

One does not simply borrow a meme.

Memetics from the perspective of cognitive contact linguistics

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In 1976 Richard Dawkins coined the term *meme* (a portmanteau of *mimesis* and *gene*), in analogy to the biological notion of a gene, to refer to any unit of cultural transmission (Dawkins 1976). The advent of the Internet, and of Web 2.0 in particular, revived interest in the concept (Blackmore 1999; Shifman 2014; Nooney & Portwood-Stacer 2014): the “multimodal artifacts remixed by countless participants, employing popular culture for public commentary” found on the Internet are prime (albeit quite self-conscious) examples of what Dawkins had in mind (Milner 2013). One notable subcategory of these Internet memes are so-called image macros. An **image macro** consists of text (usually in ‘Impact’ font) superimposed over an image. The image and discursive theme are fairly consistent in the replication process, but the text itself is open for modification. As they typically aim to produce an original, surprising or funny (though seldom punningly ambiguous) variant of the model, image macros are a form of wordplay – or perhaps rather word/image-play. As illustration, Figure 1 provides three examples of ‘Socially Awkward Penguin’.



Figure 1. The image macro ‘Socially Awkward Penguin’

So far, research on image macros and memes has focused on intertextuality (Huntington 2016); the literal and visual rhetorical techniques used in creating a meme (e.g. synecdoche, metaphor, pastiche, and so-called “irritating” juxtapositions; Stroupe 2004); critical discourse analysis of the socio-political messages they communicate (Milner 2013; Nakamura 2014); and methodological explorations of algorithms that can trace the propagation and vitality of memes (Leskovec et al. 2009; Paradowski & Jonak 2012). Attention from (contact) linguistics is however rare.

Nevertheless, in their tension between fixedness/conventionality and creativity/adaptation, memes and general and image macros in particular share quite a number of features with **constructions** as defined in Cognitive Linguistics (see e.g. Goldberg 1995). A specific subcategory of these image macros is specifically interesting in this respect: so-called snowclones are image macros that contain a fixed expression with one or more open slots.

Figure 2 shows a particular instance of “One does not simply [VP]”, a snowclone based on the Lord of the Rings quote “one does not simply walk into Mordor”.



Figure 2. An instance of the ‘One does not simply [VP]’ snowclone

The tension between fixedness, conventionality, originality, creativity, wordplay, and intertextuality becomes more outspoken when studying the borrowability of memes, as language users are additionally challenged in trying to combine source and receptor language structures and frames (compare Doğruöz & Backus 2009). Example (1) shows how the English snowclone from Figure 1 is embedded in a Dutch tweet. In the example, contact linguistics (e.g. relating to word order), Construction Grammar (e.g. concerning structural and semantic variability) and communication studies (e.g. in the blending of global image schemas and references specific to the Low Countries) meet.

- (1) One does not simply smijt een koffiebekerke in de vuilbak op nen Desiro.
 ‘One does not simply throw a coffee mug in the bin on a Desiro [train].’

This talk will discuss the challenges of an **interdisciplinary analysis** of memes, meme propagation and meme borrowing. We first present our data collection, which consists of a large image macro corpus and a database of the English and Dutch tweets based on the snowclones found in that corpus (e.g. [*not sure if NP or NP*] from the meme “The most interesting man in the world”, [*I don’t always VP, but when I do I VP*] from the meme “Futurama Fry”). The discussion will discuss the penetration of English snowclones in Dutch with a focus on the relationship between code choice and geographical diffusion; on the contrast between the loss of the visual rhetoric and the strong reliance on intertextuality; and on the adaptation of the construction to the receptor language structure (cp. Van de Velde & Zenner 2009, Van de Velde et al. forthc.).

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