

Multimodal tropes in academic Tumblr: the case of metaphor and hyperbole

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Abstract

Les messages qui combinent une phrase décrivant une situation de la vie et une image qui illustre la situation en question sont de plus en plus populaires sur les réseaux sociaux. Cette étude analyse ce type de messages, qui repose sur deux systèmes sémiotiques différents (verbal et visuel), avec pour cadre théorique les études multimodales et la pragmatique. Elle se concentre plus précisément sur les tropes multimodaux rencontrés dans des messages postés sur des pages Tumblr ayant pour sujet le quotidien des enseignants-chercheurs et doctorants, et combinant un GIF et une légende, avec un intérêt particulier pour la métaphore ou l'hyperbole. Les données ont été collectées sur trois pages Tumblr : PhD in Gifs!, When in Academia et Ciel mon doctorat !. L'objectif de l'étude est d'explorer l'interaction entre texte et image dans la création et la réception de ces deux tropes.

Posts which combine a verbal caption describing a situation of life and a static or moving image mirroring the situation in question are increasingly popular on online social media. This study analyses such posts, which rely on two different semiotic systems (verbal and visual), within the framework of multimodal studies and pragmatics. In this paper, I focus more precisely on multimodal tropes in academic Tumblr posts combining a verbal caption and a GIF, with a special interest for metaphor and hyperbole, and the combination of both. The data for the study comes from three Tumblr pages: PhD in Gifs!, When in Academia, and Ciel mon doctorat !. Drawing on previous investigations on multimodal tropes and pragmatic approaches to tropes, the primary objective of the study is to explore the interaction between text and image in the creation and reception / interpretation of those tropes.

1. Introduction



Fig. 1

Posts such as the one above (Fig.1), which combine a verbal caption describing a situation of life with a static or moving image mirroring the situation in question, have become a staple of social media such as Twitter, Facebook or Tumblr. The point of those posts is for their authors to recount what is most of the time a rather mundane experience thanks to a static or animated image. The static or moving image in question can have a purely illustrative function such as being a stand-in for a gesture or an action described or implied by the caption. For instance, after writing “When your eighteen-year-old students all try to add you as a friend”, a poster can insert a GIF - a file that contains an animated sequence of still images- showing someone shaking their head in order to express refusal. The image can also be a literal extension of the verbal caption, such as a subtitled GIF in which the character’s words are a direct reply to the caption. Or it can be a more creative non-literal elaboration which presents what is described in the caption under the guise of something completely different and / or over-exaggerated. This last type of posts is precisely the one I look at in this study. Drawing on previous investigations on multimodal tropes (El Refaie 2003, Forceville 2008 and 2018, Ferré 2014, Sobrino 2017) and pragmatic approaches to tropes (Carston / Wearing 2011, 2015), the primary objective of the study is more precisely to explore the interaction between text and moving image in the creation and reception of those posts. It is focused on two tropes, metaphor and hyperbole, which frequently co-occur in the dataset. It seeks to show that both tropes work by comparable mechanisms and enable to achieve their intended effect in the dataset, namely humour, thanks to complementary processes.

The dataset consists of 80 posts, which I have retrieved from three Tumblr pages that are popular among PhD students and academics: *When in Academia* and *PhD in Gifs!* (36 posts), which are aimed at English-speaking users, and *Ciel mon doctorat !* (44 posts), which is aimed at French-speaking users. Their common point is that users posting on these Tumblrs resort to captioned animated GIFs to share their experience of PhD and academic life. In the selected posts, GIF use is either metaphoric, hyperbolic, or, more frequently, both. I have captured and saved the posts thanks to *ScreenToGif*, a software which enables to save an animated GIF in its environment online. The study itself is more qualitative than quantitative since the sample does not claim to be representative. However, it is relevant enough to lay the groundwork for a more developed study of a phenomenon which is rather recent and remains to be more widely investigated.

2. Structure of selected posts

All posts selected for the study have a stable structure. As in figure 2, they are composed of a textual element, in the form of a caption which appears at the top of the post, and a visual element, in the form of a GIF that is inserted under the caption:

WHEN YOU TRY TO HAND BACK PAPERS AT THE VERY END OF CLASS:



2:30PM

(Notes: 41) FILED UNDER: teaching undergrads papers make those sheep of faculty of whininacademia

Fig.2

This simultaneous use of two different semiotic systems, image and text, is a good example of what Barbara Dancygier and Lieven Vandelanotte have called “the other multimodality” (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2017), multimodal use of image and text online, as opposed to face-to-face multimodality, which focuses on co-speech kinesic / visual channels. The following two sections provide an overview of how of each of the two parts of the posts works.

2.1. Caption

The captions of the dataset are quite similar in terms of structure and content.

First, concerning their content, since the data was extracted from academic Tumblr blogs, all captions have a common theme: they revolve around academic life, teaching, researching and PhD or paper writing. In most cases, they are factual, noncommittal, and descriptive rather than expressive or evaluative. Indeed, most captions contain no marker that would indicate how the poster evaluates or appreciates the situation described in the post. In 64 out of 80 posts, the caption does not include any explicit affective or evaluative marker, such as adjectives, adverbs, verbs, or even connectors. And in captions that do contain explicit markers of affective or evaluative stance, the marker in question is rarely a lexical item with a clear negative connotation to it (the dataset only contains “laborieux” -laborious-, “ne pas s’en sortir” -can’t see the end of-, “à bout de nerf” -nervous wreck-, “impostor syndrome” or “putain de” -fucking-). Most of the time the negative evaluative orientation of the caption comes under the form of an adverb such as “still” or “only”, or a rather discreet adversative “mais” or “but” (found in 11 captions). Captions hence tend to be limited to factual descriptions of a situation. As a result, if read on its own, the caption doesn’t necessarily guide the receiver towards a certain valence, be it positive or negative.

Secondly, concerning their form, all captions follow a phrasal template, which can be of three types, from the most frequent to the less frequently used:

-“When” / “Quand” + a finite clause : “When a friend asks how the dissertation is going”, “When you forget that your class is going to be observed”, “When the end of the quarter is approaching”, “when a colleague says that I ‘look tired’”, “Quand le stress commence à monter” (“when stress is rising”), “Quand démontrer une idée devient laborieux” (When demonstrating an idea becomes laborious), “Quand je commence la redaction” (when I start writing)... . In the case of Ciel mon doctorat !, using this phrasal template is one of the two rules that posters have to follow, hence its popularity. Although When In Academia specifies no such rule to follow, posters all use this same phrasal template, maybe because of the name of the microblog. Users of PhD in Gifs! use either one of the three phrasal templates, with a slight preference for *When* captions.

-Grammatical subject (often “me”) + comma + gerund clause / adverbial phrase or clause: “me, working on my creative projects while the rest of the work is piling up”, “me, presenting anything to my committee”, “me, after solemnly declaring that 2020 would be my year” “my committee, coming to me with ‘minor revisions’”.

-gerund clause (verb + ing + complement): “realizing half of the summer is gone and I’ve achieved nothing”, “watching your fellow PhD students graduate and go into the world”

As can be expected given the phrasal templates they follow, which orientate posters towards single-sentence captions, captions are generally quite concise. The average number of words per caption is 13,5 and all the captions of the dataset contain only one sentence, while only 19 out of 80 contain more than 2 clauses (29 contain 1 clause, 32 contain 2 clauses).

In general, then, captions can be described as factual, noncommittal and concise.

2.2. GIF

If all captions describe a situation of PhD or academic life, there is no common denominator between what the different GIFs used in the dataset picture. They may show humans, animals, or neither (one simply shows a hurricane, one shows a cake). They may be extracted from movies, cartoons, music videos, TV series, or documentaries, famous and recognizable or not. Some are already amusing on their own, such as the ones showing animals behaving like humans, or those showing “fails”, a staple of internet funny compilations. But some can be perceived as frightening, such as the one extracted from *The Shining* and showing Jack Nicholson chopping through a door. Some GIFs may be deemed a bit disturbing, such as the one showing a tarsier eating an insect, or the one showing a man squeezing through a hole, which may make the claustrophobic reader a bit uneasy. Finally, some GIFs trigger no particular emotional response on their own, such as the one which simply shows a cake being filled. Overall, the GIFs of the dataset may have a positive or negative valence on their own, or, more rarely, no valence at all.

The length of the GIFs used in the posts is as varied as their content: Some are very short (13 images in 1 second), others are quite long for this type of file (258 images in 25 seconds). In the end, their only common point is their form: they tell a micro-narrative that takes the form of a sequence of images, even the shortest ones. As such, they are not apprehended in the same way as the verbal caption. Charles Forceville notes that the “pictures, sounds, and

gestures have a perceptual immediacy that is lacking in language. One dimension of this perceptual immediacy is a high degree of specificity". (Forceville 2008: 5). GIFs, being images, are indeed unmediated. They show, not tell, that is they directly impose a certain specific visualization that simultaneously involves all perceptual dimensions such as colour, size, shape, or movement. Moreover, since they include a sequence of images, they arguably enable more narrative complexity and possibilities (if needed) than a single image. On the other hand, as Highfield and Miltner have shown, because of their format (shortness, lack of sound or playback options), GIFs are polysemic and are easily de- and re-contextualized to offer "different meanings and interpretations to different audiences" (Miltner / Highfield 2017: 4-5). Another characteristic that may well have contributed to their popularity is that they enable to illustrate one's thoughts with scenes from famous pictures, cartoons, or popular figures and animals such as cats, who are notoriously popular over the internet. Apart from making posts visually attractive, it enables posters to create a sense of in-group feeling with other users familiar with the source the GIF is extracted from. When its source is recognized by the reader, the implicit content conveyed by the GIF may even influence the reader's understanding of the post. For instance, in the following post (figure 3), the GIF conveys much more implicit meaning when the reader is familiar with the film it is extracted from (*Titanic*), and knows that the character is not just waiting but awaiting an impending catastrophe:

WHEN YOUR ADVISOR GOES ON A SABBATICAL AND DROPS ALL CONTACT:



2:30PM
(Notes: 88) FILED UNDER: submission anonymous Ask sabbatical alone help

Fig. 3

All in all, there is a recurring dynamic in caption-GIF association in the dataset: the GIF reveals what remains unsaid in the verbal caption, which, as we have seen, is very often factual and rather noncommittal. The following section delves deeper into this dynamic and how the tension between caption and GIF plays into the construction of metaphor and hyperbole.

3. Identification and operation of metaphor and hyperbole in Tumblr posts

Metaphor and hyperbole are the tropes that users of academic Tumblrs most frequently resort to, alongside irony. In the dataset, they present themselves under a form which is slightly different from classical literary examples since they rely on two semiotic systems. In spite of this difference, they work in a quite similar way.

3.1. Metaphorical posts

Metaphorical posts are the ones that combine a textual caption with a GIF that shows something completely different, and in which caption and GIF are juxtaposed without any grammatical marker of comparison. Figure 4 presents one such metaphorical association:



Fig.4 (caption translates as “When you adjust to the working conditions at your university”)

As all metaphorical posts, it presents the defining features of any metaphor:

-the target domain, which is the caption, and the source domain, which is the GIF, belong to two different conceptual domains. Here, the two conceptual domains are cooking (the GIF shows a man draining pasta with a tennis racket) on the one hand and teaching or researching on the other hand (the caption is about working conditions in universities).

-the association between target domain and source domain is not mediated and the source domain is therefore directly projected onto the target domain. This is the main difference with the simile, which is what this other post (figure 5) relies on:

WHEN I VOTE ON PRO-EDUCATION AND PRO-UNION PROPS, I FEEL LIKE:



2:21PM

(Notes: 22) FILED UNDER: [amuniza california do what's right prop 30 voting wheninacademia prop 32](#)

Fig.5

In figure 5, the association is mediated through preposition “like”. Consequently, it is not considered as a metaphor but a simile.

In metaphorical posts, what is at stake is a mechanism that has been analysed since Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors we live by* as Conceptual Metaphor, and which is “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff / Johnson, 1980: 5). As Charles Forceville writes, since Lakoff and Johnson, we know that “metaphor need not be verbal in nature” since “metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and action, and only derivatively a matter of language” (Forceville 2018: 101). As I have pointed out in the preceding section, GIFs, as source, arguably offer more complexity than text in that they enable to picture a micro-narrative, which is dynamic, includes movement, evolution in time and space, and appeals to all perceptual dimensions with immediacy. Hence, probably, the aptness of GIF for expressing all kinds of experience. Because of their complexity and dynamicity, the traditional formula of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, A is B, is then not really a convenient way to sum up the metaphors of the dataset. Indeed, most of the time they picture an action or a dynamic situation, in other words something happening to someone or something, or someone or something doing things, and not a theme or thing or person. A better way to sum up the metaphors of the dataset would then be “A-ing is B-ing” or, or “for X to A, or be A-ing, is for Z to B, or be B-ing”. For example, in the opening example of this section, adjusting to the working conditions at the university is draining pasta with a racket. Again, this is something Charles Forceville already noted in his 2018 study about the metaphorical representation of depression in short, wordless animation films:

What matters in metaphor is that things people do to, or experience through, the source domain are mapped onto the target domain, including the emotions, attitudes and values associated with these things. It might therefore be better to replace the standard formula by a-ing is b-ing (Forceville, 2016a: 19) (Forceville 2018: 103).

GIFs, with their intrinsically dynamic nature, enable Tumblr users to offer a complex, unmediated visualization of how they experience what they describe in the caption.

3.2. Hyperbolic posts

Hyperbolic posts are the ones that combine a textual caption with a GIF that shows a deliberately exaggerated illustration or elaboration of it, such as figure 6:

Quand visiblement la fac a décidé de faire des
économies de chauffage dès le vendredi de la
veille des vacances



IL Y A 3 ANS - ♥ 11

Fig. 6 (caption translates as “When the university has obviously already started saving on their heating bill on the Friday before the holidays”)

The caption says that the university has obviously already turned the heating off while the GIF shows *Frozen*'s princess, Anna, looking at her frozen hands, thus implying that the temperature inside the university's buildings is freezing cold. This post is a very good illustration of Gaëlle Ferré's definition of hyperbole: “Hyperbole is a figure of speech by which speakers present an exaggerated version of reality (quantitatively or qualitatively, towards positive or negative values) thus shifting frames in discourse to enter a fictitious representation of the world” (Ferré 2014: 25). In this post, the illustration of the caption provided by the GIF is so exaggerated that it is extracted from a fantasy work of fiction, in this case Disney's cartoon *Frozen*. From this point of view, using GIFs extracted from animated films, TV series or movies enables to visualize actions or events that would not be physically possible in the real world, like Anna's frozen hands or Lily, from *How I met Your Mother*, giving her “you're dead to me” look in this other post:

Quand on te demande : “alors, on va boire/manger quoi ?” 5 minutes avant le début de ta soutenance



IL Y A 1 AN · ♥ 7

Fig. 7 (caption translates as “When someone asks ‘so, what are we drinking / eating?’ 5 minutes before your defence starts”)

Of course, this is also the case for metaphors: “animation has opportunities to visualize metaphors that are not so readily available to other media” (Forceville 2018 : 101).

That said, the visualization does not have to be extracted from a work of fiction and can be a more realistic representation of the world, while still being (or meant to be) interpreted as a fictitious representation of the real world. A common type of hyperbolic post that works in this way is the one presenting a GIF picturing an exaggerate response to the situation described in the caption, such as in figures 8 (breathing inside a paper bag, which is associated with hyperventilating and anxiety attacks), figure 9 (smashing one’s computer on one’s desk and throwing it out of the window) and figure 10 (destroying one’s computer with a hammer because it keeps crashing):

Realizing half of the summer is gone and I've achieved nothing



#phd #phd life #phd school #grad #grad school #university #college #student #anxiety #low productivity #stress #rachael green #friends #gif #studyblr #time #procrastination #summer procrastination
144 notes ... 📌 ❤️

Fig. 8

WHEN IT SEEMS LIKE EVERY POST IN YOUR FEED IS A HUMBLEBRAG ABOUT WRITING:



10:01AM

(Notes: 43) FILED UNDER: [or a baby of course](#) [bout diss life](#) [humblebrag](#) [thefacebooking](#) [wheninacademia](#)

Fig. 9

Quand ta soutenance est mise en pause QUATRE fois pour des crashs de visioconférence...



Fig. 10 (caption translates as “When your defence is being paused FOUR times because of the video conference system crashing”)

What is pictured in those GIFS, while physically possible, is a clearly exaggerated response to what is described in the caption. They are what one could picture themselves doing in their heart of hearts but probably depart from what the poster would do in reality, even though there probably is a gradation in terms of likelihood. Breathing inside a paper bag, in spite of its being a bit excessive given what the caption describes, is indeed possibly more likely to happen than destroying one’s computer with a hammer or throwing it out of the window.

In fact, gradation is part and parcel of hyperbole, which is scalar in essence since it “involves deliberate and overt exaggeration (along a particular scale)” (Carston / Wearing 2015: 81). In the post with the *Frozen* GIF, the illustration selected goes further up the conceptual ladder of coldness compared to what is described in the caption. In the post with Lily from *How I Met Your Mother*, the expected reaction to what is recounted in the caption is annoyance, exasperation, or irritation, but the visualization offered by the GIF expresses sheer wrath, going higher up, straight to the highest point, on the scale of negative reactions. Arguably, the hyperbolic effect is made even more successful because of the lack of grandiloquence of what is described in the captions. The bigger the discrepancy is, between the platitude of what is described in the caption and the magnitude of what is shown in the GIF, the more efficient the post is. This is particularly true in this last post, where the GIF showing a very angry Hades from Disney’s cartoon *Hercules*, expresses pure rage when the caption describes a rather mundane event, “the library recalls a book over break”:

WHEN THE LIBRARY RECALLS A BOOK OVER BREAK:



© 11/11/11
(Notes: 55) FIRED UNDER: especially summer break: who does that and who is reading the same books as the wheninacademia library books recall caps.11

Fig.11

The following section explores how this recurring discrepancy between caption and visualization enters the very projected effect of hyperbolic posts and works along the same lines as metaphorical associations.

4. Functioning and functions of metaphors and hyperboles in the dataset

Affinities between hyperbole and metaphor have already been noted and studied (Carston / Wearing 2011, 2015), and so has their frequent co-occurrence (Kreuz et al. 1996), which is also the case in the dataset. Some of the posts under study are clearly only metaphorical, some posts, more rarely, are only hyperbolic, while some, as Carston and Wearing wrote about the corpus they had studied for their 2011 article,

clearly resist easy classification as exclusively metaphorical or hyperbolic; instead, it seems most plausible simply to say that they are both. A great many conversational metaphors seem to be simultaneously hyperbolic in this way (Carston / Wearing 2011: 291).

Those affinities between the two tropes are by no means surprising since they both work by comparable interpretation mechanisms and serve the same functions in the Tumblr posts under scrutiny, as the two following sections demonstrate.

4.1. Interpretation process

Carston and Wearing (2011, 2015) have shown that hyperbole and metaphor are totally distinct tropes but work by a comparable mechanism in that they share the absence of a projected literal interpretation, and the necessity for the reader to form an occasion-specific interpretation of the post. According to them, hyperbole's defining feature is "an overt and blatant exaggeration of some property or characteristic" (Carston / Wearing 2015: 80). For instance, "freezing" instead of merely "cold" in the *Frozen* GIF, or "irate" instead of merely "annoyed" in the *Hercules* GIF. This exaggeration is not meant to be taken at face value by the poster, and meant to be recognized as such by the reader:

The speaker does not intend to be taken literally and the hearer recognizes this. So, assuming the communication is successful, both parties recognize that the literal description is an overstatement of the actual state of affairs. (Carston / Wearing 2015: 80)

In the hyperbolic posts of the dataset, the reader is supposed to recognize what is shown in the GIF as an overstatement of the reality described in the caption and not take it literally. For instance, the reader is supposed to understand that it is not literally freezing inside the university buildings, that the poster is not really unable to breathe because of his summer procrastination, or that he is not truly smashing his computer with a hammer because it keeps crashing. Literal interpretation is then meant to be neutralized and meaning adjusted.

In a different but comparable fashion, in the case of a metaphor, literal meaning is neutralized too since the target domain and the source domain belong to two different conceptual domains. In figure 12, literal interpretation is impossible: not only is the utterer normally not a turtle, but the GIF shows something completely different (it shows a turtle trying to climb a slide and sliding backwards, but no one writing a dissertation). Literal meaning is hence neutralized.

Quand je commence la rédaction.



IL Y A 2 ANS - ♥ 24

Fig. 12 (caption translates as “When I start writing”)

As shown by relevance theory, which focuses on Grice’s maxim of relevance, the receiver nonetheless automatically calculates a relevant interpretation since they will always take the sender to have been meaning to make sense. Indeed, as the communicative principle of relevance says, “every act of ostensive communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance” (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 260). Therefore, when faced with such a semantic mismatch, the receiver searches for a common ground between the two elements of the post. An analogy is then activated, that makes it possible to understand what is meant in this incongruous association. In the case of figure 11, the common ground is the idea of stagnation, or even regression, after setting about doing something, since the turtle is sliding backwards after trying to go up the slide. The reader is thus expected to understand that the poster has a hard time getting started with their dissertation writing.

If metaphor and hyperbole work by a comparable mechanism of meaning adjustment, Carston and Wearing also note that hyperbole has an evaluative component, which is typical of it, but not of metaphor. They account for this difference between metaphor and hyperbole in the following way:

We suggest that this is because the two figures are essentially different in purpose: metaphor is a bid to give precise expression to a thought or experience for which there is no literal linguistic encoding, while what is fundamental to hyperbole is the expression of an evaluation (positive or negative) of a state of affairs. (Carston / Wearing 2015: 89)

This difference makes them complementary but could also account for their frequent co-presence in the dataset: metaphor offers a non-literal elaboration of what is conveyed by the caption, while hyperbole maximizes what is implied by it.

4.2. Metaphor, hyperbole, and unexpectedness

As I have shown in the preceding sections, metaphorical and hyperbolic posts, in their own respective way, both rely on a discrepancy between what the caption says and what the GIF shows. In doing that, posters play with the reader's expectations: the association is not what the reader expected. This unexpectedness may well be why both tropes are so popular among posters. Indeed, Gaëlle Ferré associates the expressivity of hyperboles with unexpectedness in her study of multimodal hyperboles (Ferré 2014). Being "highly conventional" (in other words, expected) possibly reduces the force of a hyperbole, and conversely, being highly unexpected makes the hyperbolic statement stronger. Marta Dynel (Dynel 2009) draws a similar link between humorousness and unexpectedness in her study of metaphors and humorousness. The more unconventional the association, the more likely it is to be found humorous. Unexpectedness is in fact precisely the essence of humorousness according to the dominant theory in current humour research, the Incongruity-Resolution model (Suls 1972, 1983, Shultz 1972), which holds that humorousness relies upon unexpected associations that go against "our normal mental patterns and expectations" (Hye-Knudsen 2018: 15). Therefore, since the posts of the dataset are intended at being amusing, unexpectedness is decisive to their success. In this perspective, the more surprising the association between caption and GIF is, the more efficient the post is. Metaphor and hyperbole can be viewed as key devices in this respect.

Incongruity is a recurring characteristic of metaphorical posts in the dataset: most of them rely on *ad hoc* associations, which are creative and bring together domains which are considered as dissimilar and whose association is novel. We've already seen some of them, for example adjusting to the working conditions at one's university is draining pasta with a racket, or handing back essays at the end of a class is driving a car forwards in the midst of a herd of sheep going the other way. There are many more examples of those unconventional associations: not being able to access a useful article is being a monkey trying to eat a luscious banana that stands out of reach behind a windshield (figure 13), having one's computer crash after spending hours on unsaved work is being a raccoon washing cotton candy that dissolves instantly (figure 14), or cutting a thousand signs from one's paper is removing one block from a Jenga tower and having it fall on you (figure 15).

Quand je trouve le code d'un article avec lequel je
veux comparer mes résultats mais qu'il ne
fonctionne que sous Windows alors que je
travaille sous Linux.



IL Y A 3 ANS · ♥ 7

Fig. 13 (caption translates as “When I find the code of an article I want to compare my results with but it works under Windows and I work under Linux”)

Quand ton ordinateur commence à planter après
des heures de travail non enregistré.



IL Y A 3 ANS · ♥ 9

Fig. 14 (caption translates as “When your computer starts crashing after hours of unsaved work”)

Quand je dois retirer 1000 signes à un article pour
respecter les normes d'une revue



Fig. 15 (caption translates as “When I have to cut 1000 signs from my paper in order to fit the norms of a journal”)

Unexpectedness is also a characteristic of many hyperbolic posts in the dataset, whose efficiency also relies on the discrepancy between what is described in the caption and the extreme proportions it takes in what the GIF shows. For instance, in the following post (figure 16), searching for a building on campus, a rather modest endeavour, is presented as going on an epic adventure:

WHEN I HAVE TO FIND A BUILDING ON THE SCIENCE SIDE OF CAMPUS:



2:30PM

(Notes: 150) FILED UNDER: [carnous lost university you have your own library??](#) [oh science wheninacademia](#)

Fig. 16

This epic visualization is clearly out of proportion to the caption, which describes a very mundane experience. The disproportion effect is even probably enhanced if the reader recognizes the movie the GIF is taken from, which is *The Hobbit*, and the scene, where the hero's epic journey through Middle earth begins.

A similar unexpected exaggeration is at stake in this last post (figure 17), where the “minor revisions” list of the caption becomes a seemingly never-ending parchment unrolling on the floor:



Fig. 17

It is particularly interesting to notice that the GIF offers a visualization which is at the exact extreme opposite, in terms of degree, of what the caption describes with the low degree adjective “minor”.

4.3. Co-occurrence of metaphor and hyperbole in posts

It can be assumed that co-occurrence of both tropes maximizes unexpectedness, but hyperbole may also reinforce the valence of the metaphor, which, in the dataset, is most of the time a negative valence. Indeed, if captions tend to be rather factual and rarely contain cues indicating how the poster evaluates or appreciates the situation described in them, their association with a GIF reveals the valence of the post, which is generally negative. This is the case in the figure 18:

Quand tu relis ta thèse après l'avoir imprimée



IL Y A 3 ANS · ♥ 14

Fig. 18 (caption translates as “When you proofread your dissertation after printing it”)

The caption, as most in the dataset, is factual and has no positive or negative valence. However, the associated GIF, extracted from *Jurassic Park* and showing a character walking up to huge pile of dinosaur dung, assimilates the dissertation mentioned in the caption to the pile of dung pictured in the GIF. Thus, the GIF reveals the poster’s rather negative feelings towards his or her dissertation on re-reading it, which would remain unspoken otherwise.

Rather than “positive” experiences such as success or pride, posts in the dataset generally revolve around what can be vaguely called “negative” experiences such as:

- guilty feelings, for example the ones one may have about not writing, jealousy, or diverse self-esteem and self-confidence issues.
- challenges and difficulties, such as having to cut down words from a talk or searching for a job.
- failure, such as being stuck on one’s dissertation, being rejected from a position, or being unable to answer a question during Q&A.
- back luck, as having one’s computer crash after working for hours on unsaved work or having an unstable connection during one’s remote defence.

How come those posts are still humorous? According to the “benign violation theory” (Warren / McGraw 2020), which builds upon the incongruity theory, the violation of our expectations that is necessary for humour “must have a negative valence instead of simply departing incongruously from one’s expectations or mental patterns, hence why slipping on a banana peel is often considered humorous while winning the lottery is not.” (Hye-Knudsen, 2018: 15)”. According to the benign violation theory, however, most violations do not make people laugh. To remain humorous, those violations have to remain benign, which is why they stop being funny if they are too threatening, too aggressive, or too serious. This is the very point of the posts of the dataset: making people laugh about the poster’s misfortunes but in a benign way. In this perspective, hyperbole enables to maximize the negative valence of the post to make it even more striking, while at the same time making it so exaggerated that it is not credible. In other words, and a bit paradoxically, hyperbole dramatizes, in the original

sense of the word (making it more theatrical), our experiences in order to dedramatize them. It inflates them in order to deflate them.

5. Conclusion

Through comparable and complementary mechanisms, metaphorical and hyperbolic use of GIFs collaborate in the humorous dramatization of unpleasant experiences shared by the members of the academic community. They transform negative experiences into laughable stories through the lens of seemingly unrelated or unexpectedly inflated images that end up being surprisingly similar or accurate. This comic relief may well be a key factor in their popularity. Indeed, in their study on types of humour and virality of memes, Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong write that the self-defeating style of humour is the kind of humour that got the highest number of likes and shares. According to them, “receivers of those memes who experience the same feeling as the creator share the memes to make fun of themselves while making people in their networks laugh”. (Taecharungroj / Nueangjamnong 2015: 300) This is particularly true of posts that strongly rely on in-group feeling like the ones in the dataset: they are arguably even more efficient when they deal with something the receiver has already experienced and of which they give a new, unexpected but strikingly accurate perception. Hence, their potential humorousness resides in a subtle mix of incongruity and familiarity, unexpectedness and relatability. The role of tropes such as metaphor and hyperbole in relatability and conviviality online, while still largely unexplored, is then not to be neglected.

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