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Memes as Multimodal Metaphors: A Relevance Theory Analysis

Abstract

In this article I analyse object labelling image macro internet memes as multimodal metaphors, taking the Distracted Boyfriend meme as a case study. Object labelling memes are multimodal texts in which users add labels to a stock photograph to convey messages that are often humorous or satirical in nature. Using the relevance-theoretic account of metaphor, I argue that object labelling memes are multimodal metaphors which are interpreted using the same processes as verbal metaphors. The labelling of the image guides the viewer in the construction of ad hoc concepts, and it is these ad hoc concepts that contribute to the overall meaning that is communicated. The analysis in this article is rooted in the relevance-theoretic claim that pragmatic interpretive processes are triggered by all and any ostensive acts of communication. I also draw heavily on Deirdre Wilson's work on lexical pragmatics to show how this plays out in the case of a multimodal digital text. Memes, like verbal metaphors, do not require a special theory or framework. They can be understood as ostensive stimuli which trigger the search for an optimally relevant interpretation.

Keywords: internet memes; lexical pragmatics; metaphor; multimodality; ad hoc concepts; digitally mediated communication.

1. Introduction

In this article, I use ideas from pragmatics, and specifically from relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986/95; Carston 2002; Wilson & Sperber 2012; Clark 2013) to analyse object labelling internet memes. In particular, I draw on Deirdre Wilson's work on lexical pragmatics and figurative language to show how these memes function as multimodal metaphors, drawing on the same pragmatic processes as verbal metaphors. I begin in Section 2 with an overview of memes as a phenomenon, introducing the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme as an example of an object

labelling image macro. Section 3 provides the theoretical backdrop for the analysis. I introduce relevance theory and consider how it applies to memes as ostensive stimuli which raise expectations of relevance. I also outline the relevance-theoretic analysis of metaphor as a loose use of language. Developed out of pioneering work on lexical pragmatics by Deirdre Wilson and her colleagues, this forms the basis of the analysis that follows (Sperber & Wilson 1998; 2008; Carston 2002; Wilson & Sperber 2002; 2012; Wilson 2003; Wilson & Carston 2007; Wilson & Kolaiti 2017). In Section 4, I propose an analysis of tokens of the *Distracted Boyfriend* object labelling meme as multimodal metaphors. Section 5 brings these ideas together and concludes that, like metaphors more generally, the multimodal metaphors in image labelling memes do not require any special treatment. Their interpretation can be understood via standard relevance-based pragmatic principles and processes.

2. Internet Memes

The term *internet meme* has been adopted to describe digital cultural content that is shared, adapted, and passed between users online. Shifman (2014: 41-42) defines an internet meme 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.

Internet memes are passed from user to user, and spread throughout an online community as they are adapted and shared. According to Shifman's definition, an internet meme is not a single post, video, or image, but rather a group of digital items. The members of this group share characteristics of some sort. They resemble one another in some way and derive at least some of their meaning from being part of a wider set. In this paper, I discuss both these groups of digital items and individual units from within these groups. For clarity, I therefore refer to the group of digital items as a meme or meme family, and to individual items within that group as meme tokens. I refer to the

individuals who create and/or share meme tokens as *users*, and to the individuals who interpret those memes as *viewers*.¹

Image macros are multimodal memes which combine a stock image of some sort with user edited text captions. The LOLcats series is a typical example of an image macro meme (KnowYourMeme.com). Each token of this meme consists of an image of a cat with an accompanying humorous caption describing the cat's behaviour in childish or broken English. Examples of tokens of this meme are given Figure 1 and Figure 2.



Figure 1. LOLcats Meme: Keruptin Yr Fylez. Clancy Ratliff from St. Paul, MN, U.S., CC BY-SA 2.0

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¹ I follow the convention of referring to the speaker as *she* and the hearer as *he*, but also adapt this to the multimodal nature of memes. I will refer to the user as *she* and the viewer as *he*.



Figure 2. LOLcats Meme: Out of Focus. MisterWiki at English Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0

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Image macros are multimodal, and as Yus (2018) discusses, both the image and text typically play an important role in their overall interpretation. Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017: 565) describe image macros as “merging multimodal constructions relying as much on image as on text”. The pictures of the cats in LOLcats memes are just cute photographs without the added text. Adding text provides *anchoring* (Barthes, 1977) which guides the viewer in his interpretation of the image. Furthermore, the text on its own would be uninterpretable without the context that the image brings. However, when the text and image are combined and the meme token is interpreted in the context of the wider LOLcats meme family, each image becomes part of “one of the most popular and enduring Internet memes” (Miltner 2014). Meme tokens within the same meme family share distinctive features, and these may be visual or verbal (Segev et al. 2015). For example, as Shifman explains, LOLcats memes “share a topic (cats), form (photo + caption), and stance (humor)” (2014: 177). Image macro memes are often intended to be humorous and/or

satirical. In his analysis of 150 image macro tokens, Yus (2021a; 2021b) found that the humour often arises from the process of incongruity resolution. Many memes also involve word play and puns, and as such they exploit pragmatic interpretation processes including reference resolution and disambiguation to create the humour-generating incongruity (Oswald & Maillat 2018; Yus 2021a; 2021b). As Zappavigna (2012: 103) notes, image macros such as LOLcats are “used for social bonding rather than purely information sharing”. The use of humour and, in particular, “shared insider jokes” (Knobel & Lankshear 2008: 29) contributes to this function.

Object labelling memes are a subcategory of image macros in which a user adds labels to the characters or objects featured in a stock image. Users can easily and quickly create and share new versions of existing memes using free online meme generators. As I will argue in the rest of this article, by labelling the image, the user creates a multimodal metaphor. To show how object labelling memes function metaphorically, I analyse examples of the so-called *Distracted Boyfriend* meme. This is a widely shared object labelling meme based on a stock photograph taken by Antonio Guillem. It shows a man and a woman, presumably boyfriend and girlfriend, walking down a street, holding hands. The man is shown turning to look at another woman, wearing red. His girlfriend, wearing blue, looks at him in amazement and anger. The original caption for the photograph reads “Disloyal man walking with his girlfriend and looking amazed at another seductive girl”. The stock image on which this meme is based is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Distracted Boyfriend Meme Image. Photograph by Antonio Guillem / Shutterstock.com.

New versions of the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme are created by adding labels to the photograph for each of the main characters. In canonical versions, three labels are added, one for the eponymous Distracted Boyfriend, one for the Woman in Blue, and one for the Woman in Red. Some typical examples of text labels from real tokens of this meme are given in (1) to (3).

- | | | |
|-----|-----------------------|--|
| (1) | Distracted Boyfriend: | Me |
| | Woman in Red: | New books at the bookstore |
| | Woman in Blue: | The untouched, unread books on my bookshelf at home |
| (2) | Distracted Boyfriend: | Me |
| | Woman in Red: | Solar eclipse |
| | Woman in Blue: | Scientific evidence supporting the dangers of staring at the sun |
| (3) | Distracted Boyfriend: | Millennials |

Woman in Red:	Avocado toast
Woman in Blue:	A stable career, property ownership, health insurance, the financial stability to start a family

Each act of labelling creates a metaphorical relationship between the object or person in the text and the object or person described in the label. To demonstrate how the metaphorical relationship arises and how it is employed by the user to communicate her message, I analyse examples of this meme using the relevance-theoretic pragmatic framework. A brief overview of relevance theory is provided in the next section, and the relevance-theoretic account of metaphor is outlined, along with general comments about memes as ostensive stimuli.

3. Relevance, Metaphors, and Internet Memes

3.1 Relevance, Ostension, and Memes

Relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986/95; Carston 2002; Wilson & Sperber 2012; Clark 2013) is a framework for understanding cognition and communication. According to relevance theory, “[s]omeone who engages in any kind of ostensive behaviour intentionally draws some attention to himself” and by doing so makes manifest the assumption that “he is trying to be relevant” (Sperber and Wilson 1986/95: 53-54). When we draw someone’s attention to something, we are communicating that we believe it will be worth that person’s while to pay attention to it, and that their attention will be rewarded with cognitive effects. According to relevance theory, pragmatic interpretive mechanisms and heuristics are therefore triggered not only by utterances but by any behaviour which “makes clear an intention to communicate” (Clark 2013: 113), and the domain of pragmatics is not just utterances, but all ostensive communication.

Social networking sites thrive on sharing (Author 2021). When a user shares content on a digitally mediated platform, she is, in effect, *showing* that content to other users (Author 2021; 2022). Showing is an ostensive act of communication (Sperber & Wilson 1986/95: 46-54; Wharton 2009), and as such it triggers relevance-based comprehension heuristics. As Wilson and Carston (2019: 4) point out, there is a range of behaviours which might be used as “cues to ostension”, including “catching someone’s eye, touching... pointing, [or] showing

... something”. By sharing, a user is showing something to a viewer and drawing his attention to it. That viewer can expect his attention to be rewarded with cognitive effects.

A viewer might, of course, derive cognitive effects by processing information from an image, irrespective of how they came across that image. However, the act of showing an image to a viewer creates an ostensive stimulus. The act of showing raises expectations of relevance, and these expectations play a role in interpretation. When content is shared on social media, the user may not have complete knowledge of or control over who will see the post, and so there may well not be a definite addressee for many instances of sharing. However, as with pre-digital broadcast communication such as radio and television, “a stimulus can be addressed to whoever finds it relevant”, and we can understand the user to be “communicating her presumption of relevance to whoever is willing to entertain it” (Sperber and Wilson 1986/95: 158). The user could, of course, choose to share an unedited version of an image or photograph. This in itself would be an act of showing. However, when an image is edited and labels are added, it becomes what Jewitt (2013: 254-255) calls a “multimodal ensemble”. In the case of object labelling memes, it is this ensemble that is the ostensive stimulus, and this is the focus of my discussion here.

Editing the image to add labels guides the viewers interpretation in at least two ways. First, adding a label to a part of the photograph highlights the labelled part of the image, and in doing so directs the viewer’s attention to it. There are various ways in which speakers and writers may use highlighting to help communicate their messages. Adding labels to the photograph, indicates that the viewer should pay attention to those parts of the image, and he can expect to derive some relevance from doing so. The act of highlighting is a cue to ostension, and a clue to the user’s informative intention (Wilson & Carston 2019; Author 2021). The act of labelling not only highlights the objects or characters in the image, however. The labels also contain linguistic clues that guide the viewer in their interpretation of the image. As Barthes (1977: 39) identified, this anchoring function of text with image “helps to identify purely and simply the elements of the scene and the scene itself”. In the case of the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme, the labels provide referring expressions in the form of pronouns and noun phrases. These play an important role in guiding the viewer towards a metaphorical interpretation, as will see in the analysis which follows.

3.2 Metaphors, Relevance and Ad Hoc Concepts

In verbal utterances, whether spoken or written, the words that the speaker uses are clues to her meaning. They are not always used literally and neither do addressees expect them to be used so. Addressees simply expect words to be used in a way that is relevant. Lexicalised concepts may be adjusted to suit a particular occasion of use, and relevance theory makes an important distinction between the concept that is encoded by a word and the concept that is communicated by that word when it is used on a particular occasion by a particular speaker in a particular context (Wilson and Sperber 2012: 31-46).

When a speaker uses a content word in a spoken, written, or signed utterance, the lexicalised concept encoded by that word will be activated. This provides the starting point for the construction of what is known as an *ad hoc concept* (Sperber & Wilson 2008; Wilson & Sperber 2012). Ad hoc concepts are occasion specific adjusted concepts that are created for the interpretation of a specific utterance. The meaning that is communicated by a word on a particular occasion of use may be narrower and/or broader than its lexicalised meaning. For example, the word *drink* in (4) might be used to communicate that the speaker is not going to drink alcohol for a month. In this case, the communicated ad hoc concept is narrower than the lexicalised concept. In (5), however, we can imagine that the speaker might intend for the word *coffee* to be understood in a loose sense to mean any drink that one might buy at a coffee shop. In this case the ad hoc concept that is communicated is broader than the lexicalised concept.

(4) I'm not going to drink for a month

(5) Let's meet for coffee later

An ad hoc concept is indicated on the page by adding an asterisk in the notation, as in DRINK*. The same lexical item may be used to communicate different ad hoc concepts in different contexts. To distinguish between different ad hoc concepts, different numbers of asterisks are added. DRINK*, for example represents a different ad hoc concept than DRINK**.

According to relevance theory, “metaphor involves an interpretive relation between the propositional form of an utterance and the thought it represents” (Sperber & Wilson 1986/95: 231). Ad hoc concept formation plays a key role in understanding this relation. Imagine that Sara meets her friend in the park for lunch on a hot and sunny day, and, as they sit down on a bench, she utters (6).

(6) My office is a greenhouse

When Sara uses the metaphor in (6) in this context, she is communicating that her office is hot and stifling. The word *greenhouse* literally encodes the concept GREENHOUSE. However, in (6) the speaker does not use it to communicate this literal concept. There is no claim that Sara's office is an actual and literal greenhouse. Sara uses the word *greenhouse* because the concept that it encodes in some way resembles the concept in the proposition that she intends to communicate. The lexicalised concept GREENHOUSE makes a range of implications accessible to the hearer. These will be implications that follow from Sara's office literally being a greenhouse, and they might include, for example, the assumption that the office is hot and humid, and that it is a good place to grow plants. These assumptions will hold to varying degrees even if the office is not literally a greenhouse. Some of these implications will be relevant to the hearer in the context and will lead him to infer that the speaker intended to communicate that her office is a GREENHOUSE*. GREENHOUSE* represents a concept "which is close enough [to being literally a greenhouse] to yield the implications that make the whole utterance contextually relevant" (Wilson & Sperber 2012: 107). The ad hoc concept GREENHOUSE* represents something like "hot, stuffy, and airless space". From this, the hearer might infer that Sara is relieved to be out in the fresh air and that she finds her working environment uncomfortable on hot and sunny days. In this context, the hearer is not, however, likely to infer that Sara's office has glass walls or is full of plants. The ad hoc concept is both narrower and broader than the lexicalised concept. It is narrower in that it only includes functioning greenhouses, and not, for example, a greenhouse with broken windows which lets air circulate freely. It is broader in that it includes buildings that are not made of glass or designed to grow plants.

The construction of ad hoc concepts is guided by considerations of relevance. If Sara's utterance were produced in a different context, the ad hoc concept is likely to be different. Imagine, for example, that Sara's colleague is obsessed with plants and brings new ones in every week to decorate the office. As Sara is telling her friend about this, she utters (6). On this occasion of use, a different set of assumptions will be accessed, and the concept communicated by the use of the word *greenhouse* will be different. We can represent this different ad hoc concept as GREENHOUSE**, and it will communicate something like "full of plants".

In Section 3, I have discussed acts of sharing online as ostensive acts of communication. When a user shares a meme on a social networking site she is showing it to her viewers and they will therefore look for relevance in this act of showing. I have also outlined the relevance-theoretic account of metaphor as a loose use of language

involving the construction of ad hoc concepts. In Section 4, I propose a relevance-theoretic analysis of object labelling memes as multimodal metaphors, taking the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme as a case study.

4. Analysis and Discussion: The Case of the Distracted Boyfriend

4.1 Object Labelling Memes and Reference

In this section, I propose an analysis of the *Distracted Boyfriend* object labelling meme. I begin by considering how the “multimodal ensemble” (Jewitt 2013: 254-255) of text and image is processed by a viewer as a standalone stimulus. Three characters are highly salient in the *Distracted Boyfriend* image: the Distracted Boyfriend, the Woman in Blue, and the Woman in Red. These characters are centrally positioned, and the Distracted Boyfriend and Woman in Blue are shown in sharp focus. The Woman in Red is slightly out of focus. She is, however, closest to the camera and facing the audience, and the viewer’s attention will be naturally directed towards her if they follow the eye gaze direction of the Distracted Boyfriend. To think about the characters, the hearer must form a mental representation of each of them, and this will involve some process of recognising or conceptualising the components in the photograph.

In this analysis, I assume the relevance-theoretic characterisation of concepts discussed by Sperber and Wilson (1986/95; Wilson & Sperber 2012) and developed in my relevance-theoretic account of reference (Author 2020). On this approach, concepts are “comparable to entries in an encyclopaedia” (Wilson & Sperber 2012: 31). They are “psychological objects considered at a fairly abstract level” and “each concept consists of a label or address...under which various types of information can be stored and retrieved” (Sperber & Wilson 1986/95: 86). The characterisation of these files is discussed in more detail in various pragmatic approaches to reference and reference assignment (Reboul 1998; 1999; Jackendoff et al. 2012; Recanati 2012; 2014). Each account is underpinned by the idea that reference is resolved on a mental representation that takes the form of a file containing information relating to an individual concept. As Jackendoff et al. (2012: 156) note, we can “only refer to things that [we’ve] conceptualised”. In the discussion here, I use the term “conceptual file” to describe the mental

representations of referents in an utterance or image. We use conceptual files to store all of the information that we have about an object, person, or idea.

Forceville and Clark (2014) discuss cases where a viewer might recognise a character in an image as being coreferential with somebody for whom they already have a conceptual file (Julius Caesar, for example), and they see this aspect of image processing as a form of reference assignment. Forceville (2020) discusses reference assignment in images in relevance-theoretic terms in more detail. When the viewer first sees a token of the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme, and assuming he does not recognise the people in the image, he must construct a conceptual file representing each of the characters. At this point, these conceptual files are likely to contain only the very basic information that is available via the image itself. This might include, for example, the visual appearance of the characters, information about each character's sex and approximate age, along with some inferred assumptions about their relationships. It might also perhaps include some information relating to each character's behaviour in this particular moment. For example, the conceptual file representing the Woman in Blue will contain basic information about how she looks and what she is wearing, and this will be based on what the viewer can see in the image. The viewer might then infer that the Woman in Blue is in some sort of romantic relationship with the Distracted Boyfriend, based on the fact that they appear to be holding hands. The viewer might also infer something about how the Woman in Blue is feeling based on her facial expression. Similar files will be constructed for the Distracted Boyfriend and for the Woman in Red.

The meme is, of course, not just the image. The viewer will also process the linguistic information in the labels that have been added. Each of these contains a referring expression. I have argued elsewhere (Author, 2020) that referring expressions contribute to relevance by guiding a hearer to a conceptual file. The information encoded in the referring expressions, both conceptual and procedural, may guide the hearer in accessing an existing conceptual file on which to resolve reference. Alternatively, the information may guide him in the construction of a new conceptual file. Definite referring expressions indicate that the addressee should look for an existing conceptual file, while indefinite referring expressions indicate that he should create a new one. Other information from the referring expression guides the addressee in these processes and/or provides extra information that may be added to the conceptual file. In the meme token in (1), for example, the viewer will seek conceptual files onto which he can map the referring expressions *Me*, *New books at the bookstore* and *The untouched, unread books on my bookshelf at home*. He will follow a path of least effort when doing so, and test interpretations in order of accessibility. He will

look for an existing conceptual file that is compatible with the information encoded by the referring expression. A highly accessible interpretation is that the pronoun *Me* refers to the user who has shared the meme, and so the viewer will either access or create a conceptual file representing this person. If the meme has been shared by somebody that the viewer knows, then this conceptual file might be full of detailed information and rich assumptions about that person. If, however, the meme has been shared anonymously or by someone the viewer has not encountered before, the conceptual file will be fairly bare, perhaps consisting of little more than a placeholder with a username from the sharing account. For the sake of discussion here, assume that the meme has been shared by Sara. Sara is somebody that the viewer knows, and so he can access an existing conceptual file representing her. That file contains all the different assumptions that the viewer holds about Sara. There is information about what she looks like, what she enjoys doing, her connections with other people, and various other assumptions. The viewer will follow the same process for the other two labels, constructing or retrieving conceptual files that represent *New books at the bookstore* and *The untouched, unread books on my [Sara's] bookshelf at home*, respectively.

The viewer now has two sets of conceptual files. A set representing the characters depicted in the image, and another representing the referents of the labels. The viewer must infer what the user intended to communicate by adding the labels to the specific parts of the image. Assuming a relevance-theoretic approach to the interpretation of ostensive stimuli, the viewer will follow the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure. He will test interpretations in order of accessibility, and will assume that the first interpretation that satisfies his expectation of optimal relevance is the intended interpretation. In this case, a highly accessible interpretation is that the creator of the meme is using the text labels to refer to the characters in the image, in the same way that someone might point to somebody across a room while uttering a description of them. That is, the act of labelling is the act of saying that the characters in the image should be understood to be whatever is named in the labels. The user intends the viewer to infer a coreferential relationship between the conceptual file representing each character and the conceptual file representing the associated label. The literal interpretation of these acts of labelling would be something along the lines of (7) to (9).

- (7) Sara is the Distracted Boyfriend
- (8) New books at the bookstore are the Woman in Red
- (9) The untouched, unread books on my bookshelf at home are the Woman in Blue

If taken literally, this would prompt the viewer to merge the conceptual files of the two members of each pair from across the two sets. However, it is unlikely that the viewer will be able to merge these files in any meaningful way. He already holds various assumptions about Sara, and these are not compatible with her literally being the Distracted Boyfriend. Similarly, even though the viewer may have had to construct new conceptual files for the remaining two labels, the referring expressions describe objects, not people, and so once again are incompatible.

According to relevance theory, there is, however, no assumption or expectation that a communicator will make her utterance literal.² As Wilson and Sperber (2012: 108) explain:

[L]iteral interpretations are not default interpretations: they are not the first to be considered, and they are not necessarily easier to construct than non-literal ones.

Indeed, the viewer of (1) is unlikely to even consider that the acts of labelling in the meme are intended literally, just as the hearer in example (6) was unlikely to think that Sara's office was literally a greenhouse. The creator of the meme has labelled the person pictured in the image as something that he clearly is not, but we can still assume that she intends to communicate something relevant by doing so. Compare this non-literal act of labelling with the act of posting an old school photograph on Facebook and labelling it with the annotation *Me*. The label on the school photograph indicates that the person named in the label and the person in the photograph are literally the same person. As described above, to process the image, the viewer will construct a conceptual file representing the person in the picture. The act of labelling the image as *Me* then indicates that the viewer should merge the conceptual file representing the person in the image with the existing conceptual file representing the user. Merging the files enriches the original file, and it now contains information about what the user was like when she was at school.

In the meme, however, a straight merging of the files is not possible. As we have seen, the assumptions in the two conceptual files are not compatible. Furthermore, the act of labelling the image is unlikely to persuade the viewer to eliminate all of his previously held assumptions about Sara and overwrite them with the information from

² Experimental evidence appears to confirm that non-literal interpretations such as metaphors do not take longer to understand than literal alternatives (Gibbs 1994; Glucksberg 2001). If hearers always test a literal interpretation first, but reject it in favour of a non-literal alternative in some cases, we would expect metaphorical interpretations to take longer to process.

the image. Rather, he will look for some other way in which the act of labelling the Distracted Boyfriend as *Me* might be relevant. In the next section, I argue that by adding labels to an object labelling meme, a user creates a multimodal metaphor.

4.2 Object Labelling Memes as Multimodal Metaphors

When Sara adds the label *Me* to the Distracted Boyfriend character in the meme image, the viewer knows that she is not literally claiming to be the Distracted Boyfriend. In Section 3.3, we saw how the metaphorical utterance in (6) was interpreted. General considerations of relevance drove the construction of ad hoc concepts, and we can see the same processes at play when interpreting the meme tokens. In (1), Sara is not communicating the literal propositions in (7) to (9), but rather the inferentially adjusted propositions in (10) to (12).

(10) Sara is the DISTRACTED BOYFRIEND*

(11) New books at the bookstore are the WOMAN IN RED*

(12) The untouched, unread books on my bookshelf at home are the WOMAN IN BLUE*

The ad hoc concepts DISTRACTED BOYFRIEND*, WOMAN IN RED* and WOMAN IN BLUE* are inferentially derived in the discourse context and this process is guided by the principles of relevance. Again, we can see how this proceeds by thinking about how we understood the verbal metaphor discussed above (*My office is a greenhouse*).

Interpretation of the multimodal metaphor in the meme involves the same general processes. Rather than lexicalised concepts, the meme includes an image with components that are mapped onto conceptual files. Some of the assumptions associated with those conceptual files will be relevant in the context. For example, the viewer will look for ways in which Sara might resemble the Distracted Boyfriend as depicted in the image, and he will use this to construct an ad hoc concept for use in the proposition in (10). Notice that the use of an image allows a very particular moment in time to be shown to the viewer. He can assume that he is being shown this moment because it is relevant for the message that the user wants to communicate. He is not just being shown the Distracted Boyfriend, but the Distracted Boyfriend interacting with other characters and reacting in a very specific situation. Those other characters are also labelled, and so the viewer must interpret these acts of labelling relative to one another. The viewer will look for ways in which the depicted scene and the behaviour of the characters in that particular moment

resemble the objects or people referred to in the labels. He will also look for ways in which the relationship between the labelled concepts resembles the relationship depicted in the image. The ad hoc concepts will be constructed as part of the overall interpretation process and will be adjusted as the viewer searches for an optimally relevant interpretation. They will also be different for each token of the meme. For the particular version of the meme given in (1), a viewer may construct ad hoc concepts with features along the lines of those in (13) to (15).

- (13) DISTRACTED BOYFRIEND*: Easily distracted by the WOMAN IN RED*; finds the WOMAN IN RED* attractive and enticing; does not appreciate the WOMAN IN BLUE*
- (14) WOMAN IN RED*: New; interesting
- (15) WOMAN IN BLUE*: Familiar; available; not new

Notice that the salient features for the DISTRACTED BOYFRIEND* include reference to the other ad hoc concepts. The image functions as an extended metaphor in which each of the characters plays a role. Combining these ad hoc concepts with the propositions that arise from the acts of labelling given in (10) to (12), leads to the propositions in (16) to (18).

- (16) Sara is easily distracted by new, interesting things; Sara finds new, interesting things attractive and enticing; Sara does not appreciate familiar, available things that are not new
- (17) New books at the bookstore are new and interesting
- (18) The untouched, unread books on Sara's bookshelf at home are familiar, available, and not new

These then combine to yield the implicatures in (19) to (21).

- (19) Sara is easily distracted by new books at the bookstore
- (20) Sara finds new books at the bookstore attractive and enticing
- (21) Sara does not appreciate the untouched, unread books on her bookshelf at home

This implicature might then combine with other assumptions that the viewer holds to yield further implicatures about Sara's personality, character traits, and habits. Different viewers might include different features in the ad hoc concept that they construct. For example, a viewer with a particular affection for books might anthropomorphise them as having feelings, and might see the emotions of the characters as resembling the emotions of the books. In

that case, they might, for example, derive the proposition that the books at home are upset or angry, and this might then lead to further related implicatures and perhaps humorous effects.

Crucially, the interpretation of the meme depends on the combination of information in the image and the labels. They work together as a multimodal ensemble and if we change the content in the labels, different features emerge in the ad hoc concepts, leading to different implicatures. The version of the meme described in (2), for example, labels the characters as *Me*, *Solar eclipse* and *Scientific evidence supporting the dangers of staring at the sun*. Assuming that this meme token is again created and shared (or at least shared) by Sara, the viewer is likely to infer that she intended to communicate the propositions in (22) to (24). The ad hoc concepts here are indicated by a double asterisk simply to indicate that they are different to those in (13) to (15).

(22) Sara is the DISTRACTED BOYFRIEND**

(23) Solar eclipse is the WOMAN IN RED**

(24) Scientific evidence supporting the dangers of staring at the sun is the WOMAN IN BLUE**

The viewer must then construct ad hoc concepts to represent the characters in the image. Even though the starting point for ad hoc concept construction is the same as it was for the example in (1), the search for an overall interpretation of the meme token results in ad hoc concepts with different features. As before, the viewer will be looking for ways in which the objects and people described in the labels resemble the characters in the image, and this will drive the construction of ad hoc concepts. While depiction of the characters in the image may make the same range of assumptions accessible to the viewer, the subset of these which will also be relevant to the objects and characters described in the labels will be different. This leads to different ad hoc concepts, which we might characterise along the lines of those given in (25) to (27).

(25) DISTRACTED BOYFRIEND**: Can't help looking at the WOMAN IN RED**; finds the WOMAN IN RED** exciting and fascinating; does not pay sufficient attention to the WOMAN IN BLUE**;

(26) WOMAN IN RED**: Exciting; fascinating; dangerous

(27) WOMAN IN BLUE**: Sensible; boring; good for the distracted boyfriend**

When combined, these lead to the implicatures in (28) to (30).

(28) Sara can't help looking at solar eclipses

- (29) Sara finds solar eclipses exciting, fascinating and dangerous
- (30) Sara finds scientific evidence supporting the dangers of staring at the sun sensible and boring, even though it is good for her

Different aspects of the depicted characters and their relationships are made accessible by the different labels, and the ad hoc concepts that are constructed differ accordingly. Both tokens of the meme use the characters in the image to communicate something about the people, objects, and ideas in the labels. However, the overall intended meaning communicated by the meme emerges from the image combined with the labels when they are interpreted in context and guided by considerations of relevance.

We can repeat this analysis for the final example given in (3), as follows.

- (31) Millennials are the DISTRACTED BOYFRIEND***
- (32) Avocado toast is the WOMAN IN RED***
- (33) A stable career, property ownership, health insurance, the financial stability to start a family are the WOMAN IN BLUE***
- (34) DISTRACTED BOYFRIEND***: Is easily distracted by the WOMAN IN RED***; does not pay sufficient attention to the WOMAN IN BLUE***
- (35) WOMAN IN RED***: Trendy; fun; offers short term pleasure
- (36) WOMAN IN BLUE***: Sensible; offers long term security

This leads to the implications in (37) and (38).

- (37) Millennials are easily distracted by trendy, fun things that offer short term pleasure
- (38) Millennials do not pay sufficient attention to sensible things that offer long term security

In each of the different meme tokens the subset of assumptions associated with the ad hoc concepts is different. However, in each case, the construction of the ad hoc concepts is driven by a search for an optimally relevant interpretation.

4.3 Memes, Metaphor, and Meaning

We might, of course, ask ourselves why a user would use a meme to communicate such messages. In (1), for example, why does Sara use the meme to communicate her message about herself and her relationship to books? Again, we can begin to answer this question by thinking about metaphors and metaphorical interpretations more generally. Sara might have chosen to make the same basic point by simply uttering something along the lines of (16). She could have explained that she is always buying new books and should really read the large pile of books that she already has before purchasing any more. While this might communicate the same basic message that we infer from the meme, there are several reasons why the meme might be preferred.

First, it should be obvious that the paraphrase in (16) does not capture the full range of effects that we derive from the meme. If we formulated the features of the ad hoc concept slightly differently, we would get a slightly different implicature. Metaphors, and in particular creative and poetic metaphors, tend to generate a wide range of weak implicatures. As Sperber and Wilson (2015) demonstrate, a speaker's intended meaning may be more or less determinate. In some cases, forming a hypothesis about the speaker's intended overall meaning involves deriving a fully determinate proposition that can be paraphrased. Sperber and Wilson (2015: 121) illustrate this with the example in (39).

- (39) Passenger: What time is the next train to Oxford?
Railway official: 12:48

The railway official's reply can be paraphrased as (40), and not much, if any, variation is possible.

- (40) The next train to Oxford is at 12:48

The proposition that the official communicates in this case is determinate. However, in other cases, a speaker's intended meaning may be less determinate. We see this in figurative uses of language, such as metaphors. When Romeo describes Juliet using the metaphor in (41) (Shakespeare 1597/1980), he is communicating something much less determinate than the railway official's message. His utterance is much more open to interpretation and is much harder to paraphrase without loss of meaning.

- (41) Juliet is the sun (II.ii.4)

Sperber and Wilson (2015: 122) characterise determinacy as lying on a continuum where:

at one end of the paraphrasability continuum are cases where the speaker's meaning is fully determinate, and at the other are those involving the communication of impressions, where the communicator's meaning cannot be paraphrased without loss.

When a speaker's meaning is indeterminate, the implicatures that a hearer derives "are weak, and cannot be enumerated", and "[w]hat is aimed at in such cases of weak communication is a degree of cognitive alignment, not a duplication of precise contents" (Sperber & Wilson 2015: 147). Memes such as the *Distracted Boyfriend* allow the user to communicate a wide range of weak implicatures. I have spelled out determinate implicatures in my analysis here to demonstrate the interpretation process and to highlight the differences between different tokens of the same meme. However, it is likely that along with the paraphrases suggested here, these meme tokens also communicate a range of impressions which are less determinate and more vague.

Second, the meme makes a range of further assumptions accessible that are not captured by the paraphrase. For example, the two women in the photograph resemble one another physically. If the viewer notices this when interpreting the meme in (3), the ad hoc concepts that he forms might easily include this information, as represented in (42) and (43).

(42) WOMAN IN RED*: New; interesting; similar to the WOMAN IN BLUE*

(43) WOMAN IN BLUE*: Familiar; available; not new; similar to the WOMAN IN RED*

This may then lead him to derive a range of weak implicatures along the lines of those in (44) to (47).

(44) The books in the bookstore are very similar to those books on Sara's shelf at home

(45) It is the novelty of the new books that is distracting Sara, rather than a difference in quality

(46) Sara is always distracted by new, shiny things, and never appreciates what she already has

(47) Sara is likely to grow bored of the new books once she possesses them and they are no longer new

A further advantage of the meme format is that it allows the user to communicate a gentle, self-mocking attitude toward the scenario that she is representing via the metaphor. In example (1), she is communicating that her behaviour towards her books is as superficial and perhaps ridiculous as the behaviour of the *Distracted Boyfriend*. We can see how shallow his reaction is in the moment depicted, and we are encouraged to see a resemblance

between this and the user's tendency to be tempted by new books. Again, this will lead to a range of weak implicatures that are more likely to be impressions, rather than determinate propositions.

Finally, each token exists as part of a wider set, and this too contributes to the meaning that is conveyed in a way that is not possible if the verbal paraphrase were used instead. While each of the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme tokens discussed here could be interpreted in isolation, anyone familiar with the image as a meme, is likely to access further implications from interpreting the meme tokens. The fact that this same image can be modified and relabelled in so many different ways suggests that the situation depicted is a metaphor for a general scenario that many people can relate to. The experience of being distracted by something new and exciting when we should really be paying attention to what we already have or what would be good for us is very common. For the creator of the meme token in (1), the experience plays out with books. However, the very fact that the token is part of a wider family, communicates an assumption that this is a common, perhaps even universal, experience. Participating in the meme by creating or sharing a new version also communicates the user's insider knowledge and literacy of the meme. Creating a new version of a meme is an "act of semiotic belonging" and users share them to "mark awareness of a particular aesthetic" (Zappavigna 2012: 103), and to signal that they are privy to an inside joke. These may also lead to cognitive effects for the viewer in terms of the assumptions that they hold about the user. Recognising cultural references gives us what Zappavigna calls an "intertextual pleasure" (117), and users bond around the value or opinion that is being expressed or the experience that is being described.

5. Conclusion

Internet memes have emerged as part of the participatory culture afforded by networked communication and social media sites. Object labelling memes such as the *Distracted Boyfriend* meme are multimodal texts which can easily be adapted and shared by users. I have argued that the act of adding labels to an image and sharing that image in these cases creates a multimodal metaphor, and I have demonstrated that these metaphors are interpreted via the same processes which drive the interpretation of verbal metaphors. Sperber and Wilson (2008) have long argued that metaphor should not be considered as a special case and that the same interpretative process that drive non-figurative uses of language can also be used to explain the interpretation of metaphor and other figurative language

use. My analysis of object labelling memes is proposed in much the same spirit. Relevance theory, and in particular, Deirdre Wilson's ground-breaking work in the field of lexical pragmatics, demonstrates that words and other ostensive stimuli are no more than clues to the communicator's meaning. As Sperber and Wilson (1986/95: 226-227) explain:

[m]ost stimuli used in ostensive communication are representations ... [and in] appropriate conditions, any natural or artificial phenomenon in the world can be used as a representation of some other phenomenon which it resembles in some respects.

When users create and share a meme they create an ostensive stimulus, and that ostensive stimulus carries with it a presumption of its own optimal relevance. As with creative, poetic, or extended verbal metaphors, the multimodal metaphors in object labelling memes often achieve relevance by making a wide range of weak implicatures accessible to the viewer. These weak implicatures arise from the resemblance between the objects and characters in the image and the object and character in the text labels. Further implications may also follow from the meme token's position as part of a meme family, and users may create new versions of a meme to demonstrate their status as a digitally and culturally literate member of a social group. As such, object labelling memes offer the user a creative, flexible, and efficient means of simultaneously communicating a message and participating in a digital community.

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