these situations may be described as stressful, and thus can be talked about as 'giving someone a headache' (literal or figurative). The effect of the drug is thus described as helping in stressful life situations, not necessarily in alleviating physical pain. The decision to represent 'pain' in this way has interesting persuasive effects, as it presents the drug as effective in all situations calling for relief of discomfort, whether physical or emotional.

Importantly, the ad campaign provides a good example of how such artefacts become meaningful. The ads rely significantly on visual aspects such as the size or colour of the font,[3] but also allows the phrase to fill the whole width of the background page, so that the two bracket lines can indicate the 'scope' of each drug clearly – the bigger the part of the text covered by the line, the better the effect of the drug. The choice of font and central position allows the viewer to focus on the implications of the situation described, while the bracketing lines refer not to the text as such, but instead use its size and length as a representation of the intensity of feeling what can be described as 'pain' (literally or metaphorically). Much has been said (e.g. Semino 2010b) about various linguistic means speakers use to describe bodily pain figuratively (since it is not quite possible to describe it literally), often through imaginary situations that are experientially rich, even though they describe events that the speaker could not have experienced in reality (such as someone drilling in their head, or creatures moving

[3] The role of font is sometimes mentioned by multimodal metaphor scholars (e.g. El Refaie 2019 mentions 'typo-pictorial' metaphors, such that the pictorial features of the font trigger metaphors). The case we are discussing here is different, since metaphoric meaning of pain is not dependent on the shape or nature of the font, but on the content of the phrase in the context of the use of a painkiller.

about in their brain). The Bayer ads choose a less dramatic and more effective strategy, capitalizing on the metaphorical understanding of pain, without ever using the term *pain* or *painkiller* at all.

The ads can naturally be seen as 'multimodal', as they rely on text, but also on its visual aspects (size, length, and shape). We argue that such artefacts – memes or ads – are best described as relying on experiential viewpoint. On the one hand, the processing of the ad requires an automatic prompting of the image-schematic concepts such as size, shape, length, or visual scanning. On the other hand, it evokes the experience of situations which can be difficult to deal with and cause stress – metaphorically understood as painful. Focusing on the evocation of experientially rich frames to prompt the viewer's emotional response is the core of such advertisements.

But there is more suggested by the form. The construal of these ads relies on two matched scales: the severity of stress and the power of the drug, so that in order to choose the right remedy, one needs to match the values along these two scales. For example, if the boss's jokes are truly insufferably bad, Aspirina may not be sufficiently strong to help the employee relax and pretend to be amused, but CafiAspirina may 'go all the way'. These forms stand in some relationship to 'matched scales' linguistic constructions such as *the X-er the Y-er* or 'comparative correlative' (see, e.g. Hoffmann 2019), as in *the more we ask for, the less we get* and *the more distress, the more pain relief I need (so I choose CafiAspirina)*. The interaction between memetic constructions and linguistic constructions is a topic worth further consideration. In earlier chapters we discussed the ways in which predictive constructions are transformed to fit the form of a meme. In the examples above, we also saw *when*-constructions and now also matched-scales constructions. These correlations are not incidental – they represent the emergence of memes as artefacts that do not just combine image and text but rather create new constructional forms which are inherently multimodal.

11.3 Memes versus Ads

In the sections above we have argued that there is much 'leakage' between various multimodal genres, and as a result memetic forms (which often serve as a kind of template of formal and viewpoint-expression efficiency) are adapted to enhance the formal variety of other genres, such as ads. What we found especially interesting about the examples above was that using memetic templates unchanged, which some brands like to do, particularly on their social media accounts, tends not to produce the most interesting usage – in fact, we think these ads can be rather unconvincing and boringly predictable, even if brands may try to make them more interesting in other ways. For instance, at the time of writing, a food brand called Jimmy Joy uses a cartoon version of the

Drake meme (which we discussed in Chapters 5 and 9) to advertise its 'easy peasy lemon squeezy' meals which allow people to avoid 'messy stressy lemon depressy' food prep.

This might suggest that the successful survival of meme templates is guaranteed in two ways – the clarity and usefulness of the template (e.g. DBM), but also the ingenuity and variety in filling the template with frame-related meanings. For example, an ad such as the contentious Bahnhof ad is not helping potential applicants to see why working for Bahnhof would be worth abandoning stable employment elsewhere, and simply tries to evoke positive attitudes to a change of employer by relying on the standard reading of the meme. In other words, memetic discourse works best as 'on-the-spot', ad hoc evaluation of a situation, so that the framing has not gone stale before the meme is out. This is the feature of memes that makes them so relevant – in the current moment, they provide ongoing commentary on events (often rather serious political events), because they are a form of public discourse. Advertising is not like that. It is usually a thoughtful representation of objects or services being advertised, with the underlying assumption that the object would improve the user experience, and that the effect would last (at least long enough for the addressee of the ad to give it a thought, make a decision, then invest real money in the purchase, and, finally, tell their friends about it). So memes, holistically understood, do not generally make good ads, because their primary advantage is the snappy and effective frame evocation, when the frames are rich, or can change the viewer's mind, or both.

What seems to work best in genres such as advertising is using memes as inspiration. We found (though perhaps we are biased) that the painkiller ads that use select memetic conventions, while enriching them with original features, fall easily in that category. But the effectiveness in this area could be a part of the general trend to make ads as multimodal as one can. When one looks at ads from some years back, one wonders what could have really tempted customers to be taken in. One such example is Lego. Even in the sixties, they used to show a child playing with Lego and provide a page length explanation of how young minds benefit from interactive and creative toys. Today, all they show is two or three Lego blocks and add the mental reality of a child-at-play by drawing shades (so that two Lego bricks become a dinosaur or a plane) or showing whole new worlds emerging out of a single Lego brick. Or they change the colours and show Mona Lisa made in Lego. All of these ads are of course targeting parents, not kids, and appealing to those who want their children to become creative. But our point here is that companies like Lego have gone away from text, to focus on very simplistic but powerful images. Today, there is no advertising beyond multimodal advertising.

The result is that memetic conventions have become useful in advertising and other discourse genres – they might appeal first of all to those who are

Figure 11.7 The *Taillights* Aspirin ad.

exposed to memes every day, but they are generally becoming the multimodal language transparent to everyone. One interesting example of such a broad appeal of multimodal means of expression is another Aspirin ad, mounted on public buses in Toronto (Figure 11.7). When the bus is in motion, the ad is only an image of a face, but when the driver breaks, the taillights come on, so the result is that the red lights come on and off – mimicking the throbbing quality of severe pain. And the words on the ad suggest Aspirin can help.

This type of ad – visual, textual, but also dynamically representing the nature of headaches – is a perfect example of what advertising is trying to do. The main effect is a representation of the nature of severe pain – on and off, piercing, sudden, and overwhelming – through simple red lights coming on and off at frequent but irregular intervals. One can argue that the nature of pain represented in these ads is rendered via a simile. Severe headache is like these lights: throbbing, blinding, and offensively affecting perception. It seems to be just one more example where multimodal representation relies on depicted experiential similarity, rather than on description, argumentation or explanation. Simile is inherently depictive, and so are many of the memetically inspired ads.

To sum up, we should note that the memetic conventions which ads build on are often rendered in very broad visual or textual strokes – the layout of the page, the use of font and colour, the striking image with text labelling, and so on. As we suggested, the functions of ads are different from those of memes, so the memetic conventions used have to be adapted to the new context. But it is clear that these conventions can now be recognized outside of memes. This tells us clearly that the grammar of memes is gradually developing and affecting other forms of contemporary communication.

12 *One Does Not Simply* Draw a Conclusion

Throughout this project, we have been driven by a number of questions, regarding especially form-and-meaning correlations and their contribution to the uniqueness of the memetic genre. In this closing chapter, we want to first restate these questions in broader terms, and then reflect on the answers we have given throughout.

12.1 Why Should Linguists Study Memes?

From the perspective of many linguists, a linguistically grounded book about internet memes may seem surprising. There are various reasons for scepticism. First of all, memes appear to be unchallenging when their linguistic side is considered – after all, there usually isn't a *lot* of language in them. Their multimodal form may also seem simplistic, given that many Image Macros (IMs) represent situations that are exaggerated, faintly absurd, or in some other way not quite serious: think of the images in memes like *Woman Yelling at a Cat* (in fact a composite image) or *Success Kid* (a fist-clenching, determined looking baby picture). As a genre, memes often comment on unimportant daily events and thoughts, reflecting the Meme Makers (MMs)' emotionally unsophisticated responses to daily interactions with others. All these observations may present memes as unsuitable for a linguistic analysis.

There are also more serious questions. Memetic communication may appear too fleeting and changeable to permit any lasting understanding of the genre. To a degree, memes are driven by fashion, so that some memes are suddenly very popular, only to sink into oblivion within weeks, which may suggest that it is hard to say anything lasting and valid about the genre as such. And finally, some linguists simply find memes uninteresting from the language perspective, because of the truncated and underspecified role language plays in memes, and especially because of the ways in which the presence of images downplays the role of memetic language.

However, as we hope to have shown throughout this book, memes are a form of communication which is interesting on many levels and uses linguistic resources in unusual ways. Their success and virality depend not so much on

language or images as independent components, but on the specific combination of visual and textual means – in other words, memes are interesting linguistically, because they use linguistic forms in ways that overtly and systematically adjust language to interaction with images. And precisely because of the deceptive simplicity of form, memes uncover the salience of conventions which are less pronounced in ordinary linguistic use, while also 'translating' them into visual aspects of communication – so that, for example, information structure choices equivalent to clause order are reflected in spatial arrangement of images and text. We will highlight some of such form adjustments in Section 12.4 below.

What this book shows is how memes achieve meaning as multimodal artefacts, and how they do that by being governed by rules of composition and interpretation which are specific to memes, not to all multimodal artefacts. We have shown many examples in which internet memes use linguistic forms and image-text patterns in ways very similar to grammatical patterns – being rule-governed but also subject to transformations such as argument suppression, blending, or recursion. But identifying memetic patterns and their formal potential is useful only if it is followed by identifying the ways in which memes create meaning, and that requires adding considerations of interpretive concepts such as categorization, viewpoint, or metonymy. Similarly to linguistic expressions, memes are form-meaning pairs – that is, constructions, but the meaning is primarily reflective of viewpoint and stance configurations, some of which, as we've seen, can get very elaborate with multiple layers of stacked stances.

Considering memes as linguistic artefacts is adding to our understanding of meaning construction. We have shown that meaningful correlation between image and text in memes may not depend at all on the content of the text in simple combination with the content of the image. It is enough to recall the nature of *when*-memes, where the *when*-clause up top describes a situation which is not in any way replicated by the image below – the text describing someone bored and demotivated because of no access to their phone is not then 'matched' by the image of a *Bored Monkey*, sitting relaxed on a bench (Figure 6.2). The connection, as we argued, is the similarity of emotions experienced, and not any cross-matching of the referents indicated by the text and represented in the image, or a cohesive blend for the viewer to uncover. In other words, the Bored Monkey in the meme is not a 'stand-in' for the 'you', or the MM, who feels bored without their phone. The monkey as such is not relevant, but what the meme focuses on instead is the body posture reflecting the lack of energy the MM feels when deprived of their phone. In the case of the *Bored Monkey when*-meme, the text above and the image below do not 'represent' the same Meme Character (MC) or Meme Viewer (MV) – they only represent the mood of a dispirited phone-addict missing their phone. This is just

one of many examples which show that the image in the meme, wherever it is placed, does not necessarily represent visually what the words describe linguistically.

Viewing memes as form-meaning pairs alongside linguistic constructions of all kinds is, at least partly, the reason why considering the role of images versus text in memes is not a question of compositionality or metaphoricity. Because memes are to a large degree a genre specializing in 'venting', displaying and ridiculing attitudes, responding emotionally, and so on, they are also, like many examples of humour, immersed in available frames and patterns of frame-shifting (Coulson 2001). Memetic meaning is primarily stance- and viewpoint-related, and, as we have shown in earlier work (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017b), emerges through (often dauntingly complex) networks of viewpointed Discourse Spaces. We have included some examples of such networks in earlier chapters (Figures 7.5 and 8.2), while consistently referring to memetic meanings as stance-based. Overall, we have shown how memes are interesting to linguists in three centrally important ways: how they adjust linguistic form to the multimodal context, how they construct meaning through constructionally determined stance and viewpoint networks, and how they expand our understanding of multimodality.

In our remarks below, we will bring together some of the threads that we have described so far, arguing again for an approach to memes which informs various aspects of language study, such as the interpretive potential of the concept of the construction, the very nature of image-text multimodality, or the specificity of internet discourse.

12.2 How Is Memetic Image-Text Multimodality Different from Other Multimodal Genres?

Multimodal artefacts of all kinds have been studied from several investigative perspectives, such as multimodal metaphor or relevance theory. Memes, however, show formal and interpretive characteristics which go beyond such broad analytical tools. We argued that memetic forms are restricted in ways resembling syntactic constructions, while memetic interpretive patterns use images, especially IMs, as formally determined elements of the overall pattern. Due to such formal and interpretive restrictions, linguistic concepts such as 'construction' or 'categorization' can be applied productively in the theoretical and interpretive approach to memes.

One important difference between memes and other multimodal artefacts is the way in which the meaning is arrived at across image and text. We will refer to just two examples involving forms of Direct Speech. We have given much attention to the ways in which memes use forms of Direct Speech, but when we compare it to just two multimodal genres (cartoons and ads), important

differences are clear. In a cartoon, direct speech can be included as a line underneath the image, and it is easily attributed to one of the persons (or other characters) represented in the drawing. In one of our favourite *New Yorker* cartoons, a couple is sitting in front of the fireplace, in a large room filled with ocean-going and whaling memorabilia. The husband has a wooden leg and smokes a pipe. Above them, there is a huge stuffed white whale mounted on the wall (clearly a trophy). Underneath the image there is a line of text: *'Happy?'* It is easy to understand that the couple are Captain and Mrs Ahab, and that the whale on the wall is Moby Dick – finally caught and killed by Ahab. In this example, there are no speech balloons, labelling, or any other ways to clearly attribute the direct speech to Mrs Ahab – that is the *New Yorker* cartoon convention. For comparison, we have looked at a number of ads. Most car ads, for example, have no text at all, or add just basic info (name of model, engine features, etc.). Car ads are thus different, and often encourage the viewer/future buyer with imperative phrases such as *Don't dream it, drive it; Always stay focussed; Cross that line; Conquer the ice; Burn rubber, not gasoline*; etc.

In the examples above, as in many other multimodal genres, text is used differently from our memetic examples. Cartoons like the one we described assign a space to text, typically direct speech, but the speech is to be read as embedded in the scene and spoken by one of the characters represented. In graphic novels and comics, speech balloons would be common, and they contain direct discourse (speech or thought). In car ads, there are words of encouragement, placed wherever they fit the design of the ad, but they are a message from the car company or dealer and whoever is assumed to be saying the words is not represented in the scene. The connection between the car and the text is essentially the same: the car advertised will allow you to do what you want to do – stop dreaming, have a fast car which is green as well, exceed expectations, drive safely even on ice, etc. All these slogans make sense in the context of the car shown. But, as we have demonstrated, memes are not relying on any such straightforward correlations. Rather, the direct speech included in them is typically present as a demonstration of attitudes, and such attitudes are not always directly attributable to a MC represented. It is not specifically Scumbag Steve, for instance, saying *'why would you spend that much on it anyway?'* (in Figure 6.1), nor Morpheus in *The Matrix* saying *you can eat without posting it on Instagram*, nor indeed the Virgin Mary telling baby Jesus 'It's a lemon, you won't like it' (in Figure 8.7). The characters and their speech are there to allow MMs to target certain behaviours or attitudes, and this purpose is generally what all content displayed in memes is marshalled for.

The second aspect we consider is the rigidity of the artefact's form. As we have shown, most memes develop into templates, either using a predetermined IM or filling the pre-determined visual fields with images matching the slots in

the meme's meaning. For example, the IM of a meme such as *One Does Not Simply* is a central aspect of its form, while in a grid meme such as *Anakin and Padmé* the MM either uses the predetermined IMs or inserts images that construct a similar sequence – as in the Napoléon and Joséphine meme (Figure 8.3), where the faces of the MCs retain the expressions matching the communicative sequence the meme constructs.

Such a rigid visual form is not easy to find in other image-text artefacts. We all know many examples of time-honoured image-text forms – book and magazine covers, advertisements, labels, posters, product or event catalogues, editorial cartoons, comic books, travel brochures, assembly instructions for furniture or machinery, online product catalogues, and so on. However, most of these forms use language and image to describe or illustrate, even if quite creatively, essentially the same thing – so that a brochure or a catalogue shows an image of a place or an object and also provides a textual description of the referent. In the same way, an image on the cover of a magazine or a book is assumed to evoke some frames or situations related to the content of the publication. Memes, on the other hand, as we've been suggesting, quite deliberately use reusable patterns of image and text to evoke unrelated frames and situations, and express stances around them.

The rather strict correlation between memetic meaning and form led us to think about memetic patterns in constructional terms. We are also convinced that the constructional behaviour is possibly the most salient feature of the memetic genre, and we consider it further in the next section.

12.3 Constructions, Snowclones, and the Image-Text Dynamic

Most of the memes we have discussed create complex patterns which represent form-meaning pairs, that is, constructions, via a combination of text and image. However, linguistic constructions vary significantly, and it is worth looking at memes from a similar perspective. We have argued that such patterns are the basis of memetic meaning, but we will now consider additional questions.

First of all, constructions can be described in terms of the pattern of slots they open, some of which can be lexically pre-filled, while some, usually referred to as X or Y or Z, are filled with appropriate (but open-ended) lexical material when the formula is applied to a new situation (cf. Fillmore et al. 1988). For example, a well-known partially filled construction *What is X doing Y?* has two unfilled slots, X and Y. These slots need to be filled with appropriate lexical material such that X represents an object found in the unexpected location, and the location is profiled by Y. The meaning of the construction as a whole can be seen in the unpleasantly surprised or even accusatory sentences such as *What is my wallet doing in your backpack?*, *What are the policemen doing in our living room?*, and so on; the meanings of surprise or even criticism emerge in the

construction as a whole, rather than from the sum of the meaning of the individual words, which only produce a question about what activities X is engaged in in location Y (cf. Goldberg 1995). The fact that much of the constructional form can be filled by default brings such constructions closer to the concept of an idiom – a complex lexical form with pre-determined holistic meaning and not processed compositionally, such as *have bigger fish to fry* (more important things to do) or *spill the beans* (reveal a secret).

Being partially filled is also an important feature of memetic form. One can argue that, in spite of a number of possibilities we have considered throughout the book, the most basic form of a memetic construction is an image (potentially of an MC) completed with Top Text (TT) and Bottom Text (BT). However, either TT or BT is often fully or partially filled (*One does not simply*, *I don't always do X*, *said no one ever*, etc.), and an IM (the entrenched image such as *Good Girl Gina*, Boromir in *One Does Not Simply*, etc.) can also be seen as pre-filled in such cases. What is more, labelling memes (such as the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme) have *no* text pre-filled, while building their constructional meaning on the basis of an entrenched (more specifically, 'pre-filled') familiar image of a young man and two young women. As we suggested above, memetic images and memetic text have different roles to play, and are often not related at all in terms of content. In fact, any inserted elements have a constructional role to play, so that the *Heads of State* DBM (Figure 4.7) with photoshopped heads of premiers and presidents follows the same pattern as any other DBM – the IM (i.e. the constructional template, featuring three MCs) is filled in any way which applies the constructionally determined scenario (X enjoys Y, a valuable person, situation, or object, but feels the sudden urge to consider Z, and to possibly replace Y with Z). The emergent meaning of a new instantiation of the DBM construction depends on 'filling in' new referents of X, Y and Z, but the filling in is not restricted either linguistically or imagistically. The effect of the meme would have likely been very similar if the three MCs were labelled with the names of the heads of state instead of having their highly recognizable faces inserted. In general, even though there are so many types of memes, cases of partially filled forms are still extremely common, and it does not really matter whether the pre-filled part or the added, post-filled part is textual or imagistic.

Partially filled linguistic constructions are different from syntactic constructions such as the Caused Motion Construction or the Ditransitive Construction, where none of the slots is prefilled, but the sentence overall represents a scenario with predetermined types of participants (as represented by sentences such as *Paul threw the ball straight into the basket* or *Diane gave Jim a book about basketball*). But the status of partially filled constructions is further complicated by the term 'snowclone' (Pullum 2004), referring to easily replicable and instantly recognizable expressions and clichés. A recent article

by Hartmann & Ungerer (2024) attempts to make the understanding of snowclones more specific, proposing three criteria: a recognizable, (initially) culturally salient source, the possibility to produce new instances by partial lexical substitution, and 'extravagant' language (i.e. noticeable, 'imaginative and vivid' language, Haspelmath 1999: 1057). One of the examples Hartmann and Ungerer mention is the *X is the/a new Y* expression, but they also refer to the *One does not simply* phrase. Both are interesting to us, for different reasons.

In earlier work (Dancygier 2009, 2011; Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017c) we discussed the *XnewY* expressions as constructions. The *XnewY* sentences all rely on the copulative construction and the presence of the adjective *new*. X and Y are fillable slots, and, because of the copulative structure, they are both either nominal, as in *Water is the new oil,* or made to fit nominal slots, as in *Slow is the new fast*. In each case, the constructional meaning relies on the understanding of the structure of the relevant frame, such that Y occupied the top position of choice until now, but now X occupies it. That is, the dominant lifestyle of always doing things quickly has now been replaced by slowing down, while in the frame of desirable commodities oil, until recently considered indispensable, is being replaced by water. The pattern relies consistently on frames and their structure, and on a shift within that frame (as perceived by the public). Further discussion of such usage is beyond the scope of the present chapter, but we argue that expressions such as *XnewY* belong to a group of frame-manipulating constructions (generally described as XYZ constructions, cf. Fauconnier & Turner 2002, Dancygier & Sweetser 2014) and are best treated as partially filled. In other words, we think we might learn more from analysing such patterns as constructions and discussing them fully in terms of meaning-construction processes.

As regards the *One does not simply* phrase, we want to refer again to our earlier discussion of ODNS memes. As we pointed out, not only is it not necessary for MVs to recognize the source, but the phrase has also gained new and independent status as a token of a category of things that are extremely hard to do. Memes not only use and re-use images and phrases which have become recognizable, they also create new usage, with attendant new (constructional) meanings.

Such an approach, which we have been gradually building throughout the book, requires that we also clarify the role of images a bit further. We have made a distinction between, on the one hand, images selected by MMs somewhat opportunistically, and, on the other hand, IMs, which become a stable element of the meme's structure – such as the faces of *Good Girl Gina* or the DBM image. We have not, however, fully accounted for cases where a meme uses images only. The *Heads of State* DBM we briefly mentioned above is one such case, but it has little bearing on the constructional core of the DBM meme as a whole and the constructional role of the meme's IM – rather, it fills the constructional slots of

the DBM IM by adding the images of specific fillers instead of labelling the IM elements with text.

However, there are memes which do not use text and rely entirely on composition of recognizable images. A good example would be the meme which took over the internet for a few days after the 2021 inauguration of President Joe Biden, known as the *Bernie Sanders in Mittens* meme. It started with a photograph of the Vermont senator, Bernie Sanders, sitting in a folding chair in the bleachers prepared for the audience. It was a bitterly cold day in Washington DC, and so keeping warm through the long ceremony was an issue. As Figure 12.1 shows, Sanders, wearing a surgical mask, is wrapped up in a warm coat and is wearing very large knit mittens. The dark green colour of the coat, and the intricately patterned large mittens, really make Sanders stick out like a sore thumb in the context of the surrounding smartly dressed attendees at the high-profile event. He seems to continue sitting, undisturbed and at ease, even as the area around him is already emptying. In the context of the powerful words of the oath just spoken and the national as well international significance of the event, Sanders' calm and unaffected posture, as well as his warm, no-nonsense clothes (someone referred to the effect as 'grumpy chic'), just stood out. Over the next forty-eight hours, the internet was buzzing with hundreds of memes, supported by quick-acting wizards of meme-generator sites. Each of

Figure 12.1 *Bernie Sanders in Mittens*, at Joe Biden's 2021 inauguration.

them placed the figure of Sanders (and his mittens) in a new environment: an empty subway car, various movies (in the cockpit of Millennium Falcon in *Star Wars*, next to Forrest Gump on the bench, doubled as the ghosts of the twins at the end of the hallway from *The Shining*), in various famous paintings, hanging upside down with some bats, and . . . in a *Distracted Boyfriend* meme, replacing the Girl in Red. Perhaps our favourite example (posted by @kevinsukholee on X/Twitter, 22 January 2021) inserted a drawn version of Sanders in mittens on his chair by the bus stop, in the rain, in a scene from Miyazaki's film *My Neighbor Totoro*, blending the style of the insertion to fit the animation film's aesthetics.

The *Sanders in Mittens* meme has no text and allows the Sanders figure to be inserted practically anywhere and at any angle, and all it really does is create an amusing contrast between the self-sufficient and unaffected figure of an older man in mittens and some scene known to contemporary consumers of politics and culture. Partly because of lack of text, some recognition of the images is expected – in fact, the meme became a kind of a test of cultural and political knowledge, with internet users guessing the next incompatible environment where Sanders has been inserted. Is the Sanders meme a construction, then? We tend to think that it is – it is a pattern, and it is not simply an unedited photo – the image in each case is composed in a specific way. And it did grow into a memetic construction, the meaning of which develops the idea that because of his clothing and posture Sanders looked funnily out of place in the inauguration audience. So the meaning appears to relate to the idea of comic incongruity (cf. Attardo 1994): by placing Sanders in maximally out-of-place contexts we increase the humorous potential – perhaps while at the same time re-evaluating those contexts and wondering if they really need to be treated as quite so serious or dramatic.

As in memetic images in general, the internet responded to Sanders' body posture and the surrounding context. Quite amusing on its own, the image just took off. However, not all such visual memetic choices are meant to be benign, even if humour is still involved. One example to consider is the incident that occurred at the University of California Davis campus in 2011, during Occupy Wall Street protests. The photo that went viral represented protesting students, a group of them sitting on the ground in a line, cowering down to protect their faces, and being pepper sprayed by a campus cop, walking casually by and calmly spraying the students. The figure of the cop was photoshopped and inserted into a number of images, some political, such as the US Constitution, Guantanamo, and Tiananmen Square, some cultural (well-known paintings, films, murals, iconic photographs, etc.) (see Shifman 2013; Milner 2013, 2016: Ch. 5). Generally speaking, as Shifman (2013: 371–2) shows, the pop cultural remixes of the original photo are more 'amused and humorous' in tone, while the political ones are more 'sardonic' – making grimly serious points. As *Know*

Your Meme reports on its 'Casually Pepper Spray Everything Cop' page, police officers involved disappeared from the police force soon after.

This example is much more serious than the *Sanders* meme, as it represents violence against protesting students, and, crucially for the power of the meme, a policeman is acting casually and callously, as if inflicting pain on the protesters were just a matter of an ordinary day at work. The meaning of the meme, however, depends, like in the case of Sanders and his mittens, on the viewpoints prompted by the images. We will not discuss the *Pepperspraying Cop* examples at length, but we want to mention just one: spraying the US Constitution, and thus blackening the text to make it unreadable. Evoking the Constitution brings up the frame of inalienable rights, which the cop is calmly ignoring, while not being threatened in any way himself. The point of the Meme Maker in this case seems to be justified by a pervasive metonymy which treats the destruction or obliteration of the form of a document as indicative of destruction or obliteration of its content. The meme can thus be read alongside another, much more public case, when The Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, quietly ripped up the text of the State of the Union Address, just as the (then, 4 February 2020) President Trump finished delivering it – because it contained lies. Pelosi's demonstration delighted Trump's opponents, and some compared what she did to the Republicans (effectively) ripping up the Constitution. The example shows clearly how a simple memetic form can be used to communicate strong opinions and stances via a powerful representation of actions.

To sum up, memes may rely entirely on images, when the composition signals at least two frames, ones which would typically not be combined. Creating jocular contrast (e.g. *Sanders-Star Wars*, or *Pepperspraying Cop-The Last Supper*) draws attention to the person, object, or frame targeted and leads to contrasting frames – with either humorous or critical effect. This brings us to the pervasive feature of memetic constructions – relying on contrasting frames and on metonymic evocation, whether just visually or through text and image. Frame manipulation seems to be a pervasive feature of memes, yielding surprising and original formal features, complemented by complex configurations of viewpoints.

The formal solutions we have discussed above bring us to the concept of 'extravagant', that is, vivid and unusual form of expression (Haspelmath 1999). Hartmann and Ungerer propose this to be the third feature of snowclones, and other partially pre-filled constructions. We interpret the idea to point to the choices of form and wording which attract attention and require some processing to be appreciated. The memetic forms just discussed also fulfil such expectations. We argue, however, that memes, snowclones and *XYZ* constructions are generally striking and appear to be witty not because of some special quality of language (or images, as we have just seen), but because of the way in

which visual and textual elements rely on specific frames and their evaluative content. Considering the way language uses frames may lead us to a better understanding of the emergence of constructional meaning, in contexts as specific as XYZ and *XnewY* constructions, and also in multimodal artefacts such as internet memes.

12.4 The Grammar of Memes

Throughout the book, we pointed out ways in which linguistic forms used in memes depart from standard forms used in communicative contexts. We want to review these observations here. But rather than start with specific ways in which memes relax rules of English grammar, we will describe memetic grammar as configurations of image, language, and meme space. In the overview below, we will focus on several areas of memetic usage to argue that the forms memes choose are not just random simplifications of spoken and written English. Rather, the innovations we found serve the specific needs of a multimodal form of expression and the overall functions of memes, such as expression of attitudes and viewpoints.

A typical meme uses an image as the central aspect of form. The image may fill the entire space of the meme or leave an empty margin above the image. This difference is quite significant. If there is text above the image, it typically means that the content of the text does not explain or label the content of the image. This is the case in *when*-memes, which insert a *when*-clause in the top part and then use the image as an equivalent of the main clause. In the *Bored Monkey* meme, for example (Figure 6.2), the top *when*-clause describes the situation of a person who lost access to their phone, and then adds the (conspicuously unrelated) image of the monkey, bored and inactive, as the 'main clause'-equivalent content of the construction describing how a person feels when the situation described in the *when*-clause occurs. This 'main clause', appropriately to the overall meaning of a generic predictive *when*-construction, describes the consequence of the situation in the *when*-clause, except that it does so visually, not textually, and that it is restricted to showing how that person *feels* (not, for example, what they *do* to reconnect with their phone). A similar use of an image replacing a whole discourse unit more typically expressed in text is that of the *Bae Come Over* meme, discussed in Section 6.7 (Figure 6.8): there, a complete line of dialogue is replaced by the image of the car crashed into the front of a building.

Different from this pattern of having text *above* a whole image, typical TT is included *inside* the scope of the meme's image, and connects with the BT, and not with the entirety of the image. Quite often, the image then provides a visual equivalent of a referent. It could be an IM (such as *Good Girl Gina* or *Scumbag Steve*), but it could be another recognizable image, as in the meme featuring

Harry Potter, and using the TT *Gets invisibility cloak* and BT *Sneaks into the library*, to describe Harry Potter as an avid reader, rather than as a person who would become invisible to do harmful things. In GGG memes and examples like the Harry Potter meme, the grammar works similarly: TT and BT represent two clauses of a sequence-of-events construction, where the image of a GGG character or of Harry Potter explains who is performing the actions described, with the referential expressions suppressed. Furthermore, all such memes use Present Tense, as the intention of the memetic construction here is characterization (of a GGG character or Harry Potter) via descriptions of what these MCs would do in specific situations (something blameworthy or praiseworthy).

Finally, we want to point out that appropriate adverbial conjunctions such as *when* or *if* appear textually in memes only if the second, main clause of the adverbial predictive construction is represented by the image, as in the *Bored Monkey* example. Consequently, any *when*-meme or a meme such as *If 2020 Was an X* (cf. Figure 2.6) use their conjunctions in a standard way, because images take on the expression of the main clause content, while otherwise the conjunctions are suppressed (as in the GGG or Harry Potter memes mentioned above).

These kinds of patterns are salient examples of the rules of memetic grammar. Importantly, such rules emerge and are consistently used because they negotiate the allocation of forms with three aspects of memetic structure in mind: image, text and spatial configuration. Indeed, the space of the meme is either totally filled by the image (and then the text is superimposed on it), or uses text in the blank space above the meme, thus allocating the image to fill a slot in the structure of the meme as a whole.[1]

In the cases where text is superimposed over the image, there are many options. It is possible (as in the *Harry Potter* meme or GGG memes) to use TT and BT to provide a sequence of behaviours which would characterize the referent represented in the image. In ODNS memes, the relation between TT and BT is not one of sequencing, but of providing further examples of the category of tasks that are impossible to achieve. The *Kermit* meme (briefly mentioned at the end of Chapter 3) shows a pre-filled BT, *but that's none of my business*, while TT varies; the *Most Interesting Man in the World* meme typically divides its fixed template across TT and BT (TT *I don't always X*/ BT *but when I do, Y*) in such a way as to deliver its punchline in BT. Various combinations are thus possible, depending on which part of the meme is pre-filled and what type of a construction is prompted by the pre-filled text (whether TT or BT).

[1] As we saw in Chapter 10, memes created quickly 'on the hoof' on social media platforms can function a little differently, as they will use the platform's text, necessarily appearing 'above' any image appended, to create canonical memes (like *when*-memes), but also forms which can be vague in terms of their meme type (see the discussion of Figure 10.1).

A very different kind of superimposed text (or, sometimes, image) is featured in memes in the labelling category (Chapter 4), where there is no TT/BT division of labour. The assumption then is that the image as a whole represents a salient situation, with some elements participating in it; consider the DBM, with its rich meaning of attraction and betrayal, or the *Is This a Pigeon?* meme, requiring the idea of someone confusing or misconstruing something. Labelling some aspects of the image is the primary means of building the specific use of the construction implied in the bare image (e.g. a boy changing his mind about two girls represented). In the case of the *Pigeon* meme, we should note that it also has a partially pre-filled question in it – *Is this X?*, where in the original subtitle X is 'a pigeon' (while the image shows the android character Katori pointing to a butterfly). In the meme, X can then be labelled by any item that can cause confusion. It is the question, or rather the hesitation it expresses, that is at the core of the meme's meaning.

Labelling with names or other noun phrases is essentially a way to mark the specific part of the memetic image as a 'stand-in' for an element playing the same role in another instance of the meme's particular scenario. For example, labelling Katori as *Silicon Valley entrepreneurs* (Figure 4.5) is a part of a process which yields another instance of the *Is This a Pigeon?* meme. Once all the constructionally relevant aspects of the meme's image have been labelled, we are viewing another pigeon meme showing 'someone clueless or pretending to be clueless', who confuses X with Y. In other words, the simple case of using labels on the basic constructional form of a labelling meme yields another instance of the same construction. Labelling is thus a way to guarantee the replicability and meaning consistency of the meme, but is also an interesting process, because in the case of multi-argument constructions such as DBM or *Is This a Pigeon?* the example to be rendered through labelling first has to be recognized as an instance of the constructional pattern the original meme represents. So labelling Katori by adding a reference to *Silicon Valley entrepreneurs* makes sense because at the same time the other two constructional slots get filled with different labels as well – the butterfly now represents *simply ignoring pre-existing labour laws & safety regulations* and the pigeon represents *innovation*. Labelling is thus a constructional process of re-filling the slots available in the meme's template, but they all need to be re-filled for the change to make sense.

However, there are at least three other forms of labelling. One of them is photoshopping parts of the image to visually signal the change of the identities of the participants involved. That is the case of the *Heads of State* DBM (Figure 4.7) we discussed above. Another case is using frame-metonymically valid visual forms, such as flags, political party or company logos, and so on. But we have also discussed labelling with snippets of Direct Discourse, and this is the memetic operation we want to consider next.

Inserting fragments of Direct Discourse in memes does not always involve 'labelling'; indeed as we have seen, it takes a number of forms, which have different effects. In some cases, the meme text is structured as a dialogue, even if lines in the dialogue can also be filled with descriptions of actions (marked by asterisks instead of quotation marks), or with images (this is often the solution in *Me/Also Me* memes). In these cases, lines of Direct Speech presented as *Me* are indicative of the MC's (or MM's) initial situation or attitude (such as, promising to save money), while the *Also Me* line shows how the promise has not been kept (for instance, buying lots of things from expensive stores; see Figure 6.5). Such cases are not in any sense instances of labelling, but they do belong to the overall characterization of quotations as demonstrations (Clark & Gerrig 1990). In other contexts, such as the examples of GGG memes we discussed, a solitary line of dialogue can be placed in BT, to be understood as the MC's response to the TT description of a situation (see Figure 6.1). In such cases, the BT lines are responses which confirm the MC's description as Good or Scumbag. For instance, in the case of *Good Guy Greg*, the direct speech BT is often an offer of help (e.g. BT *'Guys, where do you keep the vacuum?'* after TT *knocks ashtray onto floor*), while Scumbag Steve rudely dismisses the TT concern (e.g. TT *Breaks something expensive of yours* / BT *'Why would you spend that much on it anyway?'* in Figure 6.1). These cases, again, are clearly demonstrations of an MC's expected attitudes, and are not classed as 'labelling'. Finally, we have considered cases of images in which subjectivities represented are labelled with lines of dialogue – this is especially interesting in cases of *Classical Art* memes, as in Figure 8.1 (*Heathcliff the dog?*), where the dialogic labels on various characters represented jointly create a dynamic social situation. These examples are cases of labelling, even when there is less of a built-in focus on targeting specific kinds of behaviour (e.g. inconsiderate with *Scumbag Steve*, inconsistent with *Me/Also Me*).

A curious case worth revisiting from Chapter 8 concerns the *Mad Men*-themed grids (Figures 8.4 and 8.5), where labelling MCs as disciplines (Sociology and Economics) or groups of people (Europeans and Americans) is completed with Direct Discourse suggesting differences between the two referents, inserted as BT or as part of the label. These examples are particularly interesting in that they use labelling twice to achieve two effects: identification of the entity intended (academic discipline or geographical location) and demonstration via Direct Speech (the original quotes from the series, or newly minted snippets suggesting an e-mail exchange of an American economic boast, and an insouciant European 'out of office' message).

Examples like these show that labelling may achieve various effects, but can have essentially two types of functions: the labels are used to (1) refill the constructional slots in order to apply the constructional template to another situation, which is achieved by superimposing appropriate noun phrases (NPs),

logos, or richer labels onto the image, or (2) specify the attitude of the MC represented via Direct Discourse/demonstration. Importantly, both can be done in one meme. And finally, a meme may have its pre-filled dialogic structure (consider *Anakin and Padmé*) while labelling the MCs differently, to apply the effect of the dialogue to another situation.

This brief and selective overview of some of the main memetic strategies shows us that 'the grammar of memes' is a system of interlocking patterns, with individual components organizing a select aspect of the memetic meaning. But we would also like to conclude this discussion with some observations about memetic structuring overall.

In spite of their apparent formal simplicity, memes create a grammar designed to work across different modes – a multimodal grammar. We would summarize the role of these modes as follows:

Images: they can be entrenched IMs, and thus distinguish types of memes (along with their constructional features and meaning); images can also fill slots in the lower levels of the meme. Overall, images are not illustrations, but structural components.

The '**space of the meme**': most memes are organized top-to-bottom, and left-to right. The result of this organization is that the 'punch-line' (whether textual or visual) of a meme is typically located at the bottom of the meme, creating a structure resembling the discourse organization of topic and comment; another dimension depends on whether text is included in the space of the image, above, or next to it (as in scalar grid memes; see Section 5.1); the space of the image can be used as holistic background to TT and BT, or as a differentiated structure, ready for labelling.

Text: its form is fully adjusted to appearing over, or next to images and in designated slots of the 'space of the meme'. Most textual elements are noun phrases, many are clauses, but full sentences are rare.

Embodied interaction: memes force viewers to use eye-gaze, especially scanning and focusing, to trace top-down scales or uncover structurally valid and sequenced patterns of reading.

These brief remarks refer back to fuller discussion of specific strategies provided earlier in the book. They do not exhaust the description of important aspects of memetic structure, but we believe that the comments provided remind the reader that the typology of memes we have proposed targets an accurate representation of memetic form and meaning. The actual reach or frequency of a given form may vary, as some strategies appear only in specific types, while others have a very broad range of application. Furthermore, specific memes may follow the formula exhaustively, or mix in other

conventions. But there are general expectations regulating formal options. It would be difficult to enumerate all such restricted conventions here, but the examples mentioned above should remind the reader that memes construct meanings in constructional ways, and thus aspects of form have to be selected in a way that would make the specific construction applicable.

Some readers might wonder if artificial intelligence (AI) will change everything for memes. At the time of writing, it seems to us the dust hasn't yet settled in the debate surrounding the impact AI is likely to have: some, sometimes with direct or indirect commercial interests, push a narrative in which 'this changes everything', while others remain sceptical and think there is too much hype. Deeper debates about how well Large Language Models understand language, and what 'understand' means, link into this debate. So, will memes soon all just be AI generated, with one meme bot exchanging AI memes with another? Somehow, we doubt it – humans aren't just going to step aside and be passively entertained with zero input or engagement. We're already starting to see people on social media adding their own, ironic or even acerbic, text to AI created images, like the one in which a portrait of René Descartes was expanded or filled in to show him sporting shorts, very muscular legs, and white sneakers (@ErsatzDoctor on X/Twitter, 3 June 2023). Even more material to play with: maybe that is not so much a threat to the future of online meme exchanges, but further fuel? We will find out.

12.5 Why Memes Are Important

We want to close the book with a few thoughts about the importance of memes as an object of linguistic investigation:

- They rely on and further enhance our fast-growing ability to 'read' images (faces, situations, animals, etc.) as representations of emotions and moods and to then attribute those mental and affective states to other subjectivities.
- They help MVs learn to identify instinctual or conscious responses to moods expressed through embodied behaviour (eye-gaze, facial expression, body posture).
- They increase MVs' awareness of a range and specificity of attitudes and their ability to quickly categorize situations (as difficult, annoying, pleasing, funny, etc.), based on memetic scenarios encoded in specific types of memes. In this sense, memes are a safe haven to avoid becoming detached from interaction and its emotional value, as they allow online communicators to be exposed to clear and unambiguous categorization of social situations, while adding humour to these artefacts.
- They train MVs in reading simple (but not standard) linguistic forms and recognizing their function when the form is adjusted to the images included.

- They train language analysts to deal with the pace of linguistic changes enforced by the memes' multimodal form and constructional entrenchment.

Memes are among the most economic forms of meaning expression, and the cost of their efficiency is a range of concessions to the standard expectations of completeness, 'standard' grammaticality, or preferred literate usage. But the acceptance of simplified form does not mean a necessary relaxation of rules of logic and language. Memes comment on situations and human behaviour, and do so by using and inventing non-standard forms. The creativity of memes cannot be explained in terms of their deviation from norms, but in terms of the establishment of new forms, appropriate to the medium. Memes really should very much be 'our business' (cue Kermit the tea-drinker).

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