

Multimodal figuration in internet memes

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Abstract

Internet memes have become an essential part of Internet-based communication in recent years. Considering the importance of figuration of language, instances of figuration in Internet memes are no surprise. Understanding how multimodal figuration in memes function is essential to comprehend memes in general. Thus, in this paper, I will look at the role that figurative language plays in memes and how it functions. To do so, I will begin with Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) before shifting to multimodal cases of metaphor. I will also examine the case of multimodal metonymy and multimodal simile to determine how each figure functions in Internet memes, highlighting the importance of figurative combinations. Early results showed that figuration in memes is often combined (e.g., simile and metaphor), leading to categorization issues when studying figuration and multimodal figuration in Internet memes.

Internet-Memes sind in den letzten Jahren zu einem wesentlichen Bestandteil der internetbasierten Kommunikation geworden. In Anbetracht der Bedeutung der Figuration in der Sprache sind Beispiele von Figuration in Internet-Memes keine Überraschung. Zu verstehen, wie die multimodale Gestaltung von Memes funktioniert, ist für das Verständnis von Memes im Allgemeinen unerlässlich. In diesem Beitrag werde ich daher untersuchen, welche Rolle die figurative Sprache in Memes spielt und wie sie funktioniert. Dazu beginne ich mit der *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (CMT), bevor ich mich multimodalen Fällen von Metaphern zuwende. Ich werde auch den Fall der multimodalen Metonymie und des multimodalen Vergleichs untersuchen, um festzustellen, wie diese in Internet-Memes funktionieren, und dabei die Bedeutung von figurativen Kombinationen hervorheben. Erste Ergebnisse haben gezeigt, dass Figuration in Memes oft kombiniert wird (z. B. Simile und Metapher), was zu Kategorisierungsproblemen bei der Untersuchung von Figuration und multimodaler Figuration in Internet-Memes führt.

1. Introduction and theoretical framework

1.1 Internet memes

Internet communication has become quite ubiquitous in the past few years. From sending emails to now posting images and videos on social media platforms, the use of the Internet, and more broadly speaking, the Web 2-0, has changed the way we live. The core characteristic of the Web 2-0 is the participation and interaction of people online (Aghaei et al. 2012). Another significant characteristic of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is

multimodality (Kress/Van Leeuwen 2001; Stöckl 2004; Kress 2010; Jewitt et al. 2016; Ledin/Machin 2020). While multimodality is not unique to CMC, it is particularly interesting to look at online examples. Multimodality online can appear through the use of emojis, such as “👁️”, videos, sounds, or images, but also internet memes (Mittelberg 2007; Skovholt et al. 2014; Thompson/Filik 2016; Evans 2017; Hinnel 2018; Das et al. 2019; McCulloch 2019). The notion of meme comes from Richard Dawkins’ work on genetics (Dawkins 1976). In its original sense, it referred to the transmission of cultural items such as fashions, ideas, and sounds from brain to brain (ibid.: 192). While the means of transmission differ from genes, memes, in Dawkins’ terms, are also prone to natural selection, meaning that they must fight for survival. Some memes will replicate and survive, while others will not and die (Dawkins 1976).

Some of the core notions developed by Dawkins could still apply to Internet memes, such as the central idea that they are cultural items, as well as their need to replicate in order to survive in the online world. Internet memes have attracted the interest of scholars who have started looking at memes, the role they play, and how they are used (Shifman 2014; Shifman 2013; Wiggins/Bowers 2014; Milner 2016; Dynel 2016; Piata 2016; Ambrus 2017; Miltner 2018; Hirsch 2019; Yus 2021). Limor Shifman (2014: 41) defines internet memes as: “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.” An essential point that Shifman makes is that often the terms *memes* and *viral* are used interchangeably. The author explains that a viral post will appear once and will be viewed by many people. Internet memes, on the other hand, are viral elements that evolved into memes, following modification, parody, and/or imitation (ibid.: 73).

While primary research has focused on understanding what memes are, some scholars from the field of linguistics have taken an interest in the role that language plays in the creation and understanding of memes (see Piata 2016; Dancygier/ Vandelanotte 2017; Lou 2017; Zenner/Geeraerts 2018; McCulloch 2019; Lugea 2020). Such studies highlighted the importance of cognition and language in meme interpretation.

1.2 Figurative language

In the field of cognitive linguistics, for years, the emphasis has been put on metaphors, more specifically conceptual metaphors. Conceptual Metaphor Theory was introduced by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in 1980. They claimed metaphor to be more than a simple rhetorical tool, as the way we think is metaphorical in nature (Lakoff/Johnson 1980). Other scholars quickly took interest in the topic, bringing many other aspects to it, revealing the importance of figuration in the way we think, act, and speak (ibid.; Lakoff 1987; Kövecses 2010; Forceville/Urios-Aparisi 2009; Dancygier/Sweetser 2014; Hidalgo-Downing 2015; Barcelona 2003; Terry 2019). Considering the multimodal nature of internet communication, and especially internet memes, it is essential to take into account studies popularized by Charles Forceville that focus on multimodal figuration such as multimodal metaphor, multimodal metonymy, multimodal simile, and multimodal hyperbole (Forceville 2009; Forceville/Urios Aparisi 2009; Ferré 2014; Hidalgo-Downing 2015; Hidalgo-Downing et al. 2016; Lou 2017; Dancygier/ Vandelanotte 2017). Multimodal metaphors are defined as “metaphors whose target and source [domains] are represented exclusively or predominantly in different modes” (Forceville 2009: 24). In recent years, scholars have taken an interest in studying figurative language in regard to the digital age we currently live in (Bolognesi et al. 2019; Sweetser et al. 2019; Veale 2019). For instance, Dancygier and Vandelanotte argued for a vision of internet memes as “emerging multimodal constructions relying as much on image as on text” (2017: 565). Adrian Lou studied specific memes, known as *when* memes, for which he argues that they should be looked at as instances of multimodal similes and not metaphors (Lou 2017: 106).

2. Research questions

The present paper participates in the ongoing argument regarding multimodal discourse following a cognitive linguistics approach, and more precisely the multimodal analysis of Internet memes. It aims to reinforce past research as other types of memes will be looked at. To this end, the following sections will present the corpus used in writing this paper, as well as the methodology followed. The body of the paper is dedicated to the analysis of Internet memes to answer the research question: how does multimodal figuration function in Internet memes?

In this study, I will therefore look at three cases of figuration, metaphor, metonymy, and simile, in order to hopefully reinforce ongoing research conducted by cognitive linguists in regard to Internet memes, and to further broaden the scope on Internet memes to other forms of memes in order to highlight the function of figurative language in memes.

3. Methodology

Thousands of memes are shared by users daily online. As mentioned above, most scholars studied specific cases of memes, such as image macros (Dancygier/ Vandelanotte 2017; Lugea 2020; or *when* memes (Lou 2017). While image macros can be considered the prototype of an Internet meme, and *when* memes a central type of meme online, they are only two of the many types of memes that are created and shared nowadays. For this study, I have decided to conduct a qualitative analysis of some specific memes taken from a larger corpus.

A corpus of 150 Internet memes was collected arbitrarily using different platforms. Using Google Images, the keywords *internet memes* was used for the search, which mostly returned image macros. Because one of the goals of this study was to look at other types of memes, I resolved to using social media platforms, more precisely Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. On Twitter, the memes were collected on specific accounts that are known for their meme content, such as @9GAG. On Facebook, they were retrieved from the meme page *FRESHSTOLENMEMES*, and lastly on Instagram they were collected using the hashtag #*internetmemes*.

Using this method, 150 memes were collected. However, since this study aims to look at memes in English, other memes that were produced in French, German, and Spanish had to be discarded. Internet memes are not only produced in English, as scholars have looked at memes in other languages as well (see Bonenfant 2014; Johann/Bülow 2019). Moreover, some memes were shared by different users on different platforms and lead to duplicates in the set. Instances of the same meme were also discarded, which lead to the final set being composed of 139 unique Internet memes. The set of memes studied for this project is available online (<https://github.com/SisiB97/InternetMemesData.git>). For the sake of length and time, only some examples of memes will be singled out and studied below.

4. Metaphor

While the focus of the present paper is multimodality, it is essential to cover metaphor in a broader sense. As mentioned above, metaphors were the focus of Lakoff and Johnson's book, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Before this book, which introduced Conceptual Metaphor Theory (henceforth CMT), metaphors were merely seen as tropes used in literature and poetry to enhance the appeal of a text. In rhetoric, the use of tropes such as metaphor was simply viewed as a sign of wit. Therefore, the use of tropes such as metaphors was a way of showing off one's intellectual faculty of talking beautifully and, more importantly, persuasively. However, as stated by Lakoff and Johnson, "metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just language but in thought and action" (Lakoff/Johnson 1980: 3). Taken that metaphor is pervasive in language, action, and thought, finding instances of its use in internet memes is no surprise. But before pursuing the study, let us consider the following linguistic example of a metaphor:

- (1) He is *exploding* with anger.

This is an example that could be uttered by someone getting angry and not being able to contain it anymore. The sentence involves a combination of several conceptual metaphors that are closely related to one another; anger is HEAT, ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER, which is a subcase of the ANGER IS HEAT metaphor, as well as the BODY IS A CONTAINER FOR EMOTIONS metaphor. The metaphors mentioned above are pervasive in Western cultures, meaning that we live by them, use them, and encounter them very often without necessarily realizing that they are metaphors because of how entrenched they are in both thought and language.

With example (1), one could easily visualize a representation of this sentence, for example, by representing someone with specific features related to heat, such as fire or smoke. That shows that metaphors are not merely linguistic but also visual, as seen below in Figure 1.



Fig. 1: Cartoon representation of Anger (Disney-Pixar movie Inside Out)

In Figure 1, we have apparent depictions of features proper to heat, the most salient one being the fire coming out of the character's head. Secondly, the color red is often associated with several emotions such as "anger, embarrassment or sexual arousal" (Elliot 2015: 2). This image could eventually be used in addition to example (1) as a way to represent it visually, but it can also entirely replace the statement, becoming a fully visual metaphor (cf. Bolognesi et al. 2019). Since a linguistic metaphor would be a metaphor in which both domains are represented linguistically, a visual metaphor can be described as a metaphor whose domains are represented visually, as is the case in Figure 1. That said, this first part sets the foundation for the remainder of this section by showing how CMT works in verbal examples and how it can apply to other modes of communication, as we have seen with images. Let us now have a look at our first instance of a meme:

How boyfriends calm their angry girlfriends down



Fig. 2: "How boyfriends calm their angry girlfriends down" meme

The meme in Figure 2, more specifically the template, was shared by hundreds of users online, using the template and adding text to describe various situations. In this image precisely, two parts can be distinguished. The first one

is the text which says “[h]ow boyfriends calm their angry girlfriends down”. It is a general statement people may agree with or not. The text alone is metaphorical as it is based on the ANGER IS HEAT metaphor, and its subcase ANGER IS HEAT OF FLUID IN CONTAINER metaphor. It can be observed via the use of the expression *calm [...] down*, which is related to the idea that anger increases heat in one’s body, here the girlfriend’s, so by calming her down, the boyfriend is decreasing the level and intensity of anger (MetaNet Metaphor Wiki). The second part of Figure 2 is the image that can be considered the actual meme for it combines text and image, and the caption gives context to the image below it. This second part is strikingly interesting as we have a photograph of a man pouring gas into a fire. The man, the jerrycan, and the fire constitute the three subparts of the meme. Though the relationship between anger and the image seems unclear at first, after reviewing each text or tag, the viewers are able to recognize the conceptual metaphors, then construe meaning, and consequently understand the meme. Concerning the photograph itself, several pieces of text were strategically placed on top of specific parts or features of the image, the same way we put tags on kids at school, for instance. These tags work as means of identifying each part of the meme and what role they each play in relation to the meme.

As mentioned above, three parts need to be recognized: the man tagged as the *bf*, which stands for boyfriend, and the fire tagged as the *angry GF*, which stands for girlfriend. Finally, on the red jerrycan, the phrase *relax, babe*, was added on top of it. Even though one could argue that water can be found in the jerrycan, it is most of the time associated with gas. In this particular example, the image is based on the ANGER IS FIRE metaphor (Lakoff 1987: 388), where the man is literally adding fuel to the fire (see Fig. 3 below). In this case, the meme needs to be understood as follows: by saying *relax babe*, the boyfriend is actually adding fuel to the fire, hence making his girlfriend angrier rather than calming her down. After recognizing the construction, the conceptual metaphor, and the different roles involved in the meme, the viewer will be able to draw the subsequent additional meaning that is implied here, which may be that men often fail to calm their girlfriends down. What the boyfriend does and what he says contrast and have the opposite effect from the one intended. In addition, the meme seems to also be underlined with a sexist, or perhaps more demeaning meaning that is derived from it, with the use of the word *babe* which has a strong sexist and patronizing undertone. This highlights the spread of sexism to newer

forms of communication, namely memes, which has received the attention of scholars in recent years (cf. Drakett et al. 2018; Paciello et al. 2021).

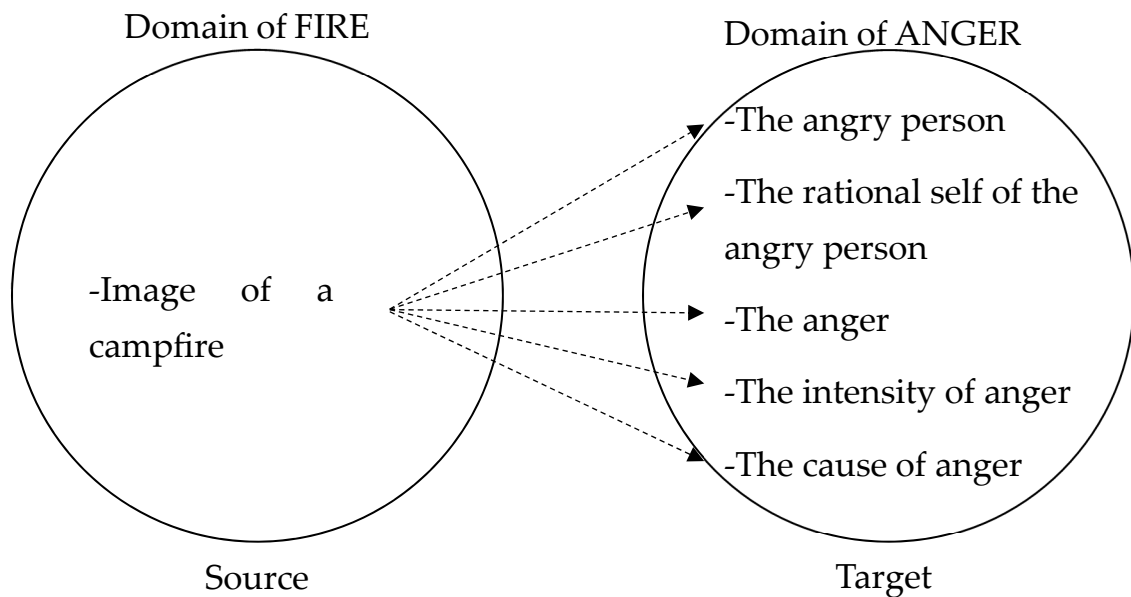


Fig. 3: Mappings for the ANGER IS FIRE metaphor (adapted from Kövecses 2010: 123)

Unsurprisingly, this first example in Figure 2 shows that the conceptual metaphors we use daily when we talk about anger can also be found in memes. Moreover, this type of metaphor could be considered a multimodal metaphor (Forceville/Urios-Aparisi 2009), as two modes are mixed here: the visual and linguistic modes. However, other examples using a similar template appear to be more fitting instances of multimodal metaphors.



Fig. 4: “Me; A new Spongebob Meme format; The Internet” meme

In Figure 4, the meme represents SpongeBob, a cartoon character which inspired thousands of memes on social media. This meme combines visual and verbal modes, making it multimodal. Considering the visual mode first without the textual input, the image would not be meaningful on its own. Hence, unlike the meme in Figure 2, which did not require the additional tags on the text to make sense, in Figure 4, the tags on the image are necessary. In this example, three parts are particularly salient and placed strategically on the image: “me; A new Spongebob Meme format; The Internet”.

In Figure 4, there is no additional context, as was the case before, where the caption functioned as the context. Here, the conceptual metaphor IDEAS ARE FOOD is presented multimodally, as the source and target domain involve two distinct modes (Forceville/Urios-Aparisi 2009; Piata 2016; Dancygier/Vandelanotte 2017). The source domain of FOOD is presented visually with the food being forced into SpongeBob’s mouth, while the target domain of IDEAS is presented textually with the sentence “a new Spongebob meme format”. This meme is therefore intended to be understood as being force-fed new SpongeBob memes.

Furthermore, the contrast between what is said and what is shown is rather important. The image depicts SpongeBob, while the text criticizes SpongeBob and, more precisely, its overuse in Internet memes. Therefore, while metaphor appears to be important, irony is equally important here. Herbert Colston explained that the goals of irony could be “to show negative emotion (94%)”, and “to be humorous (65%)” (2015: 18). In the SpongeBob meme, the irony appears to express humor. However, it is essential to point out that the ironic statement also seems to express negative emotion toward the idea expressed in the meme. As shown above, figuration is present and is often combined with other figures. Therefore, focusing solely on one figure is difficult, as figures are often combined to make meaning (Burgers et al. 2018).

5. Metonymy

While at the beginning cognitive linguists mostly focused on metaphor, leaving aside metonymy, the imbalance seems to have been corrected as scholars started looking at metonymy more often. Lakoff and Johnson defined metonymy as the “use of one entity to refer to another that is related to it” (1980: 35). They add that even though metonymy primarily has a referential function, similar to

metaphor, it also has an understanding function, and is a conceptual phenomenon that dictates how we think, talk, and act in our daily lives (1980: 35-37). To illustrate the idea that metonymy is a conceptual phenomenon, let us consider the following example from Lakoff and Johnson:

(2) She is just a *pretty face* (1980: 37).

This example, which could be found in everyday conversation, is metonymic, as at its root the metonymy FACE FOR THE PERSON can be found, which is pervasive in Western cultures as can be seen in both photography and painting (ibid.).

With conceptual metaphor theory came the notion of domains. In metaphor, the mapping is between two domains, the source and target domains. Domains are also part of how metonymy functions. While metonymy involves mappings as well, the nature of the mapping will be different from metaphorical mapping. In metonymy, the mapping is established within the same domain because at the core of metonymy is contiguity (Figure 5) (Littlemore 2015). In addition, while metaphorical mappings are monodirectional, from source to target domain, in metonymy, mappings can be multidirectional (Sweetser 2017: 701).

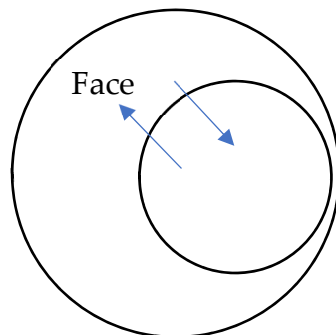


Fig. 5: Representation of a multidirectional metonymic mapping within one domain

While verbal instances of metonymy have been studied at length in the past few years, visual and, more precisely, multimodal instances of metonymy have recently piqued the interest of scholars. Emoji are perhaps one of the most widespread instances of such visual metonymy in CMC. Vyvyan Evans argued that “[m]etonymy is, in fact, what makes emoji work (2017: 187). He added that emoji work as EFFECT FOR CAUSE metonymy, in that emoji usually depict specific emotions, which can be viewed as the effect (2017).

In regard to Internet memes, Limor Shifman explained that “memetic photos” are one of the several types of memes (2014). Such memetic photos function like

emoji in that they provide visual representations of an emotion (see Figure 6 below).

had to wake up so early



Fig. 6: “had to wake up so early” tweet

In Figure 6, the author of the tweet complains about having to wake up too early, and to illustrate that, they added the photo of the YouTuber Nicole TV. The caption on top of the image provides context as to why the author used this photo. However, knowing the context of the image or who is represented in the image is not required to understand what is meant. The gesture, namely face-palming, as well as the facial expression, as Nicole seems to be blowing air out her mouth, are both known to represent exhaustion or even frustration, to a certain extent. In that sense, the gesture metonymically evokes an emotion, similarly to emoji, which depict emotion. The metonymy, therefore, is multimodal in that the EFFECT is depicted visually, while the CAUSE is presented textually in the caption, showing the importance of taking a cognitive approach to the study of Internet memes.

In 2017, Barbara Dancygier and Lieven Vandelanotte (2017) argued that metonymy is essential to memes. As seen above, conceptual metaphors are easily found in memes. In June 2019, actor Keanu Reeves appeared on stage at Microsoft’s E3 conference to present the video game *Cyberpunk 2077*, in which he portrays one of the characters (knowyourmeme.com). Following this conference presentation, a picture of Keanu Reeves standing up on stage was shared online, and it was quickly modified by social media users, creating the widely known mini-Keanu Reeves meme (Fig. 7). These two images gave rise to a tremendous number of memes online.



Fig. 7: Keanu Reeves and mini-Keanu Reeves



Fig. 8: “My mom explaining what’s wrong with me to the doctor; Me”

This image is well representative of one of the essential aspects that constitute a meme, that is, modification, or “transformation” (Shifman 2014: 41). It is easily noticeable that the first image has been transformed, shrunk into the second, which led to the creation of a plethora of memes. Many memes involve the mix of the two images together, but other instances only use one of them, mainly the second image that represents mini-Keanu Reeves. Regarding the collected corpus, mini-Keanu Reeves is very often used on its own, unlike the standard picture of the actor, which is only used combined with the modified image. There is thus an asymmetry in this example in particular in that only in the context of the modified image of the actor can the original picture express its meaning. However, the regular picture could stand alone without any semiotic constraints.

In this example, and this is true of many other memes of the same type, both standard and mini-Keanu Reeves are mixed into one picture to create the meme. Similar to the previous meme, the text was added to the image by using the same tag principle as before. Two different parts need to be recognized in this meme, *my mom*, who is doing something, and *me*. The *mom* part is placed on top

of normal Keanu Reeves, and the *me* part is placed on top of mini-Keanu Reeves. The first thing that people will recognize is that moms will always be bigger than their children, and here it is presented through metaphor. As a matter of fact, the image here provides a visual representation of the IMPORTANCE IS SIZE conceptual metaphor (Grady 1999; MetaNet Metaphor Wiki). As human beings, we often understand 'importance' in spatial terms, as in "this is the biggest project of my life," understood as "this is the most important project of my life". In the case of the meme, the metaphor is visual since importance is depicted through regular Keanu Reeves. Parents are usually seen as more important in the sense that they are the ones who have authority over their children, and they provide for their children's needs. Along these lines, it is worth noting that the meme evokes a specific frame (Fillmore 1976). In regard to frame, Fillmore stated that "the idea is that people have in memory an inventory of schemata for structuring, classifying, and interpreting experiences, and that they have various ways of accessing these schemata and various procedures for performing operations on them" (1976: 25).

Such frames metonymically evoke additional meaning, in this case through the image, which can be essential in the overall understanding of the meme. That is known as "frame metonymy" (Sweetser/Fauconnier 1996). Frame metonymy has also been studied in regard to Internet memes (Dancygier/Vandelanotte 2017). Images are compelling at evoking specific frames (Fillmore 1976). In the example above, the frame evoked is the parent frame, which is evoked visually, with regular Keanu Reeves, and textually with the word *mom*, making it even more evident what frame is evoked here and what type of relationship is established. The parenting frame is highly related to the frame of authority and responsibility (MetaNet Frame Wiki). The two latter frames can furthermore be associated with the notion of importance that is existent in the metaphor since importance often evokes responsibility and authority as in "he is an important person", or "she is a person with responsibilities", when referring to or talking about the head of a company, for instance. Presidents and CEOs are often depicted as responsible because they are in charge and authoritative to the extent that they need to establish rules that must be followed for the sake of the company or country.

Concerning the mini-Keanu Reeves meme, the same frames are evoked through the image, as well as the text. Given the responsible and authoritative nature of

parents, as they are the ones in charge of the children, the mom in the meme is taking care of the child by talking with the doctor while the child waits for her. Understanding the metaphor IMPORTANCE IS SIZE may lead viewers to observe mini-Keanu Reeves as characterizing the opposite of the parent in the sense that the child is not responsible, let alone authoritative. Furthermore, for a child of a certain age, having his mother talk to the doctor instead of talking to the doctor himself is frustrating, even humiliating. This example highlights the role of combined figures in the overall functioning and understanding of memes.

6. Multimodal simile

While frame metonymy appears to be present in most memes, there are specific memes that involve specific figures. In 2017, Lou published a paper on *when* memes and why they should be studied as cases of multimodal simile rather than multimodal metaphor. Outside of the fields of linguistics or rhetoric, simile is often only dealt with when discussing metaphor as a means to explain what a metaphor is. Similes should be understood as figurative comparison, as opposed to literal comparison (Israel et al. 2004; Carston/Wearing 2011). In fact, one of the initial steps of determining whether a figure is a metaphor, or a simile is to look for markers such as *like* or *as*. While it is often believed that the markers mentioned above are the only ones available to construct a simile, Israel, Harding, and Tobin argued that “similes really are just explicit, figurative comparisons, and therefore any construction which can express a literal comparison should in principle be available to form a simile” (2004: 125). This argument challenges the simplistic view that is generally held about simile, as example (3) shows.

- (3) The difference in water volume released is the *equivalent* of melting the entire Greenland and West Antarctic Ice Sheets (COCA 2022).

To contextualize, the example comes from Rutgers University, where researchers argued that “[e]ven if humankind manages to limit global warming to 2 degrees C (3.6 degrees F), [...] future generations will have to deal with sea levels 12 to 22 meters (40 to 70 feet) higher than at present” (ScienceDaily). While example (3) does not have *like* or *as* (typical markers for simile), it is a simile. The comparison is realized through the use of the term *the equivalent of*, which implies a comparison between the difference in water volume released and the melting of Greenland and Ice Sheets. Israel et al. (2004: 124) also argued that

comparisons are closely related to cognition as “one cannot make a comparison without thinking about both of the things one is comparing”.

People in horror movies be like



Fig. 9: “People in horror movies be like”

In Internet memes, similes are present in the verbal form. Figure 9 involves the case of a multimodal simile that is constructed as “X be like”, as can be seen in the caption. This construction is pervasive on social media and in nonstandard African American English. While in this example the simile is cued verbally through the marker *like*, the caption only provides the viewer with one part of the simile, the thing being compared. To understand the meme, the image below is necessary as it depicts a man running in the direction of death, which is indicated on the sign. Without the image, the caption above does not make sense. Once viewers connect the caption and the image, they can construe the meaning, namely that characters in horror movies tend to put themselves in dangerous situations, which often leads to the character’s death. One of the most salient examples of this would be the character entering the house of a murderer and shouting “Anybody here?” while fully aware that the killer is indeed in the house.

This example can be considered as an instance of multimodal simile since both the visual mode and verbal mode work together to make sense of the simile. Various attributes are involved in the example. First and foremost, the characters mentioned in the caption are visually represented by the man in the image. Attributes from the characters are mapped onto the visual representation of the man, such as the fact that they are (most of the time) humans. Secondly, the road sign verbally evokes the frame of death, which is perhaps a central aspect of horror movies. These attributes need to be put together for the meme

to be meaningful. In the data set, several instances of memes involved this “X be like” construction.

In other examples, simile and metaphor appear to be combined in the meme, as can be seen in Figure 10 below.



Fig. 10: “Sliding into adulthood like”

Figure 10 displays another instance of a verbally cued simile, as seen with the marker *like* used here. The caption reads “Sliding into adulthood like”. In this part of the meme different frames are evoked metonymically. The first one is the verb *sliding*, which evokes a more complex frame that may consequently involve aspects such as loss of control and having fun carelessly as a child. In fact, when sliding down, we do not have control over the speed, and therefore the landing, which may result in falling down the slide, and perhaps getting injured. Moreover, the term *adulthood* evoked a frame similar to the one mentioned regarding mini-Keanu Reeves. In this meme, the main part of the frame that seems to cohere with the meme involves (unexpected) responsibilities and not depending on someone else.

Even though there is a clear case simile here, the caption also involves a conceptual metaphor. In the caption, “Sliding into adulthood” involves the CHANGE OF STATE IS CHANGE OF LOCATION conceptual metaphor (MetaNetWiki). Becoming an adult is going from one state, being a child, then becoming a teenager, before becoming an adult. Moreover, sliding down necessarily involves a change of location from the top of the slide to the bottom of it. Considering the case of the images below, it is easy to relate the previous metaphor with two other conceptual metaphors, namely GOOD IS UP and BAD IS

DOWN, as the images depict becoming an adult as something negative. That is inferred with the facial expression of the boy, which is gradually getting worse. We might conclude that the child is grimacing because he is picking up speed and was not expecting it, therefore losing control. In that sense, the first image might refer to the early beginning of becoming an adult, where things are not too bad, but quickly evolves in an uncontrollable, unenjoyable situation at the end.

To focus now on the simile, as mentioned before, it is cued verbally. However, the text on its own will not make much sense because we need the sequential images in order to understand what it is like to become an adult. At first, the child is very slightly distressed, but it grows into a panic as the last picture shows that the kid is not amused by the slide at all. This occurs as he seems to be reaching for the sides of the slide in order to slow down. The simile needs to be understood as “becoming an adult is like sliding down a slide, you quickly lose control, and start panicking”. Additionally, the images can be understood as representing each stage of adulthood. It may start slowly and rather gently, but it grows into something you cannot control, leading later to panic. Similar to the previous meme in Figure 9, here the simile is multimodal and explicit as the text which involves a marker and the images work together in the creation of similarity. However, other memes can be considered similes without necessarily involving traditional verbal cues.

While this trope has received relatively less attention than metaphor, scholars who have looked at it found that there are different types of similes. Two types that are often dealt with are narrow scope and broad scope simile (Moder 2008; Dancygier/Sweetser 2014). Moder defines narrow scope similes as “restricted in their interpretation by the explicit linguistic specification of the attribute or dimension along which the mapping from the source to target domain is to be made” (2008: 312). Simply put, narrow scope simile focuses on very specific features and attributes. On the other hand, broad scope simile is defined as “relational rather than attributive and more open in their possible interpretations” (Moder 2008: 313). Broad scope similes, unlike narrow scope similes, require further explanation to make sense. While both are distinct, they can both be found in Internet memes.

Regarding multimodal similes in Internet memes, Adrian Lou studied the case of *when* memes. According to Lou, such memes should not be studied in terms

of multimodal metaphors or conceptual blends but rather as instances of multimodal simile. He proposed that “a multimodal simile, like its verbal counterpart, triggers mappings without relying on the presence of a final blended space where all inputs are integrated” (Lou 2017: 115). Additionally, he provides a classification of four *when* memes, which he presents as follows:

The multimodal broad-scope simile features a visual input that is jarringly incongruous with the text. Processing the simile requires the unpacking of its frame metonymies, which evoke compressed ideas of particular events and people which the simile tries to compare the target domain to.

The multimodal narrow-scope simile exhibits more accessibility; even though the image and the text are initially incompatible, both the image and the text highlight a similar perceptual pattern that facilitates mapping across modalities.

The multimodal mimetic simile contains an image that visually depicts the actions being expressed or implied in the meme’s text. [...]

Lastly, the source-focused simile presents a comparison that constructionally resembles the other *when* memes. However, the simile’s textual element retains the absurdity of the image, rather than likening it to something intuitively comparable. The simile thus subverts conventionality by restricting audiences from directly relating to what the simile tries to convey (Lou 2017: 128).

Out of the four categories aforementioned, three of them were found in the data set, but because of space restriction only two will be studied. The first is that of a multimodal broad-scope simile, which is observed in Figure 11.



Fig. 11: “when you’re chilling in the World Trade Center and suddenly get airplane wifi”

The meme in Figure 11 is composed of the caption which reads “when you’re chilling in the World Trade Center and suddenly get airplane wifi”, followed

by two photographs of a young boy, using some kind of device, perhaps a tablet. In the first photo he appears to be looking at his device, while in the second photo his facial expression seems to be conveying surprise, as his eyebrows are lifted up, and his eyes are wide open. Moreover, the low quality of the photographs seems to enhance the feeling of surprise.

Understanding this meme would require viewers to have the required knowledge to fully grasp the meaning behind it. In the caption the frame of the World Trade Center is activated verbally, and is furthermore narrowed to one specific aspect, namely the 9/11 catastrophe, which is activated via the use of the word *airplane* which is reminiscent of the planes crashing into the building causing the death of thousands of people. Following Lou's taxonomy (2017) the meme in Figure 11 falls within the first type of *when* meme as background knowledge is required in order to understand why the person is suddenly picking up airplane Wi-Fi, as it should only be possible on board of the plane. This meme also highlights the importance of causality in some memes, as here there is a cause (the caption) and the effect it produces (the photograph).

While multimodal broad-scope similes are relatively present in memes, it appears that multimodal narrow-scope similes are more pervasive in memes. As a reminder, multimodal narrow-scope similes are more accessible than multimodal narrow-scope similes in that they require less contextual or background knowledge.

That feeling when you
hit the edge of a
table with your elbow

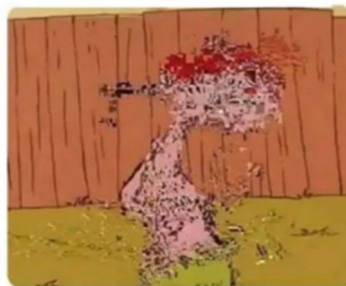


Fig. 12: "That feeling when you hit the edge of a table with your elbow"

The meme in Figure 12 introduces us to another version of *when* memes, one that involves the entire construction "that feeling when", which was then shortened to the *when* construction. This construction can be found in its complete form and also abbreviated to *TFW*, which stands for "That Feeling

When.” Following the caption is the image from the 1999 TV cartoon *Ed, Edd ‘n’ Eddy* (1999), in which one can slightly distinguish a human shape. However, the image is massively pixelated, which makes it challenging to distinguish apparent aspects of the person. On the one hand, because of the low quality of the image, viewers might be more inclined to keep scrolling without paying much attention to the content. However, on the other hand, one might argue that because it is a low-quality picture, viewers might then spend more time on the image to try to decipher its representation, which might then lead to the meme receiving more attention than if it were a clear, high-quality image (Enns/MacDonald 2012: 9). In fact, Enns and MacDonald argued that blurry images require more attention from the viewers than a clear image would.

While the caption – “that feeling when you hit the edge of a table with your elbow” – and the image below appear to be incongruent at first, we are able to construe meaning between the two. One reason why we can do so is because of the multimodal narrow-scope simile at play here. While multimodal narrow scope simile seems to be more prevalent in Figure 11, it is essential to note that the text is explaining something about the image, but the image is also explaining something about the text, therefore making it clear that the boundaries between different types of similes are rather fuzzy and open to interpretation. In Figure 12, there are two parts, the text, and the image, from which we have specific attributes, in this case, a feeling. The feeling (the target) described in the caption is most commonly known as what happens when we hit our funny bone, and more precisely, the ulnar nerve on the bone of our arm. Hitting it results in an unpleasant but benign tingling sensation in our arms. That is another reason we can understand this meme, namely, personal *embodied* experience, which in this case is shared by many. The pixelated image visually represents the tingling sensation that goes through one’s arm as one hits their elbow on a table corner, which is commonly known as *the funny bone*.

The meme in Figure 12 highlights a fundamental feature of simile, which is that, as Lou puts it, “[e]mphasizing one specific feeling or attribute is one of the rhetorical strengths of the simile, and we see that this is the same strength being augmented in its multimodal form” (2017: 117). In fact, regarding visual rhetoric, Charles Hill showed that static images are among the most vivid types of information available (2008: 31). Therefore, by adding an image to the caption, the creator is reinforcing and emphasizing the overall strength of the

simile. The meme in Figure 12 establishes the similarity between what is described in the caption and the experience it represents.

Adrian Lou argued that *when* memes should be considered instances of multimodal simile rather than multimodal metaphor (2017). Another type of meme, based on a different construction, seems to follow a similar pattern, and therefore fall within the same category.



Fig. 13: “How it feels to eat with someone who's always on their phone”

The caption in Figure 13 reads as “How it feels to eat with someone who’s always on their phone”. The verb *to eat* metonymically evokes the restaurant frame, or at least a frame related to eating. This frame is furthermore reinforced by the image which represents a man sitting alone at a table in a booth in what appears to be a restaurant. Similar to other memes, the caption here expresses a feeling or an emotion regarding a specific situation; in this case, it is how someone feels when they eat a meal with someone else who is constantly on their smartphone, and therefore not paying attention to either their meal or their friend.

At first, the caption essentially appears to be meaningless if used without the image. While the sentence is understandable, the use of the *how* construction is similar to how the *when* construction was used in the previous examples. Yet *how* examples require another part of the construction in order to make sense. When presented with the image, the meme starts to be meaningful. While the image is necessary to understand the meme, little to no contextual knowledge is needed, aside from knowing that a smartphone can capture someone’s attention for a long time. Because there is very little contextual knowledge needed, this meme is a multimodal narrow-scope simile. Once offered the two

parts of the meme, viewers can easily distinguish which attributes are being mapped from source (image) to target (how it feels) in order to come up with the intended meaning of “eating with someone who is always on their smartphone feels like facing or talking to a wall”. In other words, it feels bad.

Because frame metonymy is inseparable from memes, it is essential to point out that the image also evokes a frame, namely the one related to human communication. There is a correlation between the wall in the image and a person on their smartphone while eating with someone else, across the table from them. Attributes that are proper to walls, such as the fact that they are non-human, emotionless, and unlikely to start a conversation or to answer back, can refer to someone who spends much time on their smartphone. These features are highlighted and then mapped onto the “person who is always on their phone”. Communicating with a wall is impossible, just as communicating with a person on their smartphone during a meal is useless, as they are focusing on their phone and are perhaps less likely to respond or pay attention to the person in front of them. In this case, the situation presented in the caption is similar to what is represented visually in the image. Specific attributes will stand out and make it possible for the viewers to construe meaning and understand the similarities between the situation and the image. That is what provides the second element necessary to construe the simile. Therefore, because of the way that *how* memes function, we can argue that they are relatively similar to *when* memes and can therefore be considered multimodal similes.

7. Conclusion

This paper looked at how metaphor, metonymy, and simile function in Internet memes. The first and perhaps most essential finding is that Internet memes are often the result of the combination of at least two figures (e.g., simile and metonymy), as can be seen in Figure 10, for instance. While conceptual metaphor studies appear to have attracted most of the attention in the past, other tropes such as metonymy and simile appear to be more central to memes than metaphor, as scholars have shown in the past. While multimodal similes were significantly more present in the form of *when* memes in the data set, I argued that cases of *how* memes should also be studied as multimodal similes, as other instances in the set fall within this category. This research paper also has its limits, of course. Firstly, the data set comprised of a total of 139 memes,

which is a relatively small number compared to the numerous examples of memes that exist online. Secondly, only three figures of speech and thought were studied here: metaphor, metonymy, and simile. However, other figures, such as hyperbole and irony, were found in the data set, too. Lastly, I only studied Internet memes in English in this paper, but memes are not uniquely attested in the English language. Future research on memes and figuration could involve a larger corpus and a more comprehensive range of figures. Moreover, because of the diversity of the Internet and its worldwide use, memes in other languages could be studied to look for similarities or differences between them.

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