

## **“I Has Seen Image Macros!” Advice Animal Memes as Visual-Verbal Jokes**

MARTA DYNEL  
University of Łódź, Poland

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Top Definition *meme*

1: an idea, belief or belief system, or pattern of behavior that spreads throughout a culture . . .

2 *meme*

[Internet meme] Used to give a bit of pseudo-academic gravitas to stupid viral shit.

(<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=meme>)

### **Introduction**

This essay considers the prevalent but underresearched phenomenon of humorous Internet memes by focusing on *Advice Animal image macros*, conceptualized as an internally diversified joke genre proliferating across social media. Specifically, Advice Animals are seen as cycles of *visual-verbal* jokes—widespread humorous units typical of participatory new media, which flourish via individual users’ creative contributions. Based on a selection of meme templates that have been very popular in the past few years, I advance several hypotheses about the pragma-cognitive mechanisms underpinning the humor that stems from the visual or verbal components, or combinations of them.

The Internet is the main vehicle for traditional jokes, called *canned* jokes, and promotes a plethora of new forms of visual-verbal humor. Humor websites offer fertile ground for production and dissemination of humor across countries, thereby both reflecting and shaping people’s tastes in humor. In recent years the Internet and computer technology have facilitated an influx of new forms of humor, much of which is contingent on pictures (photographs or drawings) or very short films, with text being reduced in length. Contemporary Internet users know these as *Internet memes* or simply *memes*, a common term on entertainment/humor websites and in popular parlance. A preliminary survey of the most popular international humor websites supports a tentative claim that memes have eclipsed standard canned jokes, at least on the Internet. It is noteworthy that English-speaking (and hence internationally available) websites with humor that rank highest in popularity (see the eBizMBA Rank, which indicates websites’ volume of Internet traffic) feature primarily memes, whilst websites with canned jokes are less popular. This corroborates the claim that new media have induced societal changes and a bias favoring visual communication over verbal communication. These may be consequences of digital technological advantages that the Internet affords by facilitating unrestricted circulation of overwhelming numbers of multimedia files.

The reduction of text likely facilitates international availability of jokes on English-speaking websites, giving Internet users, whether proficient in English or having only a rudimentary grasp of it, a strong chance of understanding memes and the ability to produce new ones. Memes thrive on anonymous contributions by Internet users, who are invited to creatively construct and submit new jokes, as well as evaluate earlier ones.

Even though Internet memes have been studied across disciplines (e.g., Bennett, 2003; Burgess, 2008; Johnson, 2007; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2011, 2013, 2014; Vickery, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2014), the mechanics of humorous memes (in their various forms and guises) require academic investigation within humor research and communication studies. This holds also for image macros, a salient Internet meme category divisible into a number of subtypes, one of them being the Advice Animals/Animal memes (notice the conventionally used capital letters and plural form). In essence, each meme of this type is comprised of an image and a creative caption submitted by a user, typically to induce humorous responses in its receivers. One picture (a *template*) may give rise to thousands of independent humorous units. Despite the prominence of image macros on meme websites, very little (humor) research has been done on this meme type. This article is meant to start filling this lacuna. Its paramount aim is to elucidate the key features of humorous Advice Animal memes and attest that they can be technically conceived as visual-verbal jokes, which resemble verbal jokes in various ways.

The discussion is illustrated with a selection of canonical meme templates that have been remixed and disseminated for a few years: Grumpy Cat, the Most Interesting Man in the World, Scumbag Steve, Insanity Wolf, Courage Wolf, Foul Bachelor Frog, Foul Bachelorette Frog, Anti-Joke Chicken, Paranoid Parrot, and Lame Poon Raccoon. Their popularity rates, as well as their origin and detailed description, can be found at [www.knowyourmeme.com](http://www.knowyourmeme.com). A corpus of over 700 memes (around 70 instances of each template, based on Google hits) was collected in January 2015. The 10 listed meme series were picked to guarantee a greater diversity of memes, as the objective here is to indicate the universal characteristics of Advice Animals.

### Internet Memes

The term *meme* (derived from the Ancient Greek *mīmēma*, "something imitated") is widely credited to English evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, who defined it as a cultural unit (any nongenetic behavior or cultural idea) that infects individual minds and seeks replication by imitation for the sake of its own survival (Dawkins, 1976; Wiggins and Bowers, 2014; cf. the first definition quoted from Urban Dictionary at the beginning of this essay). The irony of fate is that the concept of a meme has itself grown to be a meme in both folk theory and academia. At this point a disclaimer is in order: I do not intend to dwell on, let alone evaluate, "meme theory," which has aroused considerable controversy, raising doubts about whether it is capable of becoming a proper theory. What is important here is that the Internet meme has emancipated itself as an independent creativity-based species, now omnipresent in online reality. Dawkins himself observed this, making an attempt to relate the new form of meme to his original proposals, which is tangential to this article:

The very idea of the meme has itself mutated and evolved in a new direction. An Internet meme is a hijacking of the original idea. Instead of mutating by random chance, before spreading by a form of Darwinian selection, Internet memes are altered deliberately by human creativity. In the hijacked version, mutations are designed—not random—with the full knowledge of the person doing the mutating. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFn-ixX9edg>)

Resulting from a natural process of semantic change, the label “Internet meme” arose as a folk notion in Internet users’ jargon to capture a novel online phenomenon. Such a meme is an idea, style, or action that spreads via the Internet in the form of mimicry, which may be variously expressed (e.g., by planking in public places, dancing to the Harlem Shake, or creating a picture-based joke). Though applying an academic term to a popular phenomenon might be frowned on or even ridiculed (cf. the second definition cited from Urban Dictionary above the Introduction), the notion of the Internet meme has already taken on academic value in areas innocent of the theoretical implications of Dawkins’ theory, primarily studies from cultural and sociological angles (Bennett, 2003; Burgess, 2008; Johnson, 2007; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2013; Shifman, 2011, 2013, 2014; Vickery, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2014) by researchers aiming to grasp the flow and flux of participatory culture. Essentially, Internet memes have evolved thanks to new media networks, which thrive on individuals’ active participation (e.g., Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Wiggins & Bowers, 2014).

It is via memes that Internet users respond to current sociopolitical events, some of which might not have been widely recognized otherwise. Such was the case with the badly translated opening sequence of the 1989 game *Zero Wing*—“All Your Base Are Belong to Us”—which over the years developed into a well-known catchphrase whose popularity in memes peaked in November 2000 (cf. Börzsei, 2013; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). This instance also exemplifies another commonplace phenomenon in memes: deliberate language mistakes, such as “I can has cheezburger?,” “much sad,” or “I has seen” (see the title of this essay), that reverberate across memes, contributing to Internet users’ peculiar vernacular. This vernacular, replete with not only language mistakes but also abbreviations and acronyms as well as peculiar vocabulary, may be deemed a crucial element of Internet memes, which pivot on replication and imitation. These paramount features of Internet memes are echoed in different definitions, academic and not.

In Internet users’ parlance, the label “Internet meme” applies to any artifact (a film, spoof, rumor, picture, song, etc.) that appears on the Internet and produces countless derivatives by being imitated, remixed, and rapidly diffused by countless participants in technologically mediated communication. Internet memes span various formats, for example videos, GIF files, photographs, and drawings, whether or not accompanied by text. In this vein, Shifman (2013) viewed Internet memes as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience” (p. 367). Coleman (2012) defined online memes as “viral images, videos, and catchphrases under constant modification by users, and with a propensity to travel as fast as the Internet can move them” (p. 109). These definitions bring one crucial feature into focus: modification/transformation, which distinguishes a meme from a *viral*. A viral spreads across digital media in unchanged form and tends to die down very quickly, while a meme centers on constant replication and

users' creativity (cf. Burgess, 2008; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2011). Internet memes are hallmarks of interactants' participation in new media. Any Internet user can become an anonymous author creatively contributing to online content.

The Internet meme is a vehicle for mass entertainment and social bonding, but its relation to humor is unequivocal. Though many see Internet memes as oriented to humor, nonhumorous memes, including image macros, are also mentioned (cf. Davison, 2012; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Vickery, 2014). This is evident, for instance, in Knobel and Lankshear's (2007) categorization of Internet memes according to four purposes: social commentary, absurdist humor (e.g., parodies, "photoshoppers," absurd discussion posts, and geek humor interests), Otaku or manga fandom, and hoaxes (e.g., pranks). However, this classification should not be seen as exhaustive or universal, given the immense diversity of Internet memes. Nor are the categories mutually exclusive. For instance, the social commentary function can mesh with humor, which need not be absurd (e.g., satire or parody).

On the other hand, Shifman (2014, pp. 99–118) listed nine meme genres that appear to cut across the humor–nonhumor divide, as indicated by the particular manifestations of each meme type: reaction Photoshops (which serve as comments on official news), photo fads (e.g., planking), flash mobs, lip-synching, misheard lyrics, recut trailers, lolcats (pictures of cats accompanied by relevant captions, typically misspelled), rage comics, and stock character macros (showing Advice Animals). A quick survey of the prominent meme websites (such as 4chan, knowyourmeme, icanhascheezburger, or 9gag) reveals that memes in some of the meme categories listed by Shifman (2014) seem to heavily outnumber memes in others. Also, the websites boast a host of meme types that the taxonomy does not appear to include (e.g., "Totally looks like," "Art of trolling," or "Visual puns"). This only proves the complexity and heterogeneity of the constantly developing and mutating memescape, which any study can only represent in a state-of-the-art picture that will be outdated in a matter of months, if not weeks.

The present pilot study on the nature of Advice Animal memes is meant to offer a foundation for future research by pointing out their universal features and recurrent strategies, as well as their similarities to canned jokes, as conceptualized and studied by humor researchers. However, this article does not aspire to make any definite conclusions concerning the nature of memes or report findings on very recent phenomena.

### **Image Macros and Advice Animals**

According to users, image macro memes, or simply image macros, are "captioned images that typically consist of a picture and a witty message or a catchphrase. . . . It is one of the most prevalent forms of internet memes" (<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/image-macros>) and encompasses several examples, such as lolcats, reaction images, demotivational posters, and Advice Animals.

Advice Animals are "a type of image macro series featuring animals of some kind (including humans) that are accompanied by captioned text to represent a character trait or an archetype that fits the role of a stock character. While many Advice Animals use a color wheel background, some use unedited versions of the original photo" (<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/advice-animals#fn1>). Each

meme in the numerous series centers an animal or human image (a drawing or a photograph) on a backdrop of multicolored triangles of chosen colors, which seem to purposefully play with or distort the traditional arrangement of hues in the color circle, or against a different established form of background. The visual stimulus is necessarily accompanied by some text, typically at the top and bottom. The image, perhaps involving some creativity or subversion (e.g., a distorted color wheel or doctored images), serves as a stable visual anchor that inspires innumerable texts typically oriented to a general theme germane to the pivotal feature of the stock character. A few of the most enduring animal images that keep spawning new memes serve as illustration here: Courage Wolf and its derivative, Insanity Wolf (Figure 1); Foul Bachelor Frog (Figure 2) and its offshoot, Foul Bachelorette Frog; Anti-Joke Chicken; Paranoid Parrot (Figure 3); and Lame Poon Raccoon. Each of these is placed against a color wheel background.

Additionally, numerous images without multicolored backgrounds have gained the status of image macro templates and been a basis for other Internet meme types. A notable instance is Grumpy Cat (Figure 4), a snowshoe cat that rose to fame thanks to its cantankerous looks. Another is the Most Interesting Man in the World (Figure 5). This meme originated in a campaign advertising Dos Equis beer with the slogan "I don't always drink beer, but when I do, I prefer Dos Equis." The meme, then, seems to have arisen as a satirical comment on the original advertisement, which is alluded to in every instantiation of this meme template. Finally, Scumbag Steve is an image macro series featuring a male teenager with a sideways-fitted cap (Figure 6).



*Figure 1. Insanity Wolf.*



*Figure 2. Foul Bachelor Frog.*



*Figure 3. Paranoid Parrot.*



*Figure 4. Grumpy Cat.*

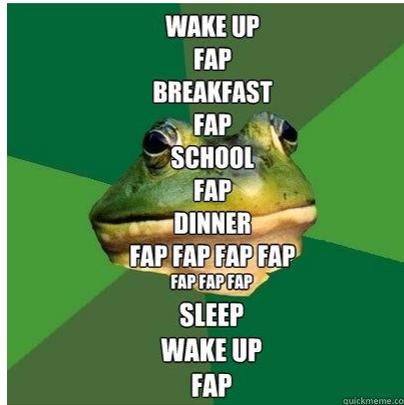


**Figure 5. The Most Interesting Man in the World.**



**Figure 6. Scumbag Steve.**

Although most Advice Animal meme series conform to the established visual formats in terms of stock images, background colors, and layout, variations in particular memes are possible, being yet another indication of individual users' creativity. For example, the text may be superimposed on the image to better convey the relevant message, such as a sense of continuity or repetition of sexual activity (masturbation) in the daily routine (Figure 7). Alternatively, the image may be modified, for instance to address a timely topic during the holiday season (Figure 8).



**Figure 7. Foul Bachelor Frog (cf. Figure 2).**



**Figure 8. Insanity Wolf.**

Regarding all the examples above, I should stress that the well-entrenched label "advice animals" may be considered a misnomer for two reasons. First, not all memes unanimously classified as Advice Animals by users actually present animals (see Figures 5 and 6), though they accord with the definition cited at the beginning of this section. Second, not all texts qualify as advice (Figures 1 and 6), being instead sarcastic comments (cf. Figures 2 and 4), internal monologues or admissions (Figures 3, 5, and 7), or aggressive imperatives (Figure 8), for example. Regardless of their pragmatic (illocutionary) goal and form, the texts must be creative and are typically (yet not always) humorous, whether in tandem with a picture or without it.

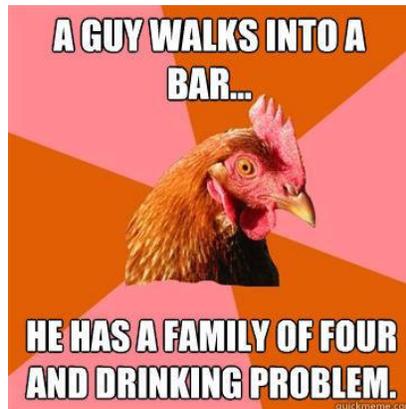
On the whole, the image macro genre captures the essence of a prototypical Internet meme: it brings together the old and the new by combining the novelty and creativity of text with the stability of an image. Although the most popular templates remain on the agenda for as long as a few years, the particular instances show evanescence, even though they are not deleted from the websites. Evanescence is likely caused by the daily uploading of hundreds, if not thousands of memes on the various websites.

New memes keep appearing, ousting the obsolescent ones and introducing new fads, but older memes are found only when they are purposefully sought. Importantly, users must obey an unwritten law prohibiting them from hijacking earlier ideas. Reposting is considered dishonest ([http://www.reddit.com/r/9gag/comments/zabeb/9gag\\_repost\\_machine\\_explained](http://www.reddit.com/r/9gag/comments/zabeb/9gag_repost_machine_explained)). Creativity is a top priority, and the lure of Internet memes relies, among other things, on their capacity to engage users in the production process. A user who comes up with an idea for a caption can easily become the author of a joke. Graphics editing software facilitates creation of memes, as do meme generators built into websites (e.g., Memegenerator.net).

### **Advice Animals as Visual-Verbal Jokes**

By its standard definition, a canned joke is a short, humorous story or dialogue, dubbed the *setup*, which ends in a *punchline* (for references see Dynel, 2009a, 2009b). Jokes are isolated humorous units that are not typically credited to any author and are circulated by members of society in oral or written form. Though it may be difficult to orally repeat jokes verbatim and slight modifications or embellishments are commonplace, the core elements and structuring must remain unchanged. Internet memes tend to be referred to as jokes (e.g., Davison, 2012; Vickery, 2014), but this usage informally takes that label to mean "an instance of humor," rather than a joke understood in a technical sense. The overarching hypothesis put forth here, however, is that the intrinsic properties of captioned image macro Advice Animal memes allow them to be conceptualized as canned jokes based on the standard joke pattern. In other words, these memes have a lot of continuity with the classic joke format. However, the setup and the punchline are differently distributed across the picture and the text, as the following discussion will show.

Two genres of canned jokes are immediately relevant here because they typically (but not always) constitute the verbal component in Advice Animals: the *one-liner*, a short joke whose setup and punchline are restricted in length and do not involve a narrative or dialogue; and the *riddle*, which comprises a short question and an answer to it. Because of their brevity, these verbal joke types lend themselves to the overlaid text in most humorous Advice Animal memes (but see Figures 7 and 30). The verbal setup typically comes above the image and the (surprising) punchline below it, but sometimes this layout is modified or a joke may involve *jab lines* (Attardo, 2001), which foster intermediate humorous effects before the punchline stage is reached (as in Figure 7, where each mention of the repeated taboo activity acts as a jab line bringing about humorous effects). Additionally, as evidenced by the Anti-Joke Chicken template (Figures 9 and 10), a joke may end in an *anticlimax*, which, in a technical sense, is also a type of punchline.



**Figure 9. Anti-Joke Chicken.**



**Figure 10. Anti-Joke Chicken.**

As the two examples above indicate, overlaid texts may allude to familiar joke patterns, such as clichés in the setup or unanswerable questions characteristic of riddles. Others may humorously exploit stock expressions or cultural adages (Figures 1 and 8). Yet another group of texts are closer to witticisms, typically carrying little wisdom outside the *humorous frame* (see Dynel, 2011) unless they can be regarded as sarcastic or mock commentaries, as in the example below.



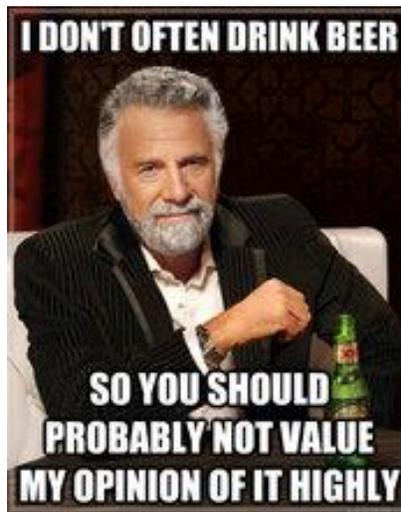
**Figure 11. Foul Bachelorette Frog.**

The witticism in this meme ends in a surprising punchline that purports to suggest that wearing a ponytail is tantamount to hygienic activities. On a deeper level of understanding, the butt of the mockery in this meme is the apparently annoying habit of some girls who, rather than wash their hair, wear a ponytail, as though the hair looked clean then.

Nonetheless, Advice Animals rely on both verbal and *nonverbal* stimuli (for the distinction see Dynel, 2009a). The latter element may be labeled *visual* (e.g., Hemplemann & Samson, 2008), given that verbal communication tends to be juxtaposed with visual communication, a notion narrower than nonverbal communication, which encompasses also nonverbal aspects of speech, such as tone of voice. The central hypothesis formulated here is that image macro memes may be conceptualized as visual-verbal jokes. Therefore, standard canned jokes can and perhaps should be conceived as *verbal* jokes (even if, in oral performance, nonverbal factors like gestures, pitch, and the tempo of speech may also be crucial to the emerging humor).

Canned jokes transmitted online (a genre that appears to be fading away) evince many similarities to Advice Animals. Both are free-floating humorous units. Both are folkloristic products and have anonymous authors. Both show a great speed of transmission and imperviousness to the passage of time (which still might not affect their actual accessibility). Furthermore, just as verbal jokes tend to appear in cycles reliant on a similar topic (e.g., blonde jokes) or formal structure (e.g., three-character jokes), Advice Animal memes can be thought of as joke cycles. They pivot on exploitable images, with or without the characteristic starburst of chosen colors in the background. Moreover, memes capitalizing on one template are similar not only in their visual poetics but also in the nature of the accompanying text, for example, expressions revolving around topics and features central to the focal animal. For instance, Foul Bachelor Frog (e.g., Figures 2 and 7) and Foul Bachelorette Frog (Figure 11) depict the laziness and hedonistic behaviors of single men and women respectively. Similarly, Angry Cat conveys messages of a bad-tempered and forever disgruntled individual (Figure 4), while the overlaid text in the Scumbag Steve series typically hinges on unethical behavior involving drugs, partying, and other human pleasures (Figure 6). On the other hand, Insanity Wolf (Figures 1 and 8) presents texts expressing extreme anger, hatred, and predilection for causing harm, while Courage Wolf texts promote reckless behavior.

The common denominator between the captions may also be the textual format or pattern. The Most Interesting Man in the World captions typically follow the pattern "I don't always X, but when I do, I Y," echoing the original beer advertisement and counting as distortions of, or allusions to, its slogan (Figures 5 and 12). Also, Lame Poon Raccoon, as the very name suggests, invites puns that tend to be "groaners" (as in the homophony of "patience" and "patients" in Figure 13). Similarly, the above-mentioned Anti-Joke Chicken memes (Figures 9 and 10) hinge on poor jokes ending in punchlines that do not typically induce amusement. In the latter two cases, insofar as the two animals (the raccoon and the chicken) appear to have been picked arbitrarily and the template pivots on the format of the texts rather than any peculiar characteristics of the animals, the created texts are topically irrelevant to the images.



*Figure 12. The Most Interesting Man in the World.*



*Figure 13. Lame Poon Raccoon.*

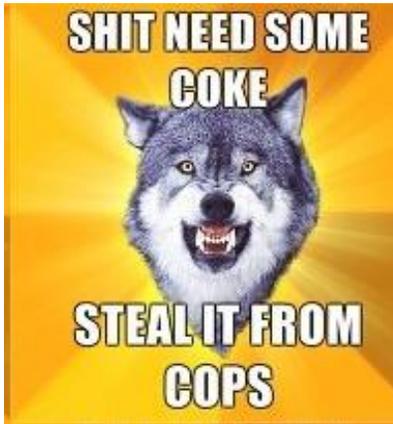
Finally, visual-verbal jokes seem amenable to pragma-cognitive analyses concerning their incremental development, parallel to those carried out with regard to traditional verbal jokes.

### **The Incongruity-Resolution Model and Advice Animal Memes**

Incongruity is considered the sine qua non for the emergence of humor, and it is also used as the acid test for it. Most contemporary linguists and psychologists (e.g., Attardo, 1994; Dynel, 2011, 2012, 2013; Forabosco, 1992, 2008; Martin, 2007) agree that the workings of jokes (and verbal humor in general) conform to the *incongruity-resolution* framework in the version put forward by Suls (1972, 1983) and Shultz (1972, 1976). In a nutshell, the receiver of humor first recognizes incongruity and then resolves it in the light of *resolution enablers*, that is, cues inviting resolution, according to an adequate cognitive rule that renders the incongruous element congruent with the remainder of the text. Once the receiver can embrace this incongruity based on a cognitive rule, the incongruity is resolved but not completely dissolved, so that humor experience can ensue (Forabosco, 1992, 2008; Mulkay, 1988; Ruch & Hehl, 1998; Suls, 1983). This overarching cognitive pattern may have many manifestations, a few of which will be discussed below, but it lies at the heart of all processing of humor.

#### ***Verbal Component***

Following in Fry's (1963) and Suls' (1972) footsteps, researchers tend to assume that the central incongruity in any joke arises at the stage of the punchline. That is, the punchline adds some surprising information that is somehow incongruous with the preceding part of the text and necessitates different cognitive rules. Also, resolving the incongruity involves different levels of processing effort, inasmuch as the punchline may assert the solution, or the solution may need to be inferred out of the punchline (Sacks 1978). Even in simple one-liners, the incongruity-resolution mechanism displays a whole gamut of manifestations, also evident in the diversified one-liners that users create for image macro memes, inspired by the features ascribed to the characters in the images. Here are a few examples of how the verbal jokes (based on the setup and punchline) co-constituting Advice Animal memes can be interpreted according to the incongruity-resolution formula:



*Figure 14. Courage Wolf.*



*Figure 15. Paranoid Parrot.*



*Figure 16. Foul Bachelorette Frog.*

The Courage Wolf meme (Figure 14), having indicated intention of obtaining a banned drug, itself an offense, surprises the receiver with the suggested method of doing so, namely committing the crime of stealing from the police, who represent the law. The resolution comes with the realization that the police may actually be in possession of confiscated drugs, indicating the exacerbation of the illegal activity, in accordance with the character's principle of offering extreme advice. On the other hand, the Paranoid Parrot meme (Figure 15) surprisingly alludes to the infamous sinking of a British passenger liner that claimed more than 1,500 lives, depicting what starts as a pleasurable cruise as a prospective disaster. Thus, the resolution boils down to appreciating that the opinion voiced is so extremely pessimistic that it verges on absurdity. Incidentally, the ultimate resolution of the whole visual-verbal joke hinges on understanding that the parrot shown in the picture suffers from paranoia, the overarching theme in the meme series. Next, the Foul Bachelorette Frog meme (Figure 16) is anchored in a jab line—the second line of the verbal joke—and the incongruous punchline at the end of the text. The resolution of the surprising information in the jab line comes with acknowledging that the female frog, known for her filthiness and crudeness, is capable of doing something so awful. On the other hand, the surprising punchline (“Oh my God pregnant”) that follows, at a glance irrelevantly, compels the receiver to fill in the information gaps to arrive at an understanding of the unexpected result. The resolution thus coincides with inferring that the frog's “bf” (boyfriend) must have used the sock in his own sexual activities.

Typically, the incongruity caused by the punchline is overt and arises automatically, but in some cases, the incongruous interpretation emerges a little later than the congruent one, for it is not as accessible. This seems to result from ambiguity in the punchline (see Forabosco, 1992). An example of this rare strategy appears in the following meme:



**Figure 17. *Lame Poon Raccoon.***

The punchline is hardly incongruous at first blush, since the more salient (i.e., more obvious) interpretation (“A record is hard to beat”) is perfectly congruent with the setup. However, receivers, having inferred this meaning and taken cognizance of the prospective humorous effects, and knowing that they are looking at a meme, are bound to recognize the polysemy of the lexical item “hard,” which invites the alternative but also relevant interpretation pertaining to a sexual taboo. The humorous incongruity is rooted in the presence of this second reading, which merely needs to be accepted as being somehow valid

at the resolution stage, with both interpretations being relevant in the context (cf. "It is difficult to beat a record" and "A penis must be hard in order to beat a record").

Rather than in the punchline, the key ambiguity may be present in the setup, which tends to coincide with the *garden-path mechanism*, a noteworthy manifestation of the incongruity-resolution pattern (Dyner, 2009a, 2012 and references therein). Essentially, the receiver is deceived into arriving at an effortlessly accessible interpretation that is then canceled out by the strength of the incongruous punchline, which brings to light the hitherto covert ambiguity and evokes the concealed and initially less accessible sense. In other words, the incongruous punchline invalidates the interpreter's earlier inference and prompts a backtracking and reprocessing of the initial part of the text to appreciate an alternative, hitherto unobserved, meaning congruent with the import of the punchline, for instance:



*Figure 18. Grumpy Cat.*



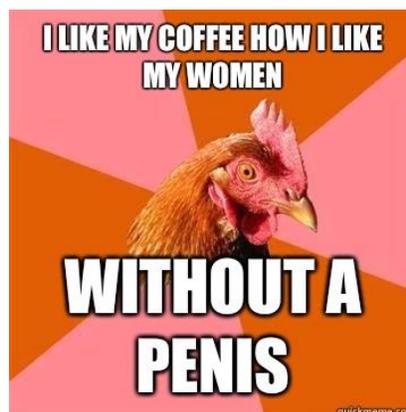
*Figure 19. Insanity Wolf.*

Both examples recruit polysemous phrasal verbs, “slip into” (Figure 18) and “runs into” (Figure 19), which enjoy salient readings (“put on” and “meets by chance” respectively) that have to be rejected after the punchline proves incongruous with them. To resolve the incongruity, the receiver needs to backtrack and appreciate the alternative interpretation of the setup (“fall into [a state]” and “collides with,” respectively), couched in the hitherto suppressed meaning of the polysemous lexeme, which incidentally is compatible with the key feature of the focal stock character in the picture.

Contrary to the examples and the argument validated so far, the incongruity may arise earlier in the text, not in the punchline (or in a jab line). The setup presents a fundamental incongruity that arises from an incomprehensible element crucial to the workings of the joke. This element prevents the receiver from putting an interpretation on the setup or its part in a potentially longer text. The resolution of the central incongruity is postponed to the punchline, which brings a surprising resolution and may be seen as promoting another incongruity (Dynel, 2012). This mechanism is manifest, for instance, in riddles (Figure 10) or one-liners like these:



*Figure 20. Insanity Wolf.*

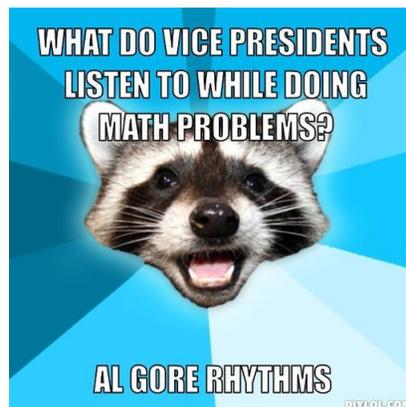


*Figure 21. Anti-Joke Chicken.*

Each of these two jokes hinges on the unavailability of the feature in the focus of the comparison presented in the setup, which causes incongruity that is duly explicitly revealed at the stage of the punchline (Figure 20: the wolf keeps women in pieces under his bed; Figure 21: coffee does not have a penis). The punchlines thus establish the resolutions of the incomprehensibility-based incongruities by divulging surprising and uncanny points of similarity rooted in the nonsalience of the focal features in both elements (Figure 20) or only one element (Figure 21; it is obvious that women do not have penises) of the comparison. Incidentally, at the stage of resolution the latter joke is in part perceived as absurd (i.e., coffee without a penis).

*Nonsense/absurd* humor appears to be another prevalent notion in Internet memes. Some authors (e.g., Ruch & Hehl, 1998; Samson & Huber, 2007) juxtapose incongruity-resolution humor with nonsense humor, where no or partial resolution is present or even new incongruities arise at the punchline stage (McGhee, Ruch, & Hehl, 1990). Nonetheless, it may also be argued that nonsense humor does subscribe to the incongruity-resolution framework, inasmuch as "cognitive mastery" of a stimulus is a prerequisite for humor appreciation (Forabosco, 2008). As Forabosco (2008, p.49) rightly asserts, next to incongruity, humor experience necessitates an element of sense that makes a stimulus "cognitively acceptable" and is acquired via the identification of a cognitive rule, whereby the hearer exerts mental control over a stimulus. Therefore, incongruity resolution may be tantamount to the hearer's conscious acknowledgement of the presence of incongruity, and thus cognitive mastery of a stimulus, although no clear cognitive rule needs to have been specified (cf. Ruch, 1992).

Here is another instance of absurd humor:



**Figure 22. Lame Poon Raccoon.**

The reply to the absurd question in Figure 22 is couched in a pun involving homophony (cf. "algorithms" vs. "Al Gore Rhythms"). Whilst the phonetic and semantic links ("math problems" and "algorithms," "vice-presidents" and "Al Gore," as well as "listen to" and "rhythm") between question and answer are detectable, little sense can be made of this joke altogether, and acknowledging these facts suffices as the final incongruity resolution.

### ***Visual Component***

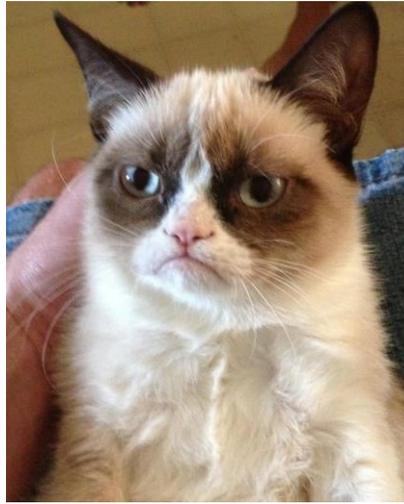
Visual humor, so far epitomized in the literature by cartoons, tends to be regarded as compatible with verbal humor in terms of its mechanics (Hemplemann & Samson, 2008). This is hardly surprising, insofar as the classic works on the universal incongruity–resolution pattern and the perception of humor pertained not only to verbal jokes but also to visual humor, notably captioned cartoons (e.g., Hirt & Genshaft, 1982; Shultz, 1972, 1976; Suls, 1972). Although there seems to be a dearth of research on this aspect of Internet memes, one could say that they lend themselves to analysis according to the incongruity–resolution pattern, albeit showing several distinctive characteristics.

As shown in the section above, verbal jokes are organized and typically processed linearly in accordance with texts' development. By contrast, visual–verbal jokes are arranged spatially, across the modes of picture and text (Hemplemann & Samson, 2008). Although image macros cannot operate according to the same unequivocally linear process of interpretation typical of verbal jokes (Dynel, 2009, 2012), there has to be an order of interpretation if the visual–verbal jokes are to work. Thus, in Advice Animal image macros, as in other visual–verbal humor stimuli, the picture and the catchphrase are consecutively processed, and the interpretative results of the two are ultimately brought together (see Carroll, Young, & Guertin, 1992). Interestingly, the incongruity–resolution model, originally proposed both for verbal/canned jokes and captioned cartoons, addresses “a sequence of ideas” (Suls, 1972, p. 82), suggesting a linear method of processing, irrespective of the multimodal arrangement.

### ***Humor in Verbal, Visual, and Visual–Verbal Components of Image Macros***

Several salient patterns of incongruity emergence and resolution (responsible for the emerging humor) can be teased out at the picture–text interface. Essentially, the focal incongruities and resolution enablers can be found in the picture and text both, or in one or the other, or at the intersection of the two. Although Advice Animal memes can be conceived as visual–verbal jokes, their humor may reside in only one component, not necessarily in both.

Humor in the various Internet memes dubbed “sight gags” (Watson, Matthews, & Allman, 2006) originates in the pictures (or videos), which remain humorous even when captions, if present, are removed. However, this is typically not the case with most Advice Animal memes, whose humorous capacity centers on catchphrases that are typically coupled with images, some of which may indeed be humorous in isolation, as in the case of Grumpy Cat (Figure 23).



**Figure 23. Grumpy Cat.**

The incongruity in this image stems from the uncannily human-like expression of disgruntlement or irritability on the cat's face. This incongruity is resolved by merely acknowledging that these are indeed the cat's looks, and that the animal is a freak of nature whose mouth is set in a way reminiscent of human facial expression.

Whether or not the incongruity intrinsic to the picture comes into play, the humor of Advice Animal memes seems typically to originate from creative captions, not necessarily in tandem with stock pictures. Like captioned cartoons, where images may merely illustrate the humorous texts (Samson & Huber, 2007), Advice Animal memes' creative captions may be humorous on their own, while the pictures only inspire and anchor the textual components of visual-verbal jokes. Such overlaid texts would retain their humorous potential even if the motivating images were taken away from the posts, or if the texts were presented orally. Such is the case in several examples presented earlier (Figures 1, 2, 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, and 22), as well as the following black humor joke inspired by the Insanity Wolf template.



**Figure 24. Insanity Wolf.**

As shown by Figure 24 above, the incongruity and its resolution are rooted solely in the verbal joke, which is also where the humor is to be sought. The setup consists in an incomprehensible comparison, which is resolved by a punchline explicating the common feature (cf. Figures 20 and 21). The image of the wolf signals what kind of text receivers can expect or how the gory idea can be accounted for, without affecting the source of humor.

One may argue that it is only because of the affordances of the Internet that an image is deployed in such jokes, and that the image is merely a pretext for the formation of the verbal joke per se. Internet users may be inspired by visual templates, which makes creating new jokes more feasible than posting jocular texts spontaneously out of context; meanwhile, receivers may find image macro memes more attractive than lines of plain text.

However, the humor of many Advice Animal memes depends heavily on both the picture and the text, for an image can contribute significantly to the import of a verbal joke based on the incongruity-resolution pattern. Even if sometimes a verbal joke could, theoretically speaking, work on its own, the picture contributes to the humorous effect. This applies to some memes with Grumpy Cat (e.g., Figure 18), where the picture displays its own incongruity. On the other hand, the picture may augment a humorous effect by presenting a widely recognized butt of a joke, which may then be considered a crucial part of the visual-verbal joke. This holds for memes featuring the Most Interesting Man in the World (see Figures 5 and 12), which poke fun at the elegant gentleman from the original advertisement, as well as in Scumbag Steve jokes like the one shown below (see also Figure 6).



**Figure 25. Scumbag Steve.**

The textual punchline in this joke introduces incongruity between the depicted person's age and the high school party (held by teenagers) concept presented in the setup. The resolution comes with the receiver's appreciating that a 25-year-old may indeed take part in teenagers' parties, thereby testifying to his/her immaturity. In this meme, the resolution and the humorous effect are strengthened by the image of Steve, who represents such a childish individual, being the butt of the joke.

Moreover, an image can provide indispensable input for the workings of a joke, as in the meme below.



**Figure 26. Insanity Wolf.**

Without the visually conveyed meaning (i.e., the message comes from a wolf baring its teeth), the verbal joke couched in a pun in the punchline below the image ("fast food" understood as "junk food" and the nonsalient but contextually motivated "food that is running") would fall flat (cf. Figures 4, 8, and 12). Hence, the image works as a fundamental incongruity resolution enabler by activating the nonsalient meaning in the verbal punchline.

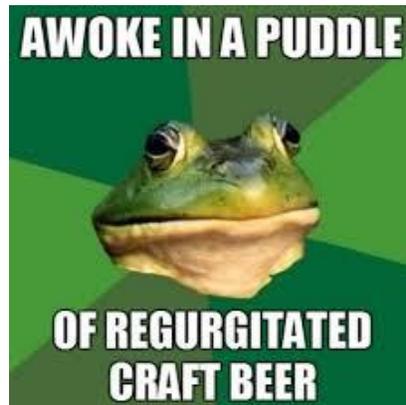
Interestingly, the humor of an Advice Animal meme may rest on knowledge of the premise underlying a particular series, such as Paranoid Parrot.



**Figure 27. Paranoid Parrot.**

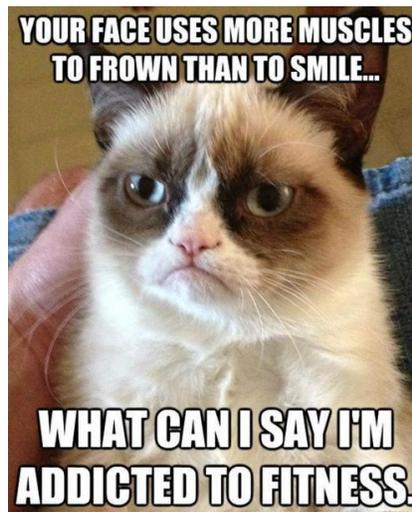
The verbal joke appears to be at least partly incomprehensible (i.e., the incongruity of the verbal punchline under the image cannot be satisfactorily resolved) without background knowledge of the pivotal feature of the parrot in the picture, namely its paranoia. Thus, the picture is the resolution enabler of the verbal joke, offering the central clue only to receivers who are already aware of the parrot's problem. The presence of an image that is likely unrevealing to a receiver not familiar with the characteristics of the animal depicted is what makes the verbal part of the whole joke tick (i.e., the parrot, being paranoid, assumes that the test cannot have been so easy and that if the other students took longer to solve it, it must have made mistakes in it).

In the stages of the inferential processes underpinning Advice Animal memes where texts and images are heavily interdependent, visual elements serve verbal jokes in different ways, contributing relevant meanings at different stages of the interpretation of the captions. For instance, as the two examples discussed above (Figures 26 and 27) indicate, an image can be crucial to interpreting the verbal punchline at the bottom of the picture. To reformulate, the incongruity introduced by the punchline can only be resolved in combination with the meaning carried by the image. Also, the image can anchor both the setup and the punchline of verbal jokes, as the two examples below indicate.



*Figure 28. Foul Bachelor Frog.*

The puddle mentioned in the setup, understood as a pool of rainwater, seems to be the natural environment of a frog like the one shown in Figure 28. However, the surprising punchline enforces an alternative interpretation based on a nonsalient meaning of puddle as a pool of any other liquid, here "regurgitated craft beer." The resolution of incongruity thus comes with realizing that the frog must have had too much to drink, which accords with the topic of the Foul Bachelor Frog meme series.



*Figure 29. Grumpy Cat.*

In Figure 29, the image of the seemingly frowning cat (which involves a secondary visual incongruity) is consistent with the setup of the verbal joke, as the cat is indeed frowning. But the verbal punchline offers a surprising, seemingly topically incongruous commentary that turns out to be apt, at least within the humorous frame, once all the relevant premises have been processed ("If frowning uses a

lot of muscles, and if using muscles is exercising, then a cat that is always frowning must love exercising, and hence fitness”).

Furthermore, a picture alone can work as the setup of a joke while the entire text performs the function of a punchline distributed at the top and bottom of the image, as exemplified by a modified version of the Courage Wolf template (Figure 30):



**Figure 30. Courage Wolf.**

The image's incongruity results from the modification of the animal's appearance via the addition of "hipster glasses" (<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/hipster-glasses>). This image, with its visually attractive modification, is the setup of the visual-verbal joke. The verbal text based on a contemporary catchphrase coincides with a punchline that offers a commentary on the picture. Interestingly, although practically all the memes presented so far capitalize on texts with joke structure, this one does not, since the clichéd expression can hardly be seen as a verbal joke. The ultimate resolution of incongruity and thus the understanding and appreciation of this meme consist in recognizing the commentary on two social groups inhabiting the virtual space: hipsters (who value independent thinking and counterculture) and haters (who will not tolerate any success in others and continually persecute them).

### **Conclusion and Final Comments**

This article has addressed the topic of Internet memes, focusing on a distinct group of image macros, namely Advice Animals, defined as visual-verbal jokes. Like verbal/canned jokes, these visual-verbal jokes are free-floating humorous units that form cycles and seem amenable to pragma-cognitive analyses parallel to those carried out with regard to canned/verbal jokes. Advice Animals were shown to operate in accordance with the incongruity-resolution framework, being interpreted sequentially but materializing nonlinearly across verbal and visual modes of presentation in terms of the setup and punchline. Several types of humorous memes in the Advice Animals category were elucidated to explore the nature of the incongruity-resolution mechanism and its manifestations in the verbal and visual

components of Advice Animals. The findings both validate the applicability of the general theoretical model and inform humor research regarding its particular manifestations.

First, I argued that the manifestations of the incongruity–resolution pattern underpinning creative one-liners and riddles, which are typically (but not always) the crucial humor-generating constituents of Advice Animal image macros, are as diverse as those of regular verbal jokes. Second, I distinguished several subtypes of image macros according to the nature of the image–caption relationship and the character of the picture (humorous or not, on its own). Albeit inspired by the relevant image, some catchphrases might exist independently and still retain their humorous potential. The humorous potential of others appears to be boosted by the anchoring images. Yet another class of memes relies heavily on both the overlaid text and the image, which are thus the *sine qua non* for the production of humor. Yet other suggestions concerned the distribution of the setup and punchline across the verbal and visual components of Advice Animals.

Some general remarks on the nature of Advice Animals are in order. The various topical and structural types of verbal jokes found in Advice Animals were circulated long before the advent of the Internet. In the past, jokes were told primarily in face-to-face encounters among friends (and to some extent spread via published volumes). The new visual–verbal jokes reflect the evolving social role of electronic media and the fact that the Internet and mass culture seem to have replaced the former social milieu. The visual components in turn facilitate the transition from face-to-face to mass-mediated communication. They also play the crucial role of “creativity promoters” among Internet users. Though the humor in some image macros is enhanced by the accompanying image, in others the image has little significance and is not integral to the emerging humor. This is not to say that the latter category should be considered inferior to forms of humor that make full use of the capabilities the Internet affords. Nonetheless, receivers may well regard the image macros whose humor resides in both visual and verbal components, especially those carrying previous associations, as more amusing. This and a host of other issues are subject to further investigation.

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