



Emotional dimensions in the linguistic analysis of internet memes

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the role of features of linguistic constructions, and features of embodied emotion, in the meaning emergence at work in internet memes. It builds on the argument that images, often showing embodied elements such as facial expressions and interactions between participants, play structural roles in meme constructions. It also aims to show how memes function as shortcuts to stance, making sometimes complex configurations of stance easily accessible to online communicators. The cultural and social construction of emotion-based stance meanings provides support, from the area of contemporary social media discourse, for a theory of constructed emotions, and at the same time the emotional resonance of memes exchanged online helps build and maintain a sense of belonging within specific social networks. In the examples analysed, special attention is paid to questions of regularity vs. innovative variation (including intertextual links between memes).

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1. Internet memes at the crossroads of language, image and emotion

Internet memes have been the focus of considerable scholarly attention, especially within rhetoric and communication studies, where book-length treatments have focused on how memes emerge and how they contribute to public discourse (e.g. Shifman, 2014; Milner, 2016; Wiggins, 2019). The social and political meanings and ramifications of meme use are revisited regularly (e.g. Huntington, 2016; Ross and Rivers, 2017; Denisova, 2019; Paz et al., 2021; Dynel, 2021) to reflect changing themes and hot topics (Occupy Wall Street, Covid-19, etc.), while pragmatic studies have investigated aspects such as intertextuality, common ground and humour (e.g. Yus, 2018; Xie, 2022; Attardo, 2023).

In a strand of meme research in which this paper is situated, inspired by cognitive linguistics (see, e.g., Geeraerts and Cuyckens, 2007; Dancygier, 2017) and construction grammar (see, e.g., Hoffmann and Trousdale, 2013; Fried and Nikiforidou, 2025), linguists have been interested in figuring out in what way internet memes are like linguistic constructions (e.g. Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2017; Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2025b; Lou, 2017; Zenner and Geeraerts, 2018; Bülow et al., 2018), and how they, in a sense, extend the existing grammar of a language like English to include 'multimodal' constructions combining image and text in regularly patterned ways. One important overall observation in this connection is that images in memes are not there as illustrations of the text, or conversely, that the text need not describe what is in the image; this is different from many other image-text combinations, such as captions under a newspaper photo, or descriptions of illustrations in art-historical criticism. Instead, images in memes serve as structural components, with

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different image-text relations applying to different types of internet memes (including, e.g., so-called Image Macro memes, *when*-memes, labelling memes, and grid memes). A detailed description of these types is beyond the scope of this paper, though some representative cases are described in section 4 below. A recent survey that captures a broader range of the existing variation is presented in [Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2025b](#).

The focus on image-text memes that have achieved a certain level of cut-through or staying power, implicit in the contextualisation just described, brings with it certain limitations. The memes analysed in this paper tend to be slightly older memes, or to rely on slightly older patterns, and likewise their users tend to be part of different social niches compared to kinds of memetic discourse often highlighted, at the time of writing, in public discussion. The recent so-called “6 7” meme, for instance, while it finds its sources in specific contexts (like in a rap song or in reference to a tall basketball player), seems mainly a device with which to mark social belonging, “creating a community of practice among those who are “in-the-know”” ([Terkoufari, 2026](#)), and so-called ‘brain rot’ on Tik Tok more broadly has similarly been interpreted as a “genre of participation” among teenagers ([Owens, 2025](#)). While some parallels can be drawn with older, image-rich memes, such as antimemes or *Loss* memes (discussed in [Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2025b](#): Chapter 9), such meme types which more exclusively function as ‘social-binding’ ([Terkoufari, 2026](#)) in-jokes will not be the main focus here, as they seem less concerned with emotional stance-taking.

Indeed, in this paper, I want to focus on emotional dimensions in the linguistic analysis of memes, for a number of reasons. Memes are typically used to package emotional meanings, allowing online communicators to kvetch or vent about the frustrations of modern life, typical human foibles, personal (but broadly relatable) shortcomings, and such like. In this way, like other social media forms (e.g. [Marx, 2023](#)) including emoji (e.g. [Evans, 2017](#); [Seargeant, 2019](#); [Sampietro and Pérez-Sabater, 2025](#)) or reaction GIFs (e.g. [Miltner and Highfield, 2017](#); [Hautsch and Cook, 2021](#); [Hautsch, 2023](#)), internet memes can be considered a kind of evolutionary adaptation to changing habits of communication ([Svetieva, 2024](#): 692–693). What is lost in terms of the embodied dynamic of face-to-face communication is compensated for in online, mediated forms of communication by other means – including, crucially, reintroducing the body by means of imagery, with Meme Characters being used to ‘perform’ emotional stance, as an “embodied rehearsal of emotion” ([Hautsch, 2023](#): 74). In [Fig. 1](#), for instance, the facial expressions and posture of the rapper Drake ‘rehearse’ the feelings of dismissal and dislike on the one hand, and of endorsement and liking on the other, applied to the frame of meal choices (a healthy school lunch vs. an unhealthy meal at a fast-food restaurant). Overall, the meme, arranged as a vertical grid (cf. [Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2025b](#): Chapter 5), pokes gentle fun at the way in which we often make the choices which we know are wrong (in this case, less healthy).



Fig. 1. Drake meme.

By using these newer ways of sharing our emotional reactions and stance online, we potentially broadcast them to many more people than in typical face-to-face interaction, increasing the potential for forms of emotional contagion (cf. [Kramer et al., 2014](#)). Arguably, the spread and popularity of specific meme patterns is also an example of the social learning of emotion types – sometimes very complex ones, involving the combination of different stances culminating in an overall viewpoint.

Zooming out from internet memes specifically, much online discourse revolves around emotional and expressive meanings, often through specific digital affordances of the platforms used: think, for instance, of the very act of ‘liking’ or

favouriting online content (an image, a tweet, a TikTok clip, a WhatsApp message) with a single click (e.g. [Hayes et al., 2016](#)), of the use of hashtags on social media platforms (e.g. [Scott, 2015](#); [Zappavigna, 2018](#)) not just to identify topics and make them searchable, but also to mark group belonging and express stances (as with #yolo, ‘you only live once’), and the use of emoji for emotional engagement and social bonding (e.g. [Seargeant, 2019](#), [Zappavigna and Logi, 2024](#)). While notions such as engagement and bonding sound broadly positive, of course those same digital affordances can create conditions in which polarizing content algorithmically receives most visibility and, for instance, can help spread hate discourse online (e.g. [KhosraviNik and Esposito, 2018](#)) or can promote misinformation (e.g. [McLoughlin et al., 2024](#)). In this connection, [McLoughlin et al. \(2024\)](#) remind us of the dictum ‘don’t bring facts to a feelings fight’, demonstrating how misinformation evoking anger and outrage invites more ‘sharing-without-reading’ and thus spreads online more easily. Beyond social media, in areas such as advertising and campaigning, we see an increased importance of emotional persuasive strategies (e.g. [Schwarzkopf and Gries, 2010](#); [Bhatia, 2023](#)), arguably facilitated by increased reliance on multimodal forms (see [Dancygier and Vandelanotte, forthcoming](#) for an argument in this sense).

The examples that will be analysed in this paper draw on years of observation and data collection, begun as part of the work reported on in [Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2025b](#), but continued since then in order to orient to new research questions. This is not a systematic or quantitatively oriented corpus study, but a form of incremental collection aimed to cover as much as possible the range and classes of internet memes combining image and text and showing identifiable patterns of meaning emergence. They can be sourced to existing meme collecting sites such as [Knowyourmeme.com](#), internet searches, and personal observations on a number of social media platforms (such as Bluesky, Facebook or Reddit). The current popularity of TikTok as a prime social media platform, particularly among younger internet users, is not captured here, though for some brief analysis of parallels within the same overall approach, see [Dancygier and Vandelanotte \(2025b: 189–194\)](#). In order to explore ways in which emotion theories and linguistically oriented analyses of internet memes can be brought into fruitful dialogue, representative examples were selected of existing meme types and meme families in which (usually human) bodies are depicted.

Section 2 below first clarifies which aspects of (which) emotion theories are particularly relevant in the analysis of multimodal discourse in general, and internet memes in particular. Section 3 then turns to the interpretation of faces in internet memes, and Section 4 illustrates the structural function of images in internet memes across three representative examples, and reflects on the notion of multimodal constructions in this context. Subsequent sections consider features of meme blending and intertextuality in labelling memes (Section 5), regularity and variation in the example of the Two Guys on a Bus meme (Section 6), and dialogue memes (Section 7), before presenting some concluding thoughts (Section 8).

2. Emotion theories and linguistic research

Emotion research in the language sciences has often focused on emotion lexicons (e.g. [Wierzbicka, 1999](#), [Gladkova, 2022](#)), with interjections as one of the prime categories of investigation, though as [Majid’s \(2012\)](#) survey already demonstrated, “emotion can interact with language at many levels of structure” ([Majid, 2012: 432](#)), from sounds over words all the way through to grammar and discourse (on this last dimension, see e.g. [Martin and White, 2005](#); [Bednarek, 2008](#); [Mackenzie and Alba-Juez, 2019](#)). In the history of Western linguistics, [Foolen, \(2022\)](#) argues that emotion has received rather variable attention, for instance as a factor in language change, but in recent decades linguistics has taken part in the broader “emotional turn” ([Damasio, 1994](#)) in the humanities, thereby increasingly recognizing the importance of emotion alongside cognition and behaviour for a fuller understanding of human life.

The field of emotion research is vast and many-faceted, but for present purposes, I will adopt the somewhat simplified framing which sees two main competing views: the basic emotions theory, rooted in the work of Paul Ekman and associates (e.g. [Ekman, 1972; 1999; Ekman and Cordaro, 2011](#)) and the theory of constructed emotions (e.g. [Barrett, 2017; Russell, 2017](#))¹. According to basic emotions theory, there are a number of discrete ‘basic’ emotions, such as anger, fear, and joy, which are automated biological adaptations developed to deal with human predicaments. ‘Automated’ here can be understood as involving mandatory, complex and relatively inflexible responses (in terms of e.g. facial movements, vocalizations, changes to the nervous system, actions, etc.) to the emotion stimulus. Against this, the theory of constructed emotions holds that even such primary emotions as anger, fear and joy are psychological constructions, “the results of acts of categorization created by people to make sense of their current states, under the guidance of culturally shaped folk concepts” ([van Berkum, 2022: 13](#)). Instead of a trigger or emotional stimulus leading automatically to a basic emotion, setting off a series of hard-wired emotional reactions (feelings, facial expressions, vocalizations, etc.), the idea here is that the emotional stimulus triggers a set of physiological changes which we as humans interpret cognitively, and thereby categorize as this or that emotion. The latter aspect is labelled by [Russell \(2017\)](#) as an ‘Emotional Meta-Experience’ (EME): “one’s perception of one’s own emotional state achieved by categorizing that state” (2017: 122).

¹ In his survey of emotion theories as relevant to linguistics, [van Berkum \(2022: 9–13\)](#) also includes other challenges to the traditional basic emotion perspective: the ‘motivational’ and ‘component process’ perspectives. In addition, he (2022: 15–18) lays out a ‘metamodel’ of emotion to capture a number of important ideas shared across the different theoretical approaches.

The idea that emotions are created or ‘constructed’ rather than automatically triggered is rather appealing to linguists interested more generally in how meaning gets constructed in language. In a highly original paper, [Wiltschko \(2024\)](#) moreover offers an intriguing argument from grammar to support the theory of constructed emotions. Her core empirical claim, carefully investigated through extensive discussion of potential counterexamples, is that there are no “grammatical categories dedicated to the expression of emotions” (2024: 12) in the languages of the world. If emotions are basic, hard-wired and universal, and if we accept that language and emotion are connected (e.g. [Lindquist, 2021](#)), then this absence is surprising. Conversely, from the perspective of the theory of constructed emotions, it is expected: “if emotions (...) are constructed, we do not expect language to treat them as primitives” ([Wiltschko, 2024](#): 33–34).

3. Constructing the interpretation of faces and emotions in internet memes

As suggested in Section 1, internet memes are among the forms of social media discourse which allow the body to be ‘reintroduced’ in online communication which, in important respects, removes embodied aspects integral to face-to-face communication exchanges. This makes it possible for features such as facial expressions, head nods and tilts, frowns, gaze direction, body posture and such like to be displayed, at least to some degree, and integrated into the meaning that emerges from the internet meme. The bodies displayed can be those of famous real-world people (celebrities, film roles, and the like) or of more or less ‘accidental’ people who may or may not have become meme-famous (think of Bad Luck Brian, Scumbag Steve, and the like), but also of cartoon characters or animals, whose embodied behaviour we often interpret in very human-like ways.

In line with the theory of constructed emotions, briefly presented in Section 2, recent work has started to show that the specific meanings of any embodied features on display in memetic images depend on the memetic construction those images are part of ([Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2025a; 2025b](#)). While some images may be pretty clear and unambiguous, at the same time, some still images viewed completely out of context could be contextualized and made sense of in different ways that are not wholly predictable. Even with primary or ‘basic’ emotions, research has suggested interpretations are not always universally hard-wired and predictable (for a review, see [Barrett, 2017](#)). For the many finer-grained emotions this arguably applies all the more. In some older memes, the name of the meme is a very significant part of what guides interpretation: a meme such as Sudden Clarity Clarence, for instance, in its name constrains the interpretation of the image. The meme, illustrated in [Fig. 2](#), shows a young man surrounded by people, apparently at a party, with open mouth and an intense glare, typically accompanied in the meme by the phrases “holy shit” or “oh my God” in the top line of text, and identifying in the bottom line of text something that most people would have understood a long time ago already (in the example, “that’s why Titanic doesn’t have a sequel” — after all, the point of the Titanic’s tragic story is that the ship sank). While ostensibly the meme just pokes fun at dim-witted people coming to what ought to be an obvious realization rather later than most, it can also be used more insidiously to rhetorically present what is in the bottom line of text as something that, in the Meme Maker’s personal view, for instance in matters of taste where general agreement is rare, ought nevertheless to be accepted by all. For instance, one example has as its text “Oh my God/dubstep sucks”, in which a particular musical genre (“dubstep”) being terrible (“sucks”) is clearly a matter of personal opinion (compared to the Titanic factually having sunk), which the Meme Maker suggests slow-witted people will eventually accept.

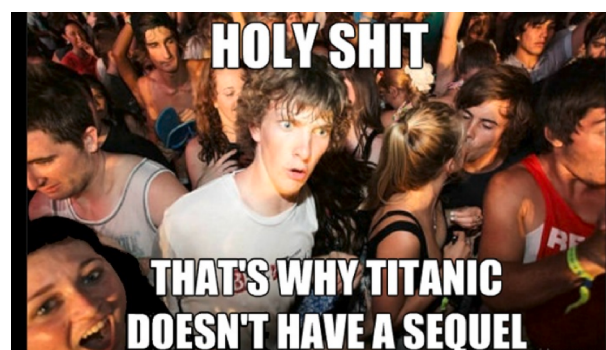


Fig. 2. Sudden Clarity Clarence meme.

One might imagine, in a different context, quite a similar facial expression being construed as an expression of fear, for instance, but not in the meme construction. Interestingly, in fact, the popular meme database Know Your Meme indicates that the Sudden Clarity Clarence meme series has been regarded by some as superfluous “due to its similarities to Conspiracy Keanu featuring an image of a frightened-looking Keanu Reeves”². At the same time, the ‘construed’ meaning of the

² <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sudden-clarity-clarence>.

facial expression in this meme is not completely open-ended: it would be difficult to construe the facial expression as a response to an emotional stimulus of joy or relief, for instance. As one of the reviewers observed, this complex relationship between embodied forms and meanings invites comparison to the way in which what can appear as a single gestural form, such as the palm up open hand gesture (Müller, 2004), does not (of course) have unconstrained meaning, but can motivate a number of different meanings, all in some way relatable to the form (e.g. introducing a topic, presenting a conclusion, or marking something as open-ended and not confidently known can all relate to the shape of holding up an object in an open hand).

To return to the question of ‘naming’ a meme, the observation that such naming can form part of what defines a meme construction was formulated explicitly by Zenner and Geeraerts (2018: 177–178), in their analysis of internet memes involving word play. Their examples, including Socially Awesome Penguin vs. Socially Awkward Penguin or Anti-Joke Chicken, show how lack of knowledge of the name of a meme can sometimes block comprehension. As a particularly striking example of the socially and culturally shared construction of emotional meanings of faces, Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017: 585–586) discussed the example given here as Fig. 3, a composite meme using the exact same text, but with very different meanings attached, based on the different frames provided by the images of the stock characters. Without knowledge of these stock characters and their names, it would be possible to interpret the faces in different ways: some might say, for instance, that the man on the left, apparently smoking a joint, is not trustworthy, whereas the blushing, perhaps shy young man with the hat on the right is harmless. In fact, the former is known as Good Guy Greg, representing considerate behaviour, and the latter is Scumbag Steve, representing inconsiderate and harmful behaviour. When Good Guy Greg sees that you’re drunk, he takes your keys – in order to prevent harm (e.g. prevent you from driving while drunk, offering to drive you home, etc.); when Scumbag Steve does the same, it will be in order to do something harmful (steal your car, go on a joy ride, etc.). The facial expressions and emotions play a role, but their meaning is not transparent, and is specifically construed within the context of the individual meme type. Both stock characters allow Meme Makers to ironically evoke stereotypical behaviour types. The example is one among so many illustrations of the layered meaning emergence in image-text memes, which requires integrating not just visual and textual inputs but aspects such as figuration, framing and viewpoint in ways explored in more detail in Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2025b).



Fig. 3. Composite image of Good Guy Greg and Scumbag Steve memes.

4. Illustrating the structural role of images in internet memes

This section articulates more clearly the idea that images in internet memes take up structural roles within a ‘meme construction’, similar to (purely) linguistic constructions, instead of merely illustrating and ‘repeating’ the meanings verbally expressed. For a fuller exploration of more types and more intricacies, the reader is referred to Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2025b). Here I pick out three examples only to briefly illustrate the general idea, against a background assumption that we can consider internet memes as providing ‘shortcuts to stance’: in highly condensed image-text formats, they allow – sometimes complex – configurations of stance to be easily accessible for Meme Makers to express viewpoints, and easily decodable by (meme-proficient) Meme Viewers. Following Du Bois (2007), we can define stance as involving a ‘tri-act’ of evaluating, positioning and aligning: “Stance is a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field” (Du Bois, 2007: 163) – though

note that, in contrast to common usage, alignment is understood here as scalar: “convergent, divergent, or as often happens, ambiguous between the two” (Du Bois, 2007: 162). Embodied emotions, shown in many images used in internet memes, can be considered as building blocks which scaffold the construal of stance-related meanings.

The first example, illustrated in Fig. 4, is quite similar to Fig. 3 in using a stock character and reusing this image in each iteration of the meme; for this reason, the image can be considered an ‘image macro’ (cf. Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2025b: Chapter 3). In fact, Good Girl Gina (the character in Fig. 4) is further similar in being part of a small group of stock characters representing stereotypical ‘good’ or ‘bad’ behaviour associated with male or female characters (Good Girl Gina/Scumbag Stacey, Good Guy Greg/Scumbag Steve). They all involve a multimodal form of conditional predictive constructions (Dancygier, 1998), which share some of their linguistic features, such as the parallel structure of the two clauses and the use of the habitual present tense. The fact that conjunctions (‘if’ or ‘when’, and ‘then’) are not given is not exclusive to the multimodal, memetic form of the construction: in purely linguistic cases too, this can occur (*She gets mad at you, she tells you why*; cf. Dancygier and Sweetser, 2005: Chapter 9). There are two important ways in which the language of the meme adjusts to the presence of the image. First, the text is divided across the top and bottom lines of text, superimposed onto the image, in meaningful ways: the top text provides the ‘protasis’ (P) and the bottom text the ‘apodosis’ (Q) of the predictive construction (if/when P, then Q). Second, the image is essential in filling in the role of the subject argument, normally obligatory in English grammar. It is precisely because it is provided visually and fills in the structural slot of the subject that it can be omitted from the text of the meme construction. A full linguistic rendering would require something like ‘When Good Girl Gina gets mad at you, then she tells you why’. The perfect ‘hold it’ smile on the stock character’s face arguably contributes to the frame of good, virtuous behaviour being stereotyped; overall, there is clearly a sexist presupposition at work in this particular example, which rests on the assumption that ‘non-good girls’ will get mad while refusing to state the reasons.



Fig. 4. Good Girl Gina meme.

The second example (given in Fig. 5) is of a *when*-meme, analysed by Lou (2017) as a multimodal simile (indeed, the example is included in his analysis). Note how here, the text is not superimposed onto the image, but is separate from it, appearing entirely above the image. Note also how the image here is not an image macro, but a more ‘ad hoc’, random image, not constantly reused in other meme iterations in the way image macros are. Even if the central Meme Character in the image is an animal, the embodied posture – and perhaps even, in a contextually constructed sense, the facial expression – contributes very meaningfully to the overall meaning of the meme, which centres on clinginess. The structural role played by the image here is quite different: it does not stand in for one particular argument in clausal structure, but instead stands in for a complete clause, i.e. the ‘then’-part of another *when-then* construction. Overall, the way a *when*-meme works is to establish a mood connection between the situation described textually (here, feeling anxious about being at a crowded party and so staying with your friend the whole time) and the situation shown visually below the text (here, a koala holding on tight to the ankle of a person). The situations as such are unrelated, but one feels similar to the other – hence the notion of multimodal simile (Lou, 2017, Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2017).

When you're at a party full of people
you don't know so you u stay with ur
friend the whole time



Fig. 5. When-meme.

The third and final example meant to illustrate the structural role taken up by images in internet memes is given in Fig. 6. It is an example of the prominent meme type of 'labelling memes', specifically of one of its most popular exponents, the so-called Distracted Boyfriend meme (DBM). The image here functions as an image macro, repeated across very many instances of the pattern, though labelling memes with non-entrenched images also exist. Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2025b: 54–61) have argued that the DBM is a multimodal construction similar to what linguists call argument structure constructions (e.g. Goldberg, 1995), like 'X put Y in Z' or 'X prefer Y to Z', which include specifications as to how many and which types of arguments are required or possible to fully realize the meaning of the verbal predicate. For instance, 'prefer' is incomplete if it doesn't specify who is preferring what, and to what other alternative. The meme does not feature a verbal predicate at all, however: the argument roles are instead provided by the three figures in the image, with their characteristic embodied stance, and the predication meaning emerges from the interaction we can see happening between the participants (attesting to the structural role of the image). The scene involves a man in the middle, sporting a very appreciative expression suggesting his interest is piqued, who turns to look over his shoulder to a passing girl in red (looking quite contented), to the strong annoyance of the girl in blue, who is holding hands with the man. The faces, body posture and movement in the still image, together with our knowledge of the frame of romantic relationships (with their expectations of loyalty), are sufficient prompts for us to simulate the broader experience (cf. Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2025a on the notion of 'simulated interaction'). However, the textual labels applied to the three 'argument roles' embodied by the three characters belong to a completely different frame that has nothing to do with a momentary loss of romantic interest in favour of another attractive alternative. Here, the dynamic of a sudden shift in attention or preference is applied to the frame of the novel *Moby Dick*, which can be critiqued for paying an inordinate amount of attention to facts about whales over the concerns of plot, usually more central to a fictional narrative. Note that the labels applied to the three characters in the image, in evoking an unrelated frame, work very differently from labels in other image-text combinations such as vocabulary textbooks or instruction manuals, where they would identify what is actually in the image.



Fig. 6. Distracted Boyfriend meme.

Let us return briefly to the notion of a construction, to consider how internet memes of the type discussed so far fit into the picture. One useful understanding of a construction is that discussed by Langacker, 1987: 57–63) in terms of a ‘conventional symbolic unit’. Croft (2005: 274) unpacks this dense formulation as follows: “an entrenched routine (‘unit’), that is generally used in the speech community (‘conventional’), and involves a pairing of form and meaning (‘symbolic’ [...])”. Construction grammar assumes that “it’s constructions all the way down” (Goldberg, 2006: 18), including “morphemes or words, idioms, partially lexically filled and fully general phrasal patterns” (Goldberg, 2006: 5). Beyond phrasal patterns, construction grammatical accounts have been formulated for larger units of text, including complex sentence constructions like conditionals (e.g. Dancygier and Sweetser, 2005), interactions in discourse (e.g. Brône and Zima, 2014), particular literary modes of discourse representation (e.g. Nikiforidou, 2012, Vandelanotte, 2021b), or even whole genres (e.g. Östman, 2005), including literary genres (e.g. Bergs, 2025).

From the perspective of construction grammar, theorized in a large number of publications in past decades (e.g. Fillmore, 1988; Goldberg, 1995; 2006; 2019; Hoffmann and Trousdale, 2013; Ungerer and Hartmann, 2023; Fried and Nikiforidou, 2025), the kinds of conventional pairings of forms and meanings described in the examples of memes under scrutiny in this paper are interesting particularly with reference to current interests in constructional creativity (e.g. Hoffmann, 2019; Bergs and Kompa, 2020; Hoffmann and Turner, 2025) and in multimodal construction grammar (e.g. Zima, 2025). The extension towards multimodal form-meaning pairings is a natural one: as Zima (2025: 8) reminds us, Langacker early on spelled out the “straightforward position that *any* aspect of a usage event, or even a sequence of usage events in a discourse, is capable of emerging as a linguistic unit, should it be a recurring commonality” (2001: 146). Thus, recurring combinations of verbal forms with co-speech gesture (e.g. Schoonjans, 2018) have, to varying degrees, been described as involving multimodal constructions – with discussions centring around degrees of obligatoriness or frequency required to confer constructional status (for extensive discussion, see Zima, 2025).

Internet memes such as discussed here instantiate a related sense of multimodality, that involving image as an expressive mode alongside text. As the examples of Good Girl Gina memes, *when*-memes and Distracted Boyfriend labelling memes show, memes can ‘break through’ to constructional status, in which the parts of the form-meaning pair that are fixed can vary across image and text, and in terms of extent and degree of abstractness. In Good Girl Gina memes, the image is fixed, as are multiple aspects of form (the parallel structure of top text and bottom text, the use of the present tense, the absence of textually expressed subject or of explicit conjunctions). For comparison, in typical *when*-memes, the image itself varies greatly, but its presence underneath and in completion of a *when*-clause is required; in the *when*-clause, only the conjunction is fixed (with some possible variation, e.g. *that moment when*). In the Distracted Boyfriend labelling meme, the image is fixed, and none of the words are, though they must label the three central figures of the image (in some variants, the labels are smaller images again, rather than words). Some other image-text memes, not discussed here, involve whole fixed phrases, alongside a fixed image (e.g. ‘one does not simply’, ‘but that’s none of my business’) or not (e.g. ‘said no one ever’). Each meme that conventionalizes into a construction thus requires its own description, just as linguistic constructions do (for more discussion, see Vandelanotte, 2021a, Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2025b).

What makes memes so effective communicatively is that Meme Viewers familiar with the patterns used will instantly be primed to expect a particular stance configuration: a wry comment on society’s expectations for virtuous female behaviour (Good Girl Gina), an amusing and perhaps surprising mood link between entirely unrelated situations (*when*-memes), an ironic observation of the human weakness consisting in momentarily neglecting a perfectly attractive option in favour of a new alternative that presents itself (DBM). The minimal verbal form tightly integrated with images with structural, ‘linguistic’ functions ensures the success of memes as shortcuts to stance, relying in many cases on forms of embodied emotion. The next section expands on the example of labelling memes, to demonstrate some of the intricate ways in which meme-proficient online communicators establish links between the emotion-based stance meanings of memes.

5. Labelling memes, intertextuality and meta-cognition of stance

When considering popular internet memes, it transpires that some meanings recur more than others. Memes focusing on likes and dislikes, changing your mind, stereotypes, recognizable ‘slice of life’ minor disappointments (like bad advice): many different memes turn out to target broadly similar facets of experience. And interestingly, meme users can be acutely aware of such similarities. A good example of this is that of the Exit 12 meme, a labelling meme used to make a humorous comment on a sudden change in preference or desire. The image used in the meme shows a car swerving, apparently rather late and brusquely, to take an exit off a motorway. In one example, the car is labelled up as “the media”, deciding at the last minute not to head straight on towards “real news”, but instead taking a sharp turn towards “Trump said a bad word”. The image in this meme does not show embodiment features (indeed, no people are visibly depicted, even if a driver must of course be presumed), though indirectly it could be argued that the brusque maneuver does betray a highly aroused emotional state (panic, excitement, ...).

Figs. 7 and 8 show two meme blends, demonstrating online communicators’ awareness of the overlap in meaning between DBM and Exit 12 (Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2025b: 154–155). These memes are clearly not about boys and girls or about driving, but about acting on the impulse to change from one thing or interest you enjoy and already have, to a competing, apparently (momentarily) more attractive alternative. Both labelling memes come ‘pre-set’ with three positions: the participant who makes a new choice, the initial preference or interest, and the novel, apparently more attractive option. Meme Makers responsible for the examples in Figs. 7–8 show full awareness of these aspects of the structure and meaning emergence in both memes. In other words, they perceive them as form-meaning pairings, i.e. constructions, similar to purely linguistic constructions. Fig. 7 is used to make a metamemetic comment on a change in popularity of memes, suggesting a temporal sequence in which DBM is being abandoned (by ‘me’, the Meme Maker) in favour of Exit 12, as a new option in the meme repertoire. It is difficult to verify exactly the accuracy of this temporal sequencing, though the indications given on the Know Your Meme website suggest it could be accurate (Exit 12 arriving towards the very end of 2017, several months after the initial popularity of DBM).



Fig. 7. DBM with Exit 12 meme as one of the labels.



Fig. 8. Exit 12 meme with DBM faces as labels.

Fig. 8 presents a different kind of blend, starting from the Exit 12 image macro, and editing the three faces of DBM onto the three crucial positions (the one who changes his mind, the initial choice, and the newly attractive option). Needless to say, it would be hard to make sense of artefacts such as these without prior independent knowledge of the memetic patterns involved.

What is of particular interest in examples like these is not only the Meme Makers' 'meta-linguistic' awareness of the constructionality involved, but also the 'meta-cognitive' awareness of the stance configuration involved. The emotion-based (Exit 12) or emotion-performed (DBM) displays in both scaffold the construction of a complex stance dynamic: happy acceptance of a partner/destination (cf. the hand-holding; the late change of direction suggesting the initial route was straight ahead); the appearance of an alternative option liked even better; the decision to act on the impulse to prefer the alternative; and, overall, the Meme Maker's assessment of the 'noteworthiness' of this change, as something that reflects human weaknesses, fickleness, and such like. In past work, this 'supervisory' viewpoint has been termed the Discourse Viewpoint (Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2016). In order to perceive the similarity of stance configurations across visually wildly different meme images, I suggest Meme Makers show a kind of 'meta-cognition' of stance, as a higher-level cognitive skill building on Russell's (2017) notion of the Meta-Experience of Emotion.

The type of meaning-based stance similarity required to connect the dots in Figs. 7 and 8 differs from what is perhaps an 'easier' type of intertextual link that can apply when there are formal similarities at play as well. The examples in Figs. 9 and 10 illustrate this kind of intertextual relation between labelling memes, though with an interesting and perceptive twist in the latter. Fig. 9 shows the Will Smith Slapping Chris Rock labelling meme, based on a still image of an incident during the 2022 Academy Awards ceremony. The interaction shows a violent scene with high impact, reflecting a strong negative stance (in the original scene, involving anger at a perceived slight to Will Smith's wife in a joke made by Chris Rock). The labelling in the example here applies this violent altercation to the feelings we experience when we are trying to enjoy the weekend, but are hit by the painful realization that a new stressful Monday awaits, spoiling our enjoyment. In a sense, the emotions running high in the original scene are perhaps 'too strong' for this relatively milder experience – which doesn't involve the high passions of actual physical violence – but at the same time, using this meme does suggest the strength of feeling. In this way, newer social media forms such as memes invite us "to interpret situations by *feeling* like those directly experiencing them" (Papacharissi, 2015: 4, emphasis original).



Fig. 9. Will Smith Slapping Chris Rock meme.

Some meme-proficient online communicators were quick to spot the similarity of the novel labelling meme with a pre-existing, cartoon-based one, known as Batman Slapping Robin, usually involving dialogue lines being filled in for the two participants. The cartoon image shows very similar event structure and power dynamics (even if the location of the protagonists is different), and reinforces this with conventions typical of comics (the lines indicating the trajectory of the slap, and the impact lines). These conventions further enhance the degree to which we can simulate what an actual slapping event feels like, and use this meta-experience when applying it to the labelling in the meme. Fig. 10 provides a strikingly metamemetic use of the older meme, in which no dialogue lines are added in speech bubbles (as is usually the case), but participant labelling is added ("Will Smith" to Batman, and "the reporter from 2012" to Robin), allowing the meme to both refer to the incident at the Oscars (Will Smith slapping someone) and commenting on it (he 'has form', i.e. he has been in a violent altercation before). (As it happens, a version circulates on the internet, re-drawing the Will Smith/Chris Rock incident in the style of the Batman comic.) The specific reference here is to a red carpet event in Moscow in 2012, where a reporter tried to kiss Smith. Instead of using labelling to construe stance around an entirely unrelated frame, as labelling memes usually do, Fig. 10 thus applies labels in order to make a fairly complex memetic 'in-joke', establishing links between

both the two memes, and the two slapping incidents. The Meme Maker's own position could be argued to be ambiguous: in casting Will Smith as superhero Batman, perhaps there is a hint that Smith's actions constitute justified uses of force (defending his own or his wife's honour) rather than violent actions to be deplored and avoided.



Fig. 10. Batman Slapping Robin meme.

6. Variations on a bus meme: Stance, humour and belonging

The Batman Slapping Robin meme discussed in the previous section is a cartoon-based meme, and usually involves what we might call 'dialogue labelling': filling in lines that could be spoken by the characters represented in the meme (see Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2025a, 2025b: Chapter 8). This section focuses on a series of examples relating to another cartoon-based meme, Two Guys on a Bus, and the next section focuses separately on dialogue-based memes, in order to demonstrate how playful variations on the standard meme patterns can create additional humour and signal feelings of "cultural and social belonging" (Doveling et al., 2018: 4; see also Gorton, 2023). Displaying emotions to others within your social network can, then, contribute to the regulation of emotions in ourselves (Fischer and Manstead, 2016) and to strengthening emotion bonds within the social network.

The Two Guys on a Bus meme originates in a cartoon by the Brazilian illustrator Genildo Ronchi, with a caption reading (in Brazilian Portuguese) 'choose the happy side of life'³. The cartoon shows the interior of a bus, with two passengers sitting on opposite sides, one smiling happily, the other sulking, each apparently looking at a different view (sunny and inviting on one side, dark and dangerous on the other). As the text of the original cartoon hints, these wildly different views are more likely a projection of the mood of the passengers (happy or sad). When used as a meme template, the cartoon is labelled up to identify participants and/or activities, as in the example in Fig. 11, where "getting a little beverage for the road" makes all the difference for someone's emotional well-being.



Fig. 11. Two Guys on a Bus meme.

³ <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/two-guys-on-a-bus>.

What I want to highlight here, starting from this initial example, is the myriad ways in which social media communicators not only use and re-use the existing template, but also introduce new variations that expand on the original scene. One example edits the original to show happy passengers and a sunny landscape on both sides, and distributes the text snippets “what can be” and “unburdened by what has been” across the two sides, a quote often used by former US vice-president and presidential candidate Kamala Harris. This is a way of remarking, humorously, on the oddity of the phrase, while perhaps also suggesting the Meme Maker’s appreciation of the positivity and optimism of the message. Other new forms involve zoom-ins, as it were ‘shrinking’ the scene. For instance, one zoom-in example shows only a cut-out of the happy passenger against the sunny background, with the text “listening to 2000s music”.

The examples in Figs. 12–14, on the other hand, expand the scene and increase the meaning potential. Fig. 12 zooms out to show the two passengers (sad and happy) in the rearview mirror, with the bus driver now visible. The labelling shows different interpretations of the bus driver’s apparently somewhat reckless driving style: negative (“he just cut someone off in traffic”) or more understanding and seeking potential grounds for justification (“he’s probably in a rush for a reason, maybe he’s late for a job interview. Maybe his wife is giving birth”). The expanded form provides a new exploitable template, for different communicators to show off their creativity and humour.



Fig. 12. Two Guys on a Bus in the Driver’s Rearview Mirror meme.

The examples in Figs. 13–14 are taken from microblogging websites (X/Twitter and Bluesky). Fig. 13 was used as a visual quote-tweet comment: the quoted tweet explains the results of a YouGov survey, showing a (slightly) greater preference for top floor seating in double-decker buses. The visual response given by the social media user in the quote-tweet slot in Fig. 13 (an account since locked, who posted this on 25 October 2024), provides two levels, with two unhappy passengers sitting in the dark landscape at the bottom level, and two happy passengers bathing in sunlight at the top level. By relying on social network members’ familiarity with the meme pattern, the wordless visual edit can be surprisingly effective as a humorous comment on seating preferences.



Fig. 13. Quote-tweet with a 'double-decker' variation of the Two Guys on a Bus meme.

As a final visual example, consider Fig. 14, which has the text “Me” followed by the composite image shown (posted by the account [michaeldrummey.bsky.social](#), 5 August 2025). The image shows, in its top part, the happy passenger sidling up to the sad passenger and showing him his phone; the lower part shows a close-up of the happy passenger with the phone screen visible. The Know Your Meme repository lists this pattern as Happy Guy on a Bus Showing Sad Guy His Phone⁴, with an example of a cat picture being shown. In Fig. 14, the format is used to comment on a Lady Gaga video which was highly topical in early August 2025. The use of the pronoun ‘me’, analysed more fully in [Dancygier and Vandelanotte \(2025b: Chapter 6\)](#), establishes a connection between the Meme Maker and the Meme Character depicted, in this case the happy guy showing the Gaga clip on his phone. Using the *me* construction, together with the modified version of the Two Guys on a Bus meme, and connecting all this with a salient event in pop culture, allows the social media user to express a positive stance towards the video, signal group membership and build rapport online.

⁴ <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/two-guys-on-a-bus>.

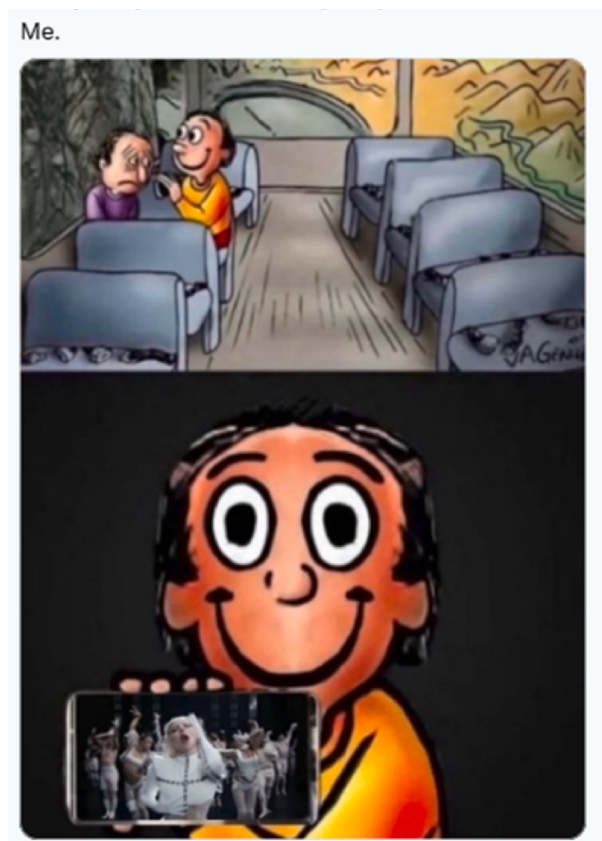


Fig. 14. Bluesky post featuring 'Me' and Happy Guy on a Bus Showing Sad Guy His Phone.

Examples such as these show the dynamic between the regularity and predictable meaning structures of firmly established patterns, and the desire and potential nevertheless to vary on the pattern and innovate new ways of expressing emotional stance and experience. A further observation is that in the right context, it is also possible to rely on the basic pattern merely through textual evocation, without using images. An example from within the friendship network of the author can illustrate this for the bus meme example: to a post showing a picture taken during a bus ride, and accompanied by the tweet text “We love a view from a bus”, another friend responded by tweeting “You’re the dude on the right in the meme” (sent from a now defunct account on X/Twitter, 28 July 2023). Given the bus context established in the initial post, and mention of “the dude on the right”, for meme-proficient social media users such as these, it is possible to evoke the Two Guys on a Bus Meme, and the ‘happy’ guy in particular, thereby turning the responding tweet into a compliment in the exchange. Further down in the same exchange, the same person elaborated on the response, adding that “You’re always so enthusiastic about things, which I love”, cementing the function of the bus meme’s evocation as a heart-felt compliment between friends, strengthening the social and affective bonds between them.

7. Dialogue memes as formats for stance presentation

Turning to dialogue memes, previous work has argued that, despite the absence of actual face-to-face communication, internet memes often strongly rely on the dynamics of dialogue (Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2025a). Memes which present participants in a verbal exchange sometimes include lines of dialogue, and apply labelling of various kinds on top of this. One such example is that of the Anakin and Padmé memes, which use a four-panel grid of stills from a Star Wars film with apparent subtitles (these in fact summarize a longer discussion and do not literally feature in the film). A number of visual and textual components form the core of the original version of this meme. First, we witness a zoom-in between two left-hand depictions of the same character (Anakin), whose zoomed-in lower panel depiction is unsmiling and serious. Second, in the right-hand character (Padmé) we observe a striking change in terms of facial expression, from happy and smiling in the top panel to serious and worried in the lower panel, suggesting changing emotional states. Textually, the left-hand cells of the grid are characterized by the absence of text in the bottom left cell; the right-hand cells, on the other hand, usually show the same text (sometimes with minor variations, especially shortenings). In the original, these texts are “I’m going to change the world” for Anakin on the left, and “For the better, right?” for Padmé on the right. One example adds

labelling to identify Anakin with “Elon Musk” and Padmé with “The internet”, suggesting that Elon Musk’s intentions with respect to the internet’s functioning are not necessarily to be trusted. The stance sequence we typically see in this meme goes from a potentially ambiguous opening gambit (Anakin, top left), over a positive, hopeful expectation of confirmation of good intentions or effects (Padmé, top right), through absence of this confirmation, to the eventual, disappointed regret or doubt about any good intentions or effects.

The examples included here (Figs. 15–16) allow me to briefly spotlight an interesting type of deviation from the default, in which faces become obscured because of visual operations, while still maintaining the overall meaning effect of the meme. Once firmly entrenched, indeed, constructions can afford not to show the full array of expected forms, retaining only sufficient and salient partial formal features that can metonymically call up the full meaning of the construction (cf. Dancygier and Sweetser, 2005: 266–268). In the example in Fig. 15, the emotional ‘darkening’ of Anakin becomes invisible, since a visual type of labelling, in the shape of the Union Jack flag representing the United Kingdom, has been applied to his face. Note, however, that the zoom-in effect has been retained: the lower flag is larger in size. The text has been changed from the original, but respects the formal requirements of repetition on the Padmé side (“So you’ll use them in your cuisine, right?”), and lack of response following Padmé’s question on the Anakin side. Overall, the meme pokes fun at the perceived blandness of British cuisine – failing dismally to incorporate any of the flavourful spices sourced from across its erstwhile Empire.



Fig. 15. Anakin and Padmé meme (British cuisine).

For comparison, the example in Fig. 16 obscures the change in Padmé’s expression, since the lower part of the lower face is missing, supposedly due to the undesired lay-outing effects of moving an image slightly around in Microsoft Word. Nevertheless, Meme Viewers’ knowledge of the memetic pattern will allow them to construe the full meaning of the artefact, which portrays Anakin-as-Microsoft-Word as an evil actor completely messing up a document’s lay-out.



Fig. 16. Anakin and Padmé meme (Microsoft Word).

As a final example, let us turn to a more recent dialogue labelling meme, with a series of image stills taken from a documentary about British celebrity couple Victoria and David Beckham (Fig. 17). In the original scene, David is repeatedly urging his wife to correct the impression she had been giving about her working class credentials – given that her dad dropped her off at school in a not very working class-coded Rolls Royce. Following repeated insistence, signalled facially and verbally, on David's part, Victoria eventually relents and corrects the record. The brief exchange inspired online communicators to use the format to criticize their own or others' perceived lack of truthfulness or accuracy in reporting what they were doing or what was happening. One example, for instance, shows as Victoria's sequence of text "I wrote for 3 h", "Ok, I wrote for 1 h", and finally "I opened my notes and took a nap".

The example in Fig. 17 allows a modest sample of auto-ethnography, in the sense that I created this version, using an online meme creator (imgflip.com), for use on a concluding slide of an academic conference presentation, thereby taking the meme format 'offline' to function in a specific type of face-to-face setting, among work colleagues. The example suggests a social desire or need to confirm affinities with an audience in terms of how we see the world, and to establish rapport in a light-hearted and humorous way (cf. [Barclay and Downing, 2023](#)). It also suggests more generally that knowing this or that meme type allows us to look at our own experiences through the lens of the specified meme format, recognizing and categorizing aspects of our behaviour in emotional terms according to newly negotiated community 'norms' encoded in emerging meme constructions. As a way to amuse, charm and convince an audience, using an image such as Fig. 17 in this way could be seen as a 'planned' emotional action, clearly different from an impulsive action or an automated reflex ([Scarantino, 2014](#)).



Fig. 17. David Beckham “Be Honest” meme.

8. Conclusions: Emotions and memetic discourse

In this paper, I have argued that internet memes allow their users to share experiences, construe emotional stance, regulate their own emotions, but also signal social belonging and rapport. This expression of stance is often facilitated by images in memes showing features of embodiment such as facial expression, posture and gaze, but also by displaying forms of interaction, including verbal interaction. These images do not illustrate or represent text in a meme but instead have conventionalized, structural roles in multimodal form-meaning pairings. What makes an analysis of memes as multimodal constructions especially compelling is that the specific constructional features of individual meme types can ‘pre-define’ slots for stance (e.g. ‘like’ and ‘dislike’ in the Drake meme), providing instant access to sometimes complex configurations of stance (as in the DBM, Exit 12, Anakin and Padmé and Beckham memes discussed in earlier sections). Combining minimal text and visual prompts, internet memes can function as powerful shortcuts to stance: recognizing the meme allows Meme Viewers to recognize the stance patterns involved. At the same time, just like linguistic constructions, meme constructions can have their conventionalized features creatively extended or manipulated in new ways, to allow further stance meanings to be expressed, as we saw in the examples of the Two Guys on a Bus and Anakin and Padmé memes.

In a modest way, from a small sample within one particular cultural niche, this exploration of emotional stance in internet memes can also provide further support for the idea that emotions are historically and culturally situated (e.g. [Leemans et al., 2017](#); [Mesquita, 2022](#)). We construe and learn emotions together, socially, and different eras or cultural niches can come up with different emotional categories or sub-categories of experience. Online sharing of internet memes – displaying our emotional stances and our newly developed means of expressing them – additionally increases the potential spread of such categories within and across social networks. Providing our own examples of experiences of socially construed emotional categories can help us feel a sense of belonging, as well as provide the playful enjoyment of and recognition for any clever or novel variations we might bring to the established patterns.

Beyond online meme culture per se, memetic discourse has become a pervasive ‘code’ many people acquire proficiency in, as a means of expressing (sometimes complex) emotional stance quickly and humorously, in ways which seep into social and political discourses of different kinds and which influence the way we communicate. We can see memetically inspired discourse forms influence, e.g., forms of advertising and online campaigning (e.g. Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2025b: Chapter 11, forthcoming), and we can see social media forms ‘leak into’ serious discourse types such as journalism (e.g. Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2017). As an example such as the mural by Eme Freethinker at Mauerpark in Berlin (Fig. 18) suggests, even the most offline of people risk running into something meme-related, as other forms of expression co-opt the memetic format. Here, the graffiti artist invites passers-by to reflect on how the idealized way we might portray ourselves on social media (posting impressive work updates on LinkedIn, or showing off how much fun we have at parties on Instagram) tends to clash with the realities of everyday existence. In giving shape to these kinds of emotional resonance, the multimodal constructions that are internet memes have earned a central place in contemporary communication.



Fig. 18. Graffiti art by Eme Freethinker in Berlin.

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Data will be made available on request.

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