KEEP CALM AND STUDY MEMES

by

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Keep Calm and Study Memes

Abstract

by

ASHLEY DAINAS

This thesis expands and applies Shifman’s (2013) communication oriented typology for memes and uses conceptual blending theory to show that the “Keep Calm and Carry On” internet meme is altered in predictable patterns. Based on this analysis, we conducted a survey study seeking to answer: 1. How do the dimensions of the taxonomy work together in order to create humor and understanding? 2. What is the minimal number of changes that can be made to a parody while still allowing it to make sense? 3. Does how well a person “gets” an internet meme predict humor ratings? The results indicate that people’s ratings of funniness are highly dependent on whether or not the person feels they have understood or “gotten” the meme. Beyond this, the results varied widely between the memes studied and tended to fall into six distinct categories based on whether or not participants “got” the meme.
1. Introduction

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), colloquially known as internet linguistics, offers a unique sandbox in which to examine language. The study of linguistics on the internet is still in its infancy, but the potential for the field is endless. The speed of online communication allows language to evolve at an astonishing rate; changes that normally take decades or centuries are compressed into a timespan of weeks or months. Most CMC is accomplished through exchanges of writing, meaning that people who communicate through technology must cope with the many difficulties inherent in textual conversations. Writing lacks tone, intonation, and gesture, and furthermore is rife with ambiguity. There are endless opportunities for misunderstandings, and yet such communication is still incredibly successful and popular on the internet. CMC is also a playground for language. One of the most notable examples is the way users collaborate and play off of each other in the creation of multimodal internet memes. An internet meme is defined by Knobel and Lankshear (2007) as the rapid uptake and spread of a “particular idea presented as a written text, image, language ‘move,’ or some other unit of cultural ‘stuff’”.

Internet memes come in all shapes and sizes; anything from a person’s face to a song can become an internet meme. That original face or song will always be cited with some level of variation in the resulting parodies. The parodic copies of the original thing proliferate in a very short period of time before dying out. Creators of these parodies walk a fine line between innovation and maintaining citational echoes of the original. Despite the amount of linguistic innovation consistently shown in internet memes, there
has been very little work the linguistics of memes or how exactly derivatives of the
original example are made.

In this thesis I will investigate the well-established “Keep Calm and X” meme
which arose from a World War II British motivational poster emblazoned with the words
“Keep Calm and Carry On”. Chapter two presents a review of the literature in regards to
meme research and related fields. In chapter three, I expand and apply Shifman (2013)’s
communication oriented typology for memes in conjunction with blending theory in
order to prove that internet memes are altered in predictable patterns. The fourth chapter
describes a pilot empirical survey study based on the theory established in chapter three.
The study explores the minimal number of changes that can be made to a parody while
still allowing it to make sense. The results indicate that people’s ratings of funniness are
highly dependent on whether or not the person feels they have understood or “gotten” the
meme. Beyond this main result, the memes studied tended to follow five different
patterns that are described in detail in the chapter.

On a small scale, this research has many applications to understanding how all
memes, not just Keep Calm and Carry On parodies are formed and understood. This
sheds light on the relationship between language and humor and may allow us to design
better memes or at least scientifically distinguish between good and bad ones. On a larger
scale, this study is vital to understanding rhetorically effective communication, especially
in the digital age where the ability to curate the limited attention of the world is a highly
valued skill. It also allows us insight into how language can combine with non-linguistics
symbols to create meaning that would not be possible with language alone.
Further, this work explores of the line between what makes something funny or not. Humor is vital to human cognition and experience, and yet it is one of the most difficult areas to study. This paper offers insight into what humans do and do not need in order to run a blend to achieve both humor and understanding. The answers suggested herein are ultimately more complicated than we would hope, but are valuable in illustrating the complexity of the human mind.
2. Literature Review

2.1 Memetics

Memes were originally described by Richard Dawkins in his book The Selfish Gene (1976) as a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, fashion trends, tool making or architectural techniques. Just as genes propagate in the gene pool, ideas also propagate. A meme in the meme pool (much like a gene in the gene pool) can only survive if the represented knowledge evolves. Without adapting to the constantly changing conditions of the social world, the value or usability of knowledge will diminish and the meme will die.

While this simple idea has been the source of much academic debate about what a meme is and how it works, the word “meme” has been picked up by internet users around the world (Shifman, 2013). As stated previously, online, a meme or “internet meme” is used to describe the rapid uptake and spread of a “particular idea presented as a written text, image, language ’move,’ or some other unit of cultural ’stuff’” (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). Another definition states that an internet meme is “a neologism used to describe a catchphrase or concept that spreads in a fast way from person to person via the Internet” (Wikipedia). An internet meme can be anything from a single to word to a graphic, from a song to a video. A simple Google search of the term “internet meme” returned 62,500,000 results (March 23, 2014). Many of the first results lead to large interactive databases available as teaching tools about internet memes, or as sources of templates that internet users can use to make their own.

One of the main differences between academia’s view of memes and the internet’s is that “serious” memetics tends to focus on the longevity of its memes.
Internet memes, on the other hand, tend to describe recent, often short lived fads that can rise to “internet fame” in a matter of hours or days or weeks and then fade away into nothing. Another difference is that the unit of an internet meme tends to be considered obvious and concrete such as youtube videos or image macros that lure many spinoffs as opposed to the more abstract and controversial unit of traditional memetics research. Both types of memes however can be best understood as cultural information that is passed from person to person, but in aggregate scales into social phenomena with a wide-reaching impact on the mindsets, behavior and actions of social groups (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007).

2.2 Diachronic Linguistics and Internet Memes

The short lived nature of internet memes makes them a goldmine of information on human processes that usually take decades if not centuries of time to take place. One of the most obvious areas of study is language change. Diachronic linguistics is often difficult because it deals with changes that take place over hundreds of years and the data available from past centuries is very sparse and heavily edited. Internet memes, particularly those with linguistic elements are a unique opportunity to look at language change sped up over months and years.

Unfortunately academic research into internet memes in general is still in its infancy. There has been some interest in the general model of evolution or growth that internet memes follow. A “meme lifecycle” has been compared to that of both viruses (Paradowski 2012) and parasites (Bjarneskans et al.). Various studies have attempted to create a generalized model of the growth and spread of memes over time. Wei et al,
(2013) used a viral model to predict which of two generic memes would spread the farthest and also experimented with whether or not the outcome of meme propagation could be influenced by external factors. Freitag et al (2012) created a corpus from online discussions designed to support research on the spread of “socially relevant ideas,” which they also call memes. They also found that a standard epidemiological model was a good fit for diachronic patterns of the adoption of lexical memes.

In a more general sense there has been a great deal of work on showing how the spread of information online follows a power law distribution often with reference to Zipf’s law (Huberman & Adamic 1999, 2001, Adamic 2011). Zipf’s (1949) law states that the frequency of a word is inversely proportional to its rank in a frequency table. In other words, in natural language the most frequent word is twice as frequent as the second most frequent word and three times as frequent as the third most frequent word. The distribution shows that you get a few high frequency words and very many low frequency words. None of these studies have looked at specific examples of memes or the patterns by which they evolve.

2.3 Internet Memes, Snowclones and Construction Grammar

An area that has received less work than diachronic studies of internet memes is the approach of considering memes as constructions as defined by construction grammarians. In its broadest sense:

“Construction Grammar is a linguistic theory concerned with the nature of speakers' knowledge of language. Like traditional grammars, ConstructionGrammar takes the basic units of language to be form-meaning pairings, or constructions... A construction is defined to be a pairing of form with meaning/use such that some aspect of the form or
some aspect of the meaning/use is not strictly predictable from the component parts or from other constructions already established to exist in the language.” (Goldberg 1997, pg 1).

I argue that it is natural to consider memes in this light, particularly memes that fall into the category colloquially called “snowclones”. “Snowclone” is a neologism for a type of cliché phrasal template originally defined as "a multi-use, customizable, instantly recognizable, time-worn, quoted or misquoted phrase or sentence that can be used in an entirely open array of different jokey variants by lazy journalists and writers." (Pullum 2003b, Pullum 2004, Whitman 2004). The concept was first noted in October 2003 by Geoff Pullum who noted a peculiar sort of "bleached conditional" (Pullum 2003a) based around the idea of Eskimos having a certain number of words for snow and X other culture having a similar number for some other word Y. Shortly after this, Glen Whitman (2004) suggested the term snowclone for this phenomenon (based on the original Eskimo example) and the term has been in use on the internet ever since. A snowclone utilizes a familiar verbal formula and the cultural knowledge of the audience to convey information. And while a variant snowclone may refer to completely different things from the original, the two will still express similar relationships and thus still be easily understood. Examples of snowclones beyond the original Eskimo one include “X all the Y!” with the original being “Clean all the things!” and “If X is wrong, I don’t want to be right!” which perhaps originates with the 1972 soul song “(If Loving You Is Wrong) I Don’t Want to Be Right.”

As Mark Liberman (2006) points out, “the issues involved [in how snowclones work] seem to overlap with the problems of construction grammar, whatever exactly we take those to be...” Following Liberman’s line of thinking, I propose that snowclones
seem to act as particularly salient, if perhaps short lived partially lexically filled constructions. Memes act similarly although they are not constrained solely to a linguistic form. Memes can also have a graphic, audio-visual or musical form in addition to their linguistic form. Memes however are unique in that they can be recognized and understood even when only a part of their form is recreated such as the linguistic elements alone or the graphic elements of the meme alone. One such meme, the “Keep Calm and Carry On” meme, which has both a linguistic and a distinctive graphic format, is the subject of this paper.

The only substantial work that has been done on memes seems to be two studies by Shifman (2011, 2013). In the first of these, Shifman created a corpus and of 30 prominent memetic videos from youtube.com which have generated a great deal of creative parodies. Her analysis revealed six common features between all of the videos: focus on ordinary people, flawed masculinity, humor, simplicity, repetitiveness and whimsical content. Each of these attributes marks the video as incomplete or flawed, thereby invoking further creative dialogue. In the later paper (2013) Shifman proposes that internet memes are not single ideas or formulas that spread easily, but rather groups of content items created with awareness of each other and which share common characteristics. Shifman then isolates three possible dimensions that make up memes and which can potentially be imitated: content (referencing both the ideas and the ideologies conveyed), form (the physical format of the message perceived through the senses) and stance (ways in which addressers positions themselves in relation to the text, the reader/viewer and other potential speakers). While Shifman speaks about these dimensions in terms of a memetic youtube video called “Leave Britney Alone”, it applies
well to memes in other formats as well and does a good job of explaining the flexibility in how many ways a meme can be altered without losing the reference to the original.

2.4 Corpus Linguistics and Memetics

Both a diachronic and a construction based approach to internet memes would be well served by the methodologies of a corpus based study. The idea of using the web as a corpus was first suggested by Kilgarriff (2001). There has since been a great deal of work on using either the whole web or parts of the web as a corpus (Gatto 2009, Kehoe 2006, Kehoe & Gee 2009, Renouf et al 2004). The web is very different from traditional corpora such as the BNC (British National Corpus) and ANC (American National Corpus). One of the reasons to use the Web for linguistic research is that it provides up-to-date information on popular language use. This is particularly important if a researcher wants to study internet linguistics which, as stated previously, changes far faster than everyday normal language.

My corpus is a self-made corpus like the pop song corpus created by Werne (2012). I will use the website Know Your Meme (knowyourmeme.com) which is a site that tracks and collects examples of internet memes.

2.5 Humor Research

When discussing internet memes, it is vital to acknowledge their humorous dimension. Not all memes are funny, but many are or attempt to be such. The research that relates to the type of humor found in memes is sparse because humor is traditionally studied in the form of standalone jokes, mostly because they are easy to collect and study
(Attardo and Chabanne 1992). The best analogue to internet memes is “joke cycles,” which are large clusters of mutually related texts (Attardo 2001). A well-known joke cycle is the light bulb joke where one questions how many of target group X are required to do the mundane activity of screwing in a light bulb. Joke cycles tend to propagate just as quickly as memes. In 1973 there were only 28 versions of the light bulb joke in the Indiana University Folklore Archives, but now there are more than a thousand variants of the original joke (Marcush 1996).

Attardo (2001) discusses how the various “texts” are related and proposes that the subject matter of the joke is not the most important feature, but rather the thematic links that connect the various subjects is what makes the cycle possible. He also proposes that joke cycles progress in generations. The first generation of the joke is the original joke in forms that vary only slightly. This prototype joke establishes the frame that any future jokes will build on or reference. This is vital because the jokes or memes that follow are only funny in relation to each other. The second generation is the para-joke derives its humor from an implicit intertextual reference to the original joke. Attardo (2001) defines intertextuality as follows “a text (T2) will be said to have an intertextual relation to another text (T1) when the processing of T2 would be incomplete without reference to T1”. In short, conceptual blending (Fauconnier and Turner 1998; Coulson 2000) is required to make sense of jokes.

Attardo (2001) then identifies a third generation of joke in which the humor comes from the failure to give the joke. This type of meta-joke requires that the setup of the original is called upon, but then never completed. A light bulb joke of this sort would be:
“How many lawyers does it take to screw in a light bulb?”

“How many can you afford?”

Most meme variations seem to be para-jokes, but there are examples that are of this third generation of joke, which depends heavily on what Attardo (2001) calls “narrative frame breaches”.

Primacy is clearer with memes than jokes, in that we know very well what the original meme is usually, and especially in the case of Keep Calm and Carry On where the origin is very well documented. However, if one started to encounter the meme in the wild without reference to the original, it is likely that they would quickly construct an idea of what the prototype joke looks like.

There are many theories that attempt to explain humor. One such theory, the Semantic Theory of Humor (Raskin 1986, 1985) is an attempt to apply a semantic theory to humor. The theory suggests that humor happens when two opposite scripts overlap. Attardo and Raskin (1991) build off this theory with the broader and more generally linguistic “General Theory of Verbal Humor” (GTVH). Yet another theoretical approach to humor comes from frame blending (Hofstadter and Gabora, 1989) or conceptual blending (Fauconnier and Turner 1998; Coulson 2000), a theoretical framework that aims to describe how human create meaning. In the simplest terms, “a conceptual blend is a meaningful object that involves the integration of information from disparate domains” (Coulson and Oakley 2005). The object that results from the blend has elements and relations between elements that are constructed from a combination of the information from those disparate domains. Blending is such a normal and instinctual activity that it takes truly pyrotechnic examples to force us to notice it happening. Some examples
include the blends that allow a race by every person who has set a record for the fastest mile (Fauconnier & Turner, 2003) and the politician whose veto of a foreign aid bill has caused accusations of him “snatching the rice bowl out of the child’s hands” (Fauconnier & Turner 2002; Turner, 2007).

Conceptual integration or blending occurs in a wide range of mental phenomena such as metaphors and, particularly of interest to the subject of this paper, humor. Researchers have shown that conceptual blending plays a vital role in various types of humor including political cartoons (Coulson, in press) and spontaneous humor found in talk radio (Coulson, 2005). Many researchers and thinkers have noted that two key points of humor in general seem to be the mixing of disparate and usually incompatible frames (Koestler, 1964; Attardo, 2001) and the resolution of the conflict between the contradictory frames by a new and humorous emergent idea or image that is only possible in the context of our incompatible frames (Lewis, 1989). Both of these aspects of humorous blends hold true for internet memes, which tend to have two inputs, the original meme being referenced (such as Keep Calm and Carry On) and a second input that can be anything from another meme to a TV show to word play. The meme’s creator must combine these inputs in a way such that both inputs can derived from the blend (the parody itself) such that the joke and/or reference being made can be understood.

Coulson (in press) points out that part of the appeal in various kinds of jokes is the challenge of solving the puzzle. This is just as true in internet memes where a large part of the pleasure and humor derived from the meme comes from figuring out what any given meme is referencing. In the next chapter I will discuss how my adaptation of Shifman (2013) and blending theory can explain the humor of internet memes.
2.6 Keep Calm and Carry On

This study will set the groundwork to explore the diachronic changes in the graphic-linguistic memetic construction “Keep Calm and Carry On” or “Keep Calm and X”. This construction arises from the phrase “Keep Calm and Carry On”. The phrase was on a motivational poster produced by the British government in 1939, several months before the beginning of the Second World War. The poster was intended to raise the morale of the British public in the aftermath of widely predicted mass air attacks on major cities. Very few copies of the poster were distributed at the time, but it was rediscovered in 2000 (Lewis, 2004). Since then, the famous red poster with white writing has been re-issued by a number of private companies and become increasingly popular.

Figure 2.6.1: The original “Keep Calm and Carry On” poster.
With its popularity, innumerable parodies and imitations have appeared on and off the internet. Variations range widely in topic and typically contain references to other aspects of popular culture. Examples have included "Now Panic and Freak Out", "Keep Calm and Carrion" and others which are showcased in Figure 1.2.

Figure 2.6.2: Some examples of “Keep Calm and Carry On” parodies.
3. Analysis and Predications

3.1 The Taxonomy

Shifman’s (2013) communication-oriented typology for analyzing memes has three dimensions: form, content and stance. The form of a meme is its physical form perceived through the senses. A meme’s content is defined as the ideas and ideologies it conveys. And finally, stance is the creator of the meme’s position with respect to the meme, the reader and other creators of memes.

In this paper I propose an expansion to Shifman’s typology that allows for a very specific analysis of what elements of the “Keep Calm and Carry On” meme are altered. I begin by dividing the form into a linguistic and graphic element. I then subdivide each of these categories into smaller parts that allow for easy quantification of possible changes between derivations of a meme. The linguistic form of this meme is as follows:

1. Imperative Morpho-syntax
2. Two verb phrases joined by a conjunction
3. No Punctuation
4. Begins with the words: “Keep Calm”
5. Ends with the words “Carry On”

The imperative morphosyntax dimension reflects such factors as the meme’s lack of an explicit subject and uninflected, imperative verbs. The original phrase “Keep Calm and Carry On” as well as a large majority of “Keep Calm and X” derivations have an implied subject who is presumably the individual reading the meme. The original is also an
imperative and this is shown through its uninflected verbs. The next dimension reflects
that the original is made up of two verb phrases “keep calm” and “carry on” which are
joined by a conjunction “and”. Unlike in every day written language, this meme lacks any
punctuation. Finally, the meme begins with the phrase “Keep Calm” and ends with the
verb phrase “Carry On”. A parody of this meme may or may not have alterations to one
of these five linguistic dimensions.

The graphic form of this meme breaks down into another list of dimensions:

1. Typography
2. Layout
3. Crown Symbol
4. Red Background
5. White Text

Typography is the arrangement of type and in the case of linguistic internet memes, it is a
key element of the visual presentation of a meme. In the case of “Keep Calm and Carry
On” it covers the very recognizable Keep Calm Font, the fact that the font is sans serif
and that the words are written in all capitals letters. The typography is complemented by
the layout of the meme. There is a crown at the top followed by text that is written one
word per line with the middle word being slightly smaller than the rest. The third
dimension addresses whether or not the original “Keep Calm and Carry On” crown
symbol at the top of the meme is preserved in the parody or if it is replaced by another
symbol representing anything from a TV show to a sport team logo. The fifth and six
dimensions address whether the text is kept white and the background is kept red from meme to meme.

The content dimension is divided into four elements: frame, implied audience, Speech Acts and Grice’s Maxims. In this study, framing is taken in the general sense of its use and draws on Goffman (1974), Fillmore (1976), and Fauconnier and Turner (1998). The working definition of the term for this paper defines frames as the coherent mental structures of social events and our subjective involvement in them. Humans use frames of understanding to construct meaning and make sense of the social world. As a side note to frames, it is important to draw attention to Goffman’s (1974) concept of keying. Keying is the process of transforming an activity that is already meaningful as a primary framework into something patterned on it but which is very different from the original. For example, the game of school often played by children is a keying of the frame of school. This concept is very relevant to meming. On one level, each new meme is a keying of the original “Keep Calm and Carry On”. However, the various parodies also draw on a wide variety of other frames to help the viewer construct the meaning of a given spoof. For the purposes of quantification, this paper will focus will specifically on the new frames a given meme draws on. For example, the original meme relies on the frame of war, World War II to be specific, whereas the parodies may rely on frames such as Batman, social media, and zombie movies to name only a few.

Beyond the frames being evoked by any given meme, there is also an implied audience being evoked in each. The implied audience is the group for persons who a given meme was created for. Some will appeal to a wide variety of people, but others will assume the audience is aware of very specific information that will help them decode the
meme. The idea of an implied audience is based in two of Clark’s (1996) ideas. The first of these is the idea of common ground, which is defined as the collection of "mutual knowledge" necessary for communication between two people. Common ground can be as simple as the knowledge of what has already been said in a conversation, but it can also refer to shared knowledge of a machine or game or social structure that makes communication about said thing possible. From this comes the second idea: the concept of cultural communities. A cultural community can be based around nationality, age groups, hobbies, subcultures, professions and more. All that matters is that the members of a cultural community must share a certain amount of common ground based around the thing that unites them. For example, two musicians share a common ground around music and can, even if they have just met, have a very complex conversation about music, music theory, or the culture of being musician that they could never have had with someone outside of the cultural community of music. When it comes to memes, a person’s cultural community, whether or not they are in the meme’s implied audience, can make the difference between understanding, partial understanding and complete confusion. For example, the original meme’s implied audience is World War II British persons whereas the derivations can have implied audiences ranging from scientists to bloggers to specific fan communities for TV shows, movies and other media.

The third and fourth categories of content are Grice’s Maxims and Searle’s Speech Acts. Grice’s Maxims are meant to describe the general rules by which people manage communication. The most important part of the maxims is the overarching cooperative principle, which states that when contributing to a discussion of any sort, the contribution should be what is “required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted
purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.” The five maxims that follow are the maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner. The maxim of quantity advises that one should try to be as informative as is needed and no more. The maxim of quality stipulates that one should try to be truthful and not lie or share unsubstantiated information. The maxim of relation indicates that one should try to be relevant and keep to the topic of the conversation. The final maxim, the maxim of manner, says that one’s contribution should try to be as concise, clear, and organized as possible while one avoiding ambiguity. With regard to some of the Keep Calm meme variations, some of the maxims are occasionally flouted or violated in order to support the humor of the meme and differentiate the derivative from the original.

John Searle’s speech acts are a classification of illocutionary acts, John Austin’s term for the act of getting an audience to recognize the speaker’s meaning (Clark 1996). Requests, questions, declarations, demands are examples of illocutionary acts. Searle divided this general concept into five main categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives declarations. An assertive is a speech act that commits a speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition, for example reciting a creed. A directive is a speech act that causes the hearer to take a particular action. This includes requests, advice and order. The original version of the Keep Calm and Carry On meme is a directive because it is intended to change the behavior of those who read it such that they do indeed Keep Calm and Carry On despite the danger of air strikes on London. Commissives are speech acts that commit a speaker to some future action such as promises or vows. Expressives are speech acts that express the speaker’s attitudes and emotions towards the audience, this includes apologies and compliments. Finally,
declarations are speech acts, which rely on codified conventions of institutions like religion or law or games in order to change reality in accord with the proposition. For example, declarations by certified religious persons can create marriages.

Since derivations of the Keep Calm meme are all parodies, most of them are making “fake” speech acts. This is especially true of examples that still sound like directives even though it is obvious that no one is actually supposed to do what the poster says such as in the case of “Keep Calm and Smear Blood All Over the Walls”. However, these fake directives often also serve as real assertives. For example, “Keep Calm and Smear Blood All Over the Walls” happens to be referencing a popular television show called Supernatural. The meme serves as an assertion of the creator’s and potential sharers’ love of the show.

Shifman’s (2013) final dimension, stance, defined as the creator’s position with respect to the text, reader and other creators, is divided into two categories: epistemic and affective stance. The epistemic stance is the creator’s certainty or belief in the meme’s message. In the original Keep Calm poster, the epistemic stance is very strongly certain in the proposition that one should “Keep Calm and Carry On”. A large majority of the derivations maintain this certainty. The affective stance of a meme is the creator’s emotional intensity measured as positive or negative. The original meme has a very positive emotional intensity, but this is not necessarily true of all of the derivations. Although both forms of stance lend themselves best to a scalar measurement, for the purposes of initial analysis, both are considered fixed quantities, either the epistemic and affective stance of a parody are the same as the original’s thus giving them a score of 0, or they are different, giving them a score of 1.
3.2 Examples of Analysis

The memes used for the analysis were gathered from Know Your Meme, an online “wiki” and database that records, describes and collects examples of memes such as “Keep Calm and Carry On”. The first 100 examples stored in the database were taken as data with the exception of a few judgment calls regarding subjects that were repeated more than three times. Under this criterion 8 examples referencing the TV show and manga *Kamen Rider* were removed from the sample.

The analysis was done in a two-step process. The first step was a qualitative analysis of which of the sixteen dimensions had or had not been altered between the original and the parody. This analysis included the specific statement of the aspects changed. The second step was then to add up the number of changes such that a change was worth a score of “1” and a lack of change was scored as a “0”. The total calculated for each parody is a score out of 16 that indicates how far removed the parody is from the original. In the following paragraphs, examples of the qualitative and quantitative analysis are provided.

The first meme analyzed is “Keep Calm and Call Batman” as shown in Figure 3.2.1. The linguistic form of the meme is almost completely unchanged. The meme consists of two verb phrases (“Keep Calm” and “Call Batman”) and a conjunction (“and”). There is still no punctuation and the imperative morphosyntax of the original is maintained. Finally, the meme begins with the iconic “Keep Calm”, but rather than ending with “Carry On” it ends with “Call Batman” The graphic form of the meme is less unchanged. The red background is changed to black and the white text is changed to
yellow. This change makes sense given that black and yellow are often the colors used in Batman’s uniform and symbol. The other change is that while there is still a symbol at the top of the poster, it is not the iconic crown, but instead the bat symbol. The changes in color and symbol are clearly meant to support the content of the meme, which will be discussed shortly. Besides these three changes, the rest of the graphic form: the typography and the layout are unaltered.

Three of the four dimensions of content are changed in this derivative and these changes are the core of the joke or reference of the parody. The frame is switched from WWII England to two parallel frames, the first of the fictional superhero Batman and the second
of a world in which Batman is real and can be called for aid. The implied audience is also
twofold. It can be either fans of the fictional superhero Batman or characters that exist
inside the world of the batman. Within the first frame, the speech act becomes an
assertive, which allows the creator and implied audience to express their support and love
of the character Batman. Within the second fictional frame, the speech act expressed
becomes a directive like in the original, though it is also necessarily a parody of a true
directive when considered outside that frame. Finally, this meme is not changed at all
with regard to Grice’s Maxims.

The stance is unchanged in this example.

The meme was scored by a simple unweighted count of what was changed and
what was not. Changes were scored as “1” and things that weren’t changed were scored
as “0”. In this example, a total of 7 changes out of a potential 16 changes were made.

The next example (Figure 3.2.2) scores much higher at 15 changes out of 16. All
of the linguistic form dimensions are changed except for the fact that the meme still starts
with the words “Keep Calm”. The second verb phrase has been changed into something
that is not a verb phrase. Punctuation has been added and the imperative morpho-syntax
of the meme abruptly ends at the ellipses. The graphic form dimensions are also all
changed. The red background becomes black and the white text is changed to green. This
color scheme obviously reinforces the EKG symbol and thus the new frame of EKGs and
flat lining. The typography is also changed in several ways. The first part of the meme is
written in all capital letters, but this is changed starting with the conjunction. Further, the
font is not the famous “Keep Calm” font. The layout is changed from the traditional form and the crown symbol is replaced with the EKG symbol.

Figure 3.2.2. A qualitative analysis of the meme “Keep Calm and…okay, not THAT calm!”

Each of the content and stance dimensions is altered. The frame becomes that of hospitals, heart monitors and flat lining. The implied audience becomes much more modern, though it can be understand by a very wide audience. The meme invokes the maxim of relation and though the meme starts off as a directive, it cuts itself off at the ellipses. The creator’s epistemic stance also weakens from strongly certain to much less so when the imperative switches as does the affective stance which changes from positive to negative.
3.3 *Quantitative Analysis*

The 100 parodies of Keep Calm and Carry On collected from KnowYourMeme.com were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively as described in section 3.2. The results of the quantitative analysis were combined using R and Excel to shed light on the number and kinds of changes that were most typical in the collected same of memes.

Figure 3.3.1 shows the distribution of the total number of changes in each of the 100 memes. Thirty-one percent of the memes have exactly six of out sixteen changes. Twenty-five percent have seven changes. The third and fourth highest proportions of changes were eight changes at fourteen percent and five changes as twelve percent. Three changes was the least number of changes observed and fifteen changes was the highest number observed.

![Distribution of Number of Alterations in Keep Calm and X Memes](image-url)
Figure 3.3.1: Distribution of the number of changes in each of the 100 memes analyzed in section 3.2.

Figures 3.3.2, 3.3.3, and 3.3.4 show the proportion of each dimension that was or wasn’t changed in each of the 100 examples. Figure 3.3.2 shows the data for the dimensions of linguistic form. With the exception of the second verb phrase of the meme being changed from “Carry On”, these dimensions are rarely altered. The linguistic form of two verb phrases joined by a conjunction and the icon “keep calm” opening line are the other dimensions most likely to be changed. They were only changed 24 and 22 percent of the time respectively. The memes only ended in “Carry On” in 3 percent of cases.

![Alterations to Linguistic Form](image)

Figure 3.3.2: Distribution of whether or not each of the dimensions of linguistic form were changed or not in each of the 100 memes analyzed in section 3.2.

Figure 3.3.3 shows the alterations made to the graphic form dimensions. Of these dimensions the background color and the symbol were the most likely aspects to be
changed. The crown symbol was changed into something else in 74 out of 100 cases. The background color was changed in 77 out of 100 cases. The text color was changed in 39 cases. The typography and the layout were rarely altered.

![Alterations to Graphic Form](image)

Figure 3.3.3: Distribution of whether or not each of the dimensions of graphic form were changed or not in each of the 100 memes analyzed in section 3.2.

Figure 3.3.4 shows the alterations to both content and stance. In almost every case the frame and audience were changed. The type of speech act was changed in 52 cases out of a hundred, that’s roughly half. Grice’s Maxims were invoked in only 15 cases, making them the least likely aspect of content to be changed. Both epistemic and affective stance were unlikely to be altered, but of the two the affective stance was more likely to be changed.
Figure 3.3.4: Distribution of whether or not each of the dimensions of content and stance were changed or not in each of the 100 memes analyzed in section 3.2.

Based on this information we can imagine a “typical” Keep Calm and Carry On parody. In terms of form, it’s probably very linguistically similar to the original. It is extremely likely that the meme will begin with “Keep Calm”, though it is just as likely that the second verb phrase has been altered from “Carry On”. The average parody does not use punctuation and maintains the original’s imperative morphosyntax. In terms of the graphic form, the background color is unlikely to be red and the symbol at the top of the meme is probably not a crown. The text color has a fifty-fifty chance of being white. Otherwise, the layout and typography are unchanged.

In this average meme, the frame and audience will most definitely be changed and there is a high probability that the type of speech act has been changed. Grice’s maxims will probably not be invoked and neither the epistemic nor affective stance will be changed. In general, such a meme will have about 6 or seven changes in total.
This frequency analysis tells us what to expect from an average meme and which dimensions are most likely to be changed. However, it is important to note that only the linguistic and graphic forms of a meme are plainly visible to an observer. The content and stance of a meme are more abstract and thus must be derived from the form. The fun of figuring out what a meme is referencing, of specifically figuring out what the frame and implied audience are and enjoying how cleverly they were referenced, is the main source of much memetic humor. But how does the form of the meme allow us to “get” the reference a meme is making? Conceptual blending (Fauconnier and Turner 1998; Coulson 2000) offers a possible explanation as to how this process works.

3.4 Blending Analysis

The basic tools of conceptual integration theory are mental spaces and mappings. Mental spaces are like mental records representing relevant information about a given domain that are pulled out for use in working memory (Fauconnier, 1994). A mental space is not exhaustive, and contains only partial representations of entities and relationships between entities as evoked by the speaker. Mappings are abstract correspondences between the entities and relations held in different mental spaces. When humans encounter language, written or spoken, we use the linguistic input in conjunction with cultural knowledge and the context of the language use to set up simple mental spaces in order to understand the input. (Coulson, 2000). Mappings are what allow us to relate the various elements or relationships in different mental spaces to each other and thus make blends possible.
Blending is often a source of humor and it is particularly key in the humor of memes, which involve blending the original meme’s mental space or frame with some other mental space to create a (hopefully) humorous result. In order to make meaning out of a meme (or “get” the joke), a viewer must be able to access the original inputs to the blend. This creates a delicate task for the meme’s creator. There must be enough clues in the blended space that the viewer knows that the meme is a Keep Calm meme. But the viewer also needs enough clues to deduce the second input.

In cases where the creator has not provided enough citations to the second input or where the viewer lacks the expected familiarity with the second input, the blend will often be unintelligible. It is possible that such a meme may still be considered amusing, but that humor does not derive from blending. On the other hand, it is possible that a viewer who does not instinctively retrieve the second input can recognize that there is an input to be missed and may appreciate the meme at this underspecified level. A more curious viewer may go beyond the mild appreciation of knowing there is a blend to be had and methodically investigate the parody in order to discover or construct the missing reference. Once the second input is retrieved the viewer can get the joke or at least understand what the creator was going for.

The manner in which such an unfamiliar second input can be recovered is instructive in how blending is used to create meaning in a given variant of a meme. Consider Figure 3.4.1.
3.4.1. “Keep Calm and Praise the Sun”.

If you are sufficiently familiar with the Keep Calm and Carry On meme, you will immediately recognize that first input space into the blend despite the obvious cosmetic differences between the above poster and famous red and white original. This initial state can be represented by Figure 3.4.2. The aspects of the first input space that are mapped onto the blending state are mainly the first verb phrase (VP1) “Keep Calm” and the presence of a symbol, though not the Keep Calm crown, at the top of the poster. Other aspects that are mapped from the first input space are the lack of punctuation, the general structure of the phrase used, the imperative morphosyntax, the layout and the typography of the original poster.
Figure 3.4.2: An illustration of the initial blended space created upon looking at an unfamiliar “Keep Calm and Carry On” parody in which you do not immediately know the second input space.

This initial knowledge does not however explain the second verb phrase (VP2) “Praise the Sun” or the sun symbol. However, both of these elements are the biggest clues to the discovering the frame and implied audience of the poster. Knowing this will tell us what the second input space is. There are many ways a naïve viewer can become a knowledgeable one. Asking other people what it means is one method. Another method, in this internet age, is simply a matter of recognizing the parts of the blend that come from the second input and searching them on Google. It is easiest to begin by searching for VP2 and seeing what comes up. If that proves insufficient, Google allows you to reverse search images and discover where the poster originated from. The combination of
these two methods will in most cases provide the needed information. In the Praise the Sun poster, the second input space is the Dark Souls RPG video game. The particular reference is to the phrase “Praise the Sun,” which is a sarcastic phrase playing off of NPC (non-playable character) Solaire of Astora’s naivety and his peculiar obsession with the sun (Know Your Meme, 2014). With this new information, this particular meme makes sense even to those with no previous familiarity with the Dark Souls game. Even so, it is interesting to note that being able to understand the blend does not automatically make the blend humorous.

Not all Keep Calm memes reference a game, movie, book or internet culture phenomenon. In other examples, humor can instead be derived from wordplay or other general humor. These examples still require blending, but the second input rarely requires the specialized knowledge of a particular subject. Such examples are of particular interest in this study because their wide appeal makes them good items for investigations into which dimensions have the most influence on the meme’s humor. This topic will be covered extensively in the following chapter of this paper.

The following variant of the Keep Calm meme (Figure 3.4.3) appeals to a very wide audience. Many modern westerners of a certain age and class have experience with the default PC Internet Explorer browser. Consequently, these individuals can look at the meme below and access the second input space based entirely on the “e” symbol at the top of the poster. With this knowledge, the punchline to the joke of the meme comes in the VP2. The VP2 is not a lexical item, but rather an empty box with a red “x” in the corner signifying that the image that is supposed to go in that space failed to load. Internet explorer often fails to load content and this fact is brought down into the blend in
the space intended for VP2. The result is a dual understanding that the intended VP2 failed to load because Internet Explorer is a slow browser, but also that the joke the quality of Internet Explorer. A further support of this blend comes from the symbol itself, which is not the standard blue the logo usually comes in, but rather grey. This draws on pre-existing blends that associate the color grey with old age, conformity, and boredom (Grey, Wikipedia) and further reinforces the joke.

![Image of Internet Explorer logo with "KEEP CALM AND"

Figure 3.4.3: “Keep Calm and [image that failed to load]”.

The meme in Figure 3.4.4 is also generally understood and found to be humorous. In this meme, the original Keep Calm input space is evoked mainly by the first verb phrase. The rest of the imagery and language in the poster evokes the second input space, that of medicine, EKGs and flat-lining. In the blended space we get the possibility of
keeping so calm and that your heart actually stops. This possibility thoroughly disrupts
the expected ending to a Keep Calm meme and is thus quite humorous.

Figure 3.4.4: “Keep Calm and… ok, not THAT calm!”
4. Experimental Study

4.1 Questions and Predictions

Which dimensions of the Keep Calm and Carry On taxonomy make memes funny? In the previous chapter, the combination of the blending and taxonomy analyses predicted that the two most basic dimensions of a Keep Calm and Carry On meme needed to allow someone to run the blend and recover the second input space are the changed symbol in place of the crown and the contents of the second verb phrase (VP2) slot. Is this true? Can a humorous meme be reduced to these two changes to the form of the meme?

Furthermore, how do these two dimensions work together? Are both necessary to retrieve the second input space or will one of them work on their own? For example, if the new symbol in a parody was replaced with the original crown, would the VP2 be sufficient to retrieve the second input? Would such a meme still be funny? Also, if the new VP2 of a parody was replaced with the original VP2 “Carry On” while keeping the new symbol, would the meme still be funny? Would each of these partially reverted memes be equally funny? Or would one be more humorous or understandable than the other? I predict that both partially reverted memes will be considered less funny than the meme with both dimensions changed, but I also predict that parodies which have the symbol reverted back to the crown will be more humorous than ones than have had the VP2 reverted to “Carry On”.

Another question is whether or not all memes with only the symbol and VP2 changed will be considered equally funny by the participants. Theoretically there should be no difference. However, that does lead to another question. Does whether or not
someone “gets”, “grogs” or understands a meme with two or one changes to these two
dimensions predict how funny the meme is? Given the nature of humor, I predict that
people who “get” a meme will always think it is funnier than those who don’t.

These are the questions I seek to answer in this portion of my research.

4.2 Methods

In order to lessen the chance of a participant not having the required knowledge of
the second input space, 32 parodies were selected from both the 100 parodies used in the
previous section and from various online lists of the best examples of “Keep Calm and
Carry On”. The parodies were selected to be generally funny and understandable without
specialized knowledge.

These 32 examples were then reduced to 15 parodies that could be simplified to
only having changes to the symbol and VP2. Examples that included changes to first verb
phrase (VP1), conjunction or punctuation were excluded. The only case chosen that
contained punctuation was one where the punctuation could be taken out without erasing
the joke. Thus, “Keep Calm and Punctuate Properly.” was not included in the second
sample set, but “Keep Calm and… ok, not that calm!” was.

The 15 examples were shown to 23 participants through an anonymous online
survey in which they were asked if they had seen each meme before and to give it a
humor rating on a 5 point Likert scale where 1 was not at all funny and 5 was extremely
funny. This informal survey was meant to confirm my assessment of the memes and help
me choose the ten funniest examples to test my hypothesis.

The survey showed that a five point Likert scale was too limited to give the fine
gradations I want in the humor rating. However, the ratings were fine enough that some
memes were clearly funnier than others. I excluded all memes that scored less than 1.85 on the 5 point scale. The survey also confirmed that the majority of participants had not seen any of the memes before.

Figure 4.2.1: The ten examples deemed funniest by the pilot survey.

The 10 examples (Figure 4.2.1) chosen were then reworked into three versions: the parody, VP2 reverted and symbol reverted (Figure 4.2.2). The parody is the version of the meme in which the VP2 and symbol are altered from the original but no other aspect of the graphic or linguistic form of the meme is changed. VP2 reverted is the version where the second verb phrase is changed back from the parody VP2 to “Carry On” while
the parody symbol is preserved. Symbol reverted is the version in which the symbol is changed back to the crown and parody VP2 is preserved.

Figure 4.2.2: In order from top to bottom, the examples of the “Keep Calm and Carrion” meme stimuli: parody, VP2 reverted and symbol reverted.
The result of this process was three sets of ten stimuli for each condition. All of the stimuli were created using the Keep Calm-O-Matic (http://www.keepcalm-o-matic.co.uk/) website and MS Paint. The symbols used in place of the crown were taken from related memes freely available on the web.

Using Qualtrics, an online survey software, I created three simple 23 question surveys. The first twenty questions of each survey alternatingly ask the respondent to state whether or not they “got” the meme being shown to them and rate the meme on a humor scale from 1-9 with 1 being “not at all funny” and 9 being “extremely hilarious”. Each respondent saw only one of the three possible variants for each meme. The last three questions were demographic questions. I recruited participants through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk software through which I gave a link to the survey. Upon finishing a survey, participants were given a randomly generated code that they could input into Mechanical Turk in order to receive compensation for their help.

82 participants began the survey, but only 76 finished it. 27 of the remaining participants took the first block of survey questions, 24 took the second and 25 took the third. They were compensated with money for their participation. Of the participants, 37 were female and 29 were male. The mean age was 37.6 with a maximum age of 62 and a minimum of 20. 47% of the participants had completed at least a bachelor’s degree. The maximum level of education of a participant was a doctorate and the minimum was some high school.
4.3 Results and Analysis

In aggregate, the ten parody versions of the memes were “gotten” by the highest percentage of participants at 83.38%, whereas the SR and VP2R versions were only “gotten” 62.52% and 54.62% of the time (Figure 4.3.2).

The mean funniness scores for participants who “got” all three versions a scale from 1 to nine were 3.91 (P), 2.91(SR) and 3.16(VP2R) (Figure 4.3.1). The mean funniness rating for participants who did not “get” the memes were .69 (P), 1.13 (SR) and 1.07 (VP2R).

Participants were much more likely to “get” the parody version than either the symbol reverted or second verb phrase reverted versions. They also tended to find the parody versions slightly more humorous than the other versions, on average. More tellingly, participants were more likely to find a meme funny if they “got” it than if they did not or were uncertain of their understanding. If a participant did not “get” a meme they rarely thought it was particularly funny. It is important to note that none of the versions were, on average, considered extremely funny even if the participants did “get” them. All of them scored below a 4 on the 1 to 9 Likert scale.
Comparison across all 30 items is, however, misleading because the memes did not all elicit similar responses from participants. It is far more illuminating to examine each of the ten memes alone. In doing so, it is evident that the responses tended to follow one of five patterns that I have split into six categories. The first pattern, found in Crayon, Carrion, iPhone, Hulk, and Rock On was that the P and SR versions were “gotten” the same percentage of the time. This is the pattern that I have split into two categories which will be discussed further below. The second pattern was that none of the three versions were “gotten” by the participants. Baryon and Karyotype followed this pattern. The third pattern, found in Carry-On, was that the P and VP2R were “gotten” the same percentage of the time. The fourth pattern was one in which the Parody was gotten more often than the other two versions. The Pokemon meme followed this pattern. And the fifth and final
pattern was a wildcard in which all three versions were “gotten” equally. The Not That Calm parody was the only meme to follow this pattern.

4.3.1 Category I: Symbol Not Needed For Blend

As stated above, the first pattern observed was that the P and SR versions were “gotten” the same percentage of the time. Another feature of this pattern is that despite the same proportion of participants who “got” them, the SR version tended to be considered less funny than the P version. The memes that follow this pattern have been divided into two categories based on potential explanations for how someone can report “getting” the SR version when, according to my theory, they need both the Symbol and VP2 to run the blend.

The first option is that despite my predictions there is enough information in the VP2 for the participant to run the blend without the symbol. Three of the memes seem to fit into this category. They are Crayon, Carrion and iPhone.

In the meme “Keep Calm and Crayon”, the symbol at the top of the meme is a pictorial representation of the VP2. The symbol and the VP2 are literally the same thing. Further the meme is not specifically referencing something like a TV show, but rather derives its humor from wordplay. “Crayon” sounds somewhat similar to “Carry On” depending on one’s pronunciation. The symbol is not needed to make to this pun, as evidenced by the fact that the SR version was “gotten” 92% of the time (Figure 4.3.4). Similarly, because the symbol is not needed to make the pun understood, the P and SR averaged similar mean humor ratings. The mean funniness rating of the parody and
symbol reverted versions were 3.93 and 3.27, respectively (Figure 4.3.3). The parody was rated more funny, but not significantly so.

A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether there was a significant relationship between participants “getting” the Crayon Parody and the version of the meme they saw. “Getting it” was not due to chance, $X^2 (4, N = 76) = 18.74$, $p^1 < .001$.

“Keep Calm and Carrion” is similar to the “Crayon” example. The symbol of a bird of prey is not the exact equivalent of “carrion” or “the decaying flesh of dead animals”, but the two are heavily associated. The symbol reinforces the pun of “Carrion” sounding like “Carry On”, but it is not necessary in order to “get” the meme. 76% of participants “got” the parody version and 71% percent got the symbol reverted version while the second verb phrase reverted version was only “gotten” 41% of the time (Figure

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1 I used an alpha level of .05 for all statistical tests.
4.3.8). Unlike the last example, the P version was on average considered funnier than the SR version, with a score of 4.53 as opposed to 2.83 (Figure 4.3.7).

It is interesting to note that participants were less likely to “get” this meme than they were the previous one. A possible reason for this result is that people are less likely to know what “carrion” is or how to pronounce it than they are the word “crayon”.

A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether there was a significant relationship between participants “getting” the Carrion parody and the version of the meme they saw. “Getting it” was not due to chance, $X^2 (4, N = 76) = 12.03, p = 0.017$.

“Keep Calm and Slide to Unlock” is the last meme that falls into the first category. This meme is not a pun like the two before it, but it falls into category of the VP2 being enough on its own because the phrase “Slide to Unlock” is so ubiquitously associated with Apple and iPhones that the actual Apple symbol is not vital to retrieving
the second input. Even so, the percentage of participants who “got” the SR version of this meme was only 74% as compared to the 92% of the P version. Both were significantly higher than the VP2R version, which was only “gotten” 37.5% of the time (Figure 4.3.6).

In this particular example, all three versions were, on average, considered equally funny in the participants reported that they “got” the meme (Figure 4.3.5).

A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether there was a significant relationship between participants “getting” the iPhone parody and the version of the meme they saw. “Getting it” was not due to chance, \( X^2 (4, N = 76) = 19.01, p < .001 \).
4.3.2 Category II: Unintended Blends

The second explanation for participants not needing the symbol in order to get the meme is that even though there is not enough information to retrieve the intended second input, there is enough to make a blend. This new blend tends to have little to do with the intended reference of the parody version, but it makes sense, which is why participants report that they “get” it. Even so, the SR versions of memes in this category are generally considered less funny than the P versions. Three of the memes seem to fit into this category. They are Hulk and Rock On.

“Keep Calm and Don’t Make Me Angry” is a meme that references the Hulk. Bruce Banner is a comic book character who becomes a giant indestructible green monster, called the Hulk, when angered. In the Parody version, this reference is obvious because of the combination of the VP2 “Don’t Make Me Angry” and the Symbol, a picture of the Hulk. Neither the VP2R nor the SR have enough information on their own to both give the second input given by the Symbol and the humor, which comes from VP2 blended with the Keep Calm framework. Despite this, “Keep Calm and Don’t Make Me Angry” does make sense on its own, without the Symbol. However the resulting meaning is very different since it cannot access “the Hulk” as a mental space. The meaning is instead much more general and potentially personal as opposed to innately referential.\(^2\)

All of the participants who saw the Parody version of this meme “got it” and 88.9% “got” the SR version. In comparison only 62.5% “got” the VP2R version (Figure

\(^2\) Note: it is possible that the phrase “Don’t make me angry. You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry.” which is heavily associated with the Hulk in popular culture may be salient enough for someone to “get” the intended blend if they have the required specialized knowledge. There is no way to know for sure which blend was run by any one participant.
4.3.10). On the other hand, even though most participants “got” the SR version, they did not find it nearly as funny as the Parody. The Parody was on average rated as a 4.4 on the humor scale whereas the SR version was on average rated as a 3.25 (Figure 4.3.9).

A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether there was a significant relationship between participants “getting” the Hulk parody and the version of the meme they saw. “Getting it” was not due to chance, $X^2 (4, N = 76) = 15.88$, $p < .001$.

“Keep Calm and Rock On” is an interesting example because the Parody involves three blending spaces as opposed to two. The first space is the original meme, the second is that of “Rock & Roll,” which comes from the VP2 and the third is the rocking horse symbol, which allows for the pun of this meme. The pun is that you simultaneously have the typical “Rock On” phrase activated alongside and blended with the idea of rocking on
a rocking horse. This pun is not difficult to grasp and all of the participants who saw it, “got” it (Figure 4.3.12). However, an equal percentage also “got” the SR version of the meme.

This may seem counterintuitive, but based on the above blending analysis, it seems taking away the symbol simply took away the third input space, but left the other space provided by the VP2 intact. “Keep Calm and Rock On” on its own is completely intelligible even though it is not a pun or all that funny. The SR version only had a mean score of 2.6 as compared to the P version’s mean score of 3.5 (Figure 4.3.11).

A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether there was a significant relationship between participants “getting” the Rock On parody and the version of the meme they saw. “Getting it” was not due to chance, $X^2 (4, N = 76) = 29.07, p < .001.
4.3.3 Category III: Specialized Information

The second pattern and the third category contained memes where none of the three versions were “gotten” by the participants with any kind of regularity. Baryon and Karyotype followed this pattern. Our proposed explanation for this pattern is that the symbol and VP2 were both not enough to give the participants the input. More explicitly, despite efforts to make the memes as available to a general audience as possible, the two memes in this category were too specialized for the general population. This oversight makes sense given my own biases and education level as well as the education levels of the less general pilot sample used to select these memes. The background knowledge needed to make sense of the words “Baryon” and “Karyotype” are both quite extensive.

“Keep Calm and Karyotype”, while also a pun like “Keep Calm and Carrion” or “Keep Calm and Crayon”, was rarely gotten by participants. The P, SR and VP2R versions were only gotten 32%, 8.3% and 33.3% of the time, respectively (Figure 4.3.14). Participants did not “get” the meme 64%, 87.5% and 48.1% of the time, respectively. Because most of the participants did not understand the meme, on average they did not find it funny. On average the Parody version scored only a 2 on the humor scale. However, in line with the overall results, in the few cases where the meme was “gotten” it was considered funnier than when it was not (Figure 4.3.13).
Figure 4.3.13. Comparisons of funniness ratings for the Karyotype meme by whether or not the participant “got it”.

Figure 4.3.14. Percentage who “got” the Karyotype parody by version.

A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether there was a significant relationship between participants “getting” the Karyotype parody and the version of the meme they saw. “Getting it” was not due to chance, $X^2 (4, N = 76) = 10.85, p < .05$.

“Keep Calm and Baryon” is not as extreme as the Karyotype example, but all three versions have low ratings of “getting it”. The Parody was “gotten” only 54.2% of the time, the SR 7.4% of the time and the VP2R 32% of the time (Figure 4.3.16). This is true even though this meme is also a pun. Based on this, it seems that knowing something of the context of the word being used in a pun may be necessary to “getting” the humor of wordplay. Those participants who did “get” the meme tended to find all of the versions about equally funny on average. Those who did not “get” it also found the meme to be equally less funny across all three versions (Figure 4.3.15).
A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether there was a significant relationship between participants “getting” the Baryon parody and the version of the meme they saw. “Getting it” was not due to chance, $X^2 (4, N = 76) = 13.45, p < .001$.

4.3.4 Category IV: Second Verb Phrase Not Needed For Resolution

The third pattern and fourth category found only in the Carry-On parody, was that the P and VP2R were “gotten” the same percentage of the time. In Figure 4.3.18, it can be seen that the P version was “gotten” 96.3% of the time and the VP2R version 100% of the time as compared with the SR version at 44%. As with the first category, I propose that the VP2R was “gotten” as often as the P because the VP2 is not needed to run the blend. This is because there is very little difference between the phrase “Keep Calm and Carry-On” and “Keep Calm and Carry On”. Thus, only the symbol would be needed to
generate the second input space of travel, airplanes and carry-on luggage. In keeping with this, the VP2R and P versions were on average rated as equally humorous (Figure 4.3.17).

A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether there was a significant relationship between participants “getting” the Carry-On parody and the version of the meme they saw. “Getting it” was not due to chance, $X^2 (4, N = 76) = 32.11$, $p < .001$.

2.3.5. Category V: Needs Symbol and VP2 equally to make sense

The fourth pattern was one in which the Parody was “gotten” more often than the other two versions, while the SR and VP2R versions were understood equally poorly. The “Keep Calm and Choose One” Pokemon meme was the only meme used to follow this pattern. Participants “got” the parody 83.3% of the time as opposed to the 52% or
40.7% of the SR and VP2R versions (Figure 4.3.20). This is interesting because this is the pattern predicted by the blending analysis in the last chapter, but the pattern only appeared in this one example. Also, as in previous examples, those who did “get” the meme, regardless of version, tended to find it funnier than if they didn’t (Figure 4.3.19).

A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether there was a significant relationship between participants “getting” the Pokemon parody and the version of the meme they saw. “Getting it” was not due to chance, $X^2 (4, N = 76) = 12.59, p < .02$.

4.3.6. Category VI: Wildcard

The fifth pattern and sixth category is a wildcard grouping in which all three versions were “gotten” equally. The Not That Calm parody was the only meme to follow
this pattern. “Keep Calm and Okay Not That Calm” is an interesting example because all three versions tended to be “gotten” by participants (Figure 4.3.22), but only the Parody and SR were considered funny (Figure 4.3.21). They had ratings of 4.78 and 4.36 respectively. This is interesting because “Keep Calm and Okay Not That Calm” which, has been discussed several times throughout this paper, requires the symbol of the EKG in order to get the second input of EKGs and hospitals. Despite this, the meme can make sense in the SR condition even without the idea of one being so calm that flat-line to generate humor. The Symbol on its own, without the VP2, however does not make sense and no blend can be generated from the second input space of “something to do with EKGs and dying”. Even, so 87.5% of participants reported that they “got” the VP2R version. Exactly what they felt they “got” is impossible to say, but it does seem to be proof that the human mind can create blends and make sense of the strangest combinations of information.

![Figure 4.3.21](image1.png)  ![Figure 4.3.22](image2.png)

**Figure 4.3.21.** Comparisons of funniness ratings for the Not That Calm meme by whether or not the participant “got it”.  
**Figure 4.3.22.** Percentage who “got” the Not That Calm parody by version.
A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit was performed to determine whether there was a significant relationship between participants “getting” the Not That Calm parody and the version of the meme they saw. “Getting it” was due to chance, $X^2 (4, N = 76) = 5.46, p > 0.05.$

4.5 Discussion

The main question I sought to answer with this survey study was how the two taxonomy dimensions of Symbol and VP2 work together. I hypothesized that both were needed to make a meme humorous. I also hypothesized that removing either would make the meme less funny with the caveat that I thought that the VP2 was more vital to humor than the symbol so that the SR (Symbol Reverted) condition would be found funnier than the VP2R (Second Verb Phrase Reverted). As shown in the previous section of this chapter, the results of my research show that the answer is a lot more complex than I anticipated.

While the Parody version was sometimes considered funnier than the other versions, there was often not a very significant difference between the humor ratings of the three versions for people who “got” each version. This supports my hypothesis that “getting it” would predict the humor rating of the memes. Those who reported “getting” the meme felt it was funnier than those who did not or who were uncertain. The more important finding to highlight is that in a majority of cases, the Parody was “gotten” by a much higher percentage of the participants than the other two versions. This means that the symbol and VP2 together were typically more conducive to “getting it” than either by
itself. The exceptions to this were of course categories 1, 2 and 4. How are people able to make sense of these very low information SR and VP2R memes?

I propose that these three categories are further proof of the incredibly strong human instinct to blend. Even with the smallest of cues and the poorest of material to work with, people will try to figure out the blend and input spaces. In such a situation my research shows that there are three possible outcomes:

1. They will not be able to make the blend and won’t “get it” (Category 3 and 4).
2. They will make a different blend than the intended, but that makes some amount of sense to them (Categories 2 and 6).
3. The intended blend is run correctly even with minimal information. (Categories 1 and 5).

The third possibility describes cases where the VP2 or Symbol alone had enough information to resolve the blend. But even in examples where both the VP2 and Symbol were present, it was possible for the first outcome to occur due to a lack of specialized information in the participants’ background (Category 3).

One issue that has arisen is that even when people “get” any of the versions of any of the memes used, they don’t seem to find them particularly funny. It is possible that this is because these highly simplified memes that only just give enough information to make the blend just aren’t that funny or enjoyable. But this also raises the question as to whether funniness is the right scale at all to use in measuring memes. Memes are definitely considered funny by the internet community, but is humor the only enjoyment we get out of memes? In consideration of my findings, I propose that enjoyment of memes is based heavily on “getting it,” which is a good proxy for being able to run a
blend of some kind. I think that other measures that might give us insight into this aspect of enjoying memes would be a rating of “share-ability” (how likely someone is to share the meme with others) or “like-ability” (how much someone likes the meme).

Trying out different rating scales is one way that future research into memes can be improved. Another is that while one or two changes to the original meme may be sufficient to allow a viewer to run the appropriate blend, such few changes may not be sufficient for high levels of humor, enjoyment or appreciation. Future research could explore such questions as whether or not more changes to the dimensions make memes funnier, or if memes are not ever found to be a particularly profound form of humor. If memes do get funnier or more understandable with more changes, is there a tipping point where more changes become less funny than more changes? Is there a saturation point to number of changes where the original meme is lost altogether? What is that point? Which combinations of the 16 dimensions are most humorous or enjoyable or share-able?

Further, as Symbol and VP2 are tied to the implied audience and frame, what other aspects of the form code for blends that change the dimensions of content and stance? How much of the form can be changed with minimal change to the content and stance? And conversely, how much of the content and stance can be changed with minimal change to the form?

Other areas of potential exploration are applying the taxonomy used in this thesis to other memes such as “X All The Y” and the Spiders Georg meme.
5. Conclusions

The study of language on the internet is still in its infancy. There are many possible avenues of study, but internet memes in particular offer an excellent place to begin. They are a unique form of language use that amasses in great quantities over short periods of time allowing for an abundance of research material. Further, memes are a genre of humor and creativity that allow a fascinating dialogue between creators and viewers in which language and meaning are constantly evolving. Studying this type of construction is vital to understanding rhetorically effective communication, especially in the digital age where the ability to curate the limited attention of the world is a highly valued skill. There remains much more to be learned.

On a small scale, this thesis represents a preliminary attempt to understand how all memes, not just Keep Calm and Carry On parodies, are formed and understood. This work may one day allow us to design better memes or at least allow both humans and potentially computers to identify better memes. Accomplishing this has ramifications for studying language beyond memes, specifically for humor and figurative speech. Humor is an essential part of human experience and cognition, but it is one of the most difficult parts to study. The present research highlights this difficulty in that the memes tested were generally found to be only mildly funny. At the same time, this research and this finding also suggests four possible accounts of the relationship between humor and memes.

The most obvious explanation centers around the idea that blending is a natural and very pleasurable human activity. When a person successfully “figures out” a blend or
otherwise solves the puzzle of a meme, they experience pleasure that is related to humor but not necessarily “laugh out loud funny”. In this view, there are no external factors to the enjoyment of memes.

However, it is naïve to think that enjoyment of memes exists in a vacuum. In the discussion, I questioned whether or not humor was the appropriate scale by which to rate enjoyment of memes. Another possible scale would be “share-ability” or how likely a participant would be to “share” a given meme with their friends, family or co-workers. If this is a better scale to use, then perhaps this indicates that enjoyment of memes has more to do with how understanding a meme indicates one’s in-group or out-group status with respect to a given cultural community. In this scenario, when a person is presented with a meme, they “get” it, are reminded of their status as someone in the in-group who “gets” this type of joke, and consequently are amused and feel good about themselves. Humor is thus a simple byproduct of group alignment and social status; the more specific a meme is to a particular group, the more enjoyable it will be to those in-group members.

A third explanation is closely tied to the previous one, except for one vital difference. In this scenario, a person who belongs or wants to belong to a certain cultural community does not “get” the meme, but instead understands that the people of their cultural community would “get” it. Since this person wants to belong to that group, they will laugh and report “getting” it and finding it funny. Such a person would be very difficult to distinguish from those of the previous group without careful examination of the person’s actual knowledge and reported understanding of the meme.

The fourth explanation is based on the anecdotal evidence that some memes genuinely are hilarious even though this humor response could not be replicated in the
lab. In this case, humor is a property that exists outside of in-group/out-group identification. Upon viewing such a meme a person has an instantaneous and visceral humor response. After the fact, that person makes up an explanation for “getting” the meme and consequently realizes that they are also a part of the group of people who would “get” that meme. In many aspects of our lives our bodies and brains have reflexive responses that we cannot control. It is possible that humor is such a reflex that we only explain to ourselves after the fact.

These explanations are not exclusive, and the most applicable theory may depend on the person viewing the meme and on the meme itself. It is certainly possible that some memes are more amenable to one of these types of reasoning than the others. An additional factor to consider is that any one internet meme may be more rooted in one of these explanations than another. The original “Keep Calm and Carry On” poster is not inherently funny, but it does naturally draw on an in-group bias of being English. Parodies of the original may be more likely to use the second and third paths to humor by requiring an understanding of a different implied audience or social group in order for the meme to be understandable. Other original memes may be of the reflexively humorous variety, such that all of the ensuing parodies attach in-group references to the already funny meme. This also allows for the possibility that there are some meme originators that are already puzzles to be solved.

Of course, internet memes are not new. As discussed in the introduction, there are many internet meme-like objects (such as joke cycles) that exist outside of and predate the internet. So far as these objects and memes are similar to each other, it should be possible to apply the broader research on humor and in-group/out-group status to internet
memes. “Keep Calm and Carry On” is a fairly tame meme for which I studied tame parodies. Internet memes do not all follow this outline and many do descend into racist, sexist and otherwise offensive humor on a regular basis. A potential avenue of research would be to examine whether or not the humor of these cruder memes serve the same functions of maintaining social boundaries and the dominance of the majority group in the anonymous world of the internet.
6. References


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