The Wickedly Flexible Adele Dazeem Construction

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At the 2014 Academy Awards, John Travolta introduced performer Idina Menzel as "Adele Dazeem," a usage event that achieved meme status. This paper argues for and situates "the Adele Dazeem Construction" within a taxonomy of usage patterns. Instances of this construction are references, creative coinages, and errors that highlight analogical connections between constructions and other knowledge (cf. Hockett 1987, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/adele-dazeem).

We first place two meme types at opposite ends of an analogical continuum. The first type is "if a giraffe wore a necktie" (Figure 1), which invites the viewer to construct a mental space blend, where the input spaces are an animal body and human clothing. In the blend, a human and an animal body must be structurally aligned (Gentner 1983, Fauconnier and Turner 1991). Due to its formal fixedness, language users who have seen one instance of this meme can extend their inferences to additional memes using the same template. The second meme type, which relies on more abstract resemblance, is "generated by a neural net". Instances of this meme may either be generated by an algorithm or by a human faking an algorithmic output. Rather than using a formal template, the meme highlights emergent consistencies in the source domain and the viewer's ability to recognize them.

"Adele Dazeem" is situated between these extremes as an instance of another meme type, "similar but legally distinct". This type differs from the "neural net" meme in that human intentionality is foregrounded; a human creator has a legal motivation to create a name that evokes a specific conceptual frame, however, the reference must also be abstracted from the particular aspects of the frame so as to avoid legal retaliation. While the production process that generated "Adele Dazeem" was qualitatively different from intentional examples, we argue that they belong to the same type: *Adele Dazeem* would be a good candidate for an "off-brand" or "plausibly deniable" version of the intended referent, *Idina Menzel*. This sweet spot between formally specified and fully emergent has been recognized in the creativity literature (Giora et al. 2017), and situating this construction type amongst the others highlights the gradient and analogical nature of linguistic knowledge.

Following Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017), we argue that the cycles of iteration and remixing in memes yield multimodal constructions, and even quite bizarre memes can be analyzed with standard cognitive linguistic tools, as they draw on similar aspects of human cognition. In cognitive/constructional approaches, constructions vary along several related continua. Constructions vary by the amount of internal symbolic complexity they present (Langacker 2008) and their degree of symbolic schematicity (Croft and Cruse 2004). Instances of a particular construction may range from more established and conventional to more novel (Booij 2010, Lepic 2019, Goldberg 2019). Surveying this creative language taxonomy, we conclude that the "Adele Dazeem Construction" highlights the gradient and analogical nature of linguistic knowledge; memes ranging in their degree of formal specificity can be fruitfully analyzed as multimodal constructions.

Fig. 1: *Two instances of a multimodal meme in which the structure of an animal body must be aligned with structure of a human body; a quite fixed meme form*
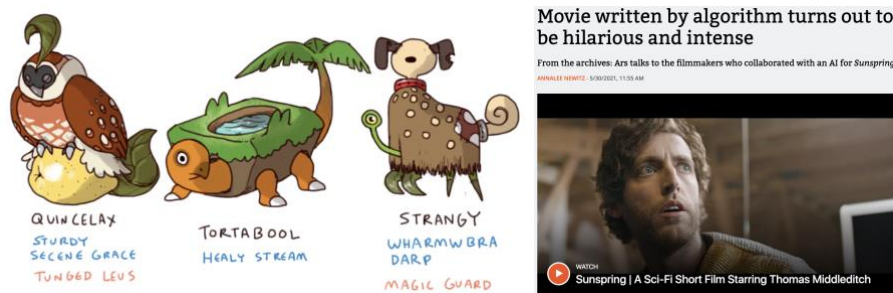
Fig. 2: Two instances of a multimodal meme in which the structure is construed as having been broadly derived from a general source domain (from https://www.aiweirdness.com/pokemon-generated-by-neural-network-17-03-31/ and https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2021/05/an-ai-wrote-this-movie-and-its-strangely-moving/)

Fig. 3: Two instances of a multimodal meme in which the form that is used indirectly evokes a specific referent (from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1QqMxXfaw0 and https://www.hy-vee.com/aisles-online/p/1853977/HyVee-One-Step-Tasteeos-Cereal)

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