Making sense of reality through fiction: Approaching memes through the intersecting lenses of cognitive linguistics and narratology

by

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Abstract

In this thesis project, I develop a new approach to examine how and why people use fictive narratives to cope with traumatic events. While this area of research has primarily been studied through the lenses of cognitive narratology and psychology, I adapt a cognitive linguistic methodology, centered on the theoretical framework of conceptual blending, frame metonymy, and viewpoint networks, to analyze multimodal online memes that blend popular fictive narratives with traumatic real-world events. This project differs from past analyses of memes by considering not just the visual and textual data of a meme, but also the contextual frames that shape the way we interact with memes in everyday online discourse—this includes the social media platforms memes they are shared through and the real-world events that prompt their creation. I focus my analysis on a set of multimodal memes created and shared in the twenty-four-hour period after the 2016 U.S. federal election that blend the shocking electoral victory of Donald Trump with images and dialogue taken from the popular *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. I argue that the creation and sharing of these memes across social media platforms in the immediate aftermath of what many considered a traumatic event provides evidence of how people use specific narratives that are salient to their culture, values, and identity to cope with trauma. These narratives inform future behaviour, provide causal and sequential logic, project closure onto an uncertain future, and connect individual experiences and viewpoints to likeminded collectives.
Lay summary

This work aims to examine how and why people use fictive narratives to cope with traumatic events. I focus my analysis on a set of multimodal memes created and shared in the twenty-four-hour period after the 2016 U.S. federal election that blend the shocking electoral victory of Donald Trump with images and dialogue taken from the popular *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. I argue that the creation and sharing of these memes across social media platforms in the immediate aftermath of what many considered a traumatic event provides evidence of how people use specific narratives to cope with trauma that are salient to their culture, values, and identity. These narratives inform future behaviour, provide causal and sequential logic, project closure onto an uncertain future, and connect individual experiences and viewpoints to likeminded collectives.
Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Jesse Colautti.
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Introduction

In the early hours of June 12, 2016, a lone gunman, Omar Mateen, walked into Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida and opened fire—killing 50 people and wounding 53 others. The tragic event, the deadliest mass-shooting in the United States history, was international news and thousands of people attended gatherings around the world in the following days to honour the victims and show their solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community¹. At the same time, a different type of tribute emerged online that brought thousands of people together to mourn the loss of so many lives and cope with the crime of hate. A Facebook post (Figure 1) created and posted publicly on the same day by Sean Astin, an actor who starred in The Lord of the Rings film trilogy, spread rapidly across the social media platform. The post included an image of Astin’s character, Sam, crying as he is consoled and kissed on the forehead by Frodo, his companion on a journey to destroy an evil ring of power in the fantasy series written by J.R.R. Tolkien, and

Figure 1: Sean Astin Facebook post from June 12, 2016

later adapted into films directed by Peter Jackson. Astin accompanied the image with the written dialogue from another point in the film series, in which Sam encourages Frodo, who is ready to give up on their quest, not to lose hope because “there’s some good in the world, Mr. Frodo. And it’s worth fighting for.” While the post did not explicitly reference the shooting, its victims, or the affected LGBTQ+ community, the 105,804 people who shared it on their own Facebook page, the 186,000 people who reacted to it with a like or emoji, and the 5,100 people who commented on it, did so in reference to its connection to the recent tragedy.

The most striking revelation from the post was not the sheer number of people who interacted with it, but the depth of the emotional engagement some of these people had with its fictional references. One commenter posted:

I’ve been sitting here, spinning in rage and sadness at the news today... and then this post happened. Maybe it's because Sam was the first character I read as a child that mirrored something resembling my own feelings when the rest of the media in my life didn't have my reflection in it at all... or maybe it's the fact you chose a quote that acknowledged the darkness but gave hope at the same time. Perhaps it is a bit of both. The important part is that it was *exactly* what I needed to read at this precise moment to provide me a little release for these churning emotions.


Another commenter said:

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2 I have chosen to cite all Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter posts and comments I analyze in this project through this format. The posts and comments are all publicly shared, however, the identity of the users is irrelevant to my analysis and I have chosen not to include this information. The only exception I have made is to include the identity of Astin, the original creator of Figure 1, because his connection to The Lord of the Rings film franchise is relevant.
This always makes me cry. When things go bad I think often of this scene... Like after the bomb exploded in the subway in Brussels... I could have been on that subway, it's the one I take to get to work... And sadly these days, every single country and so many cities have a darkness of their own. It makes me wonder whether humanity is busy destroying itself... It's hard to see the light behind the dark, my Frodo could use a great Sam in it's life to help with that... Big hugs to all the people in Orlando and everywhere else in the world where people die because others have a different view of how life should be lived. (https://www.facebook.com/SeanAstinPublic/photos/a.342798179074644.78267.206339316053865/1228283703859416/?type=3&theater, Accessed on June 26,2017)

Both posts demonstrate how fictive stories and characters, even when evoked in just a quote and image, can fundamentally shape how people make sense of threatening events like the Pulse nightclub shooting. Each commenter projects meaning and viewpoint from a fictive narrative onto a real-world event, as well as onto his and her own conceptualization of the event’s long-term significance, which enables them to find community and hope after the tragedy.

Using narratives to think

Astin’s meme, and the subsequent large-scale sharing of it, reinforces the claims of an interdisciplinary group of researchers in narratology and cognitive science who argue that narratives are a primary cognitive tool for how humans understand the world around them (Bruner 1991; Schank and Abelson 1995; Abbott 2000; Spolsky 2001; Turner 2003; Herman 2003a, 2003b, 2007, 2013; Ryan 2010). What these scholars and researchers are referring to when they use the term narrative, is not quite as specific as my example. Much of the past work in this field defines narrative in broad categorical terms as a way of thinking and shaping experience, and although there is some disagreement among narratologists around its specifics
(Ryan 2007), it seems any working definition of narrative would include a “representation of an event or of a sequence of events” (Genette 1982: 127). Additionally, it would include some form of change or transformation “from one state to another state, caused or experienced by actors” (Bal 1997: 182), and “must communicate something meaningful to the audience (Ryan 2007: 29). More simply put, narratives provide conceptual scaffolding to experience, whether that structure emerges in a novel, drama, image, spoken recollection, or even in our minds as we turn experience into meaning.

Narrative’s broad applicability can help explain why so many narratologists argue its scaffolding shapes how humans fundamentally conceptualize the world around them. Schank and Abelson argue that narratives are the “fundamental constituents of human memory, knowledge, and social communication” (1995:1). These two theorists argue that all human memory is a collection of stories, thus making the knowledge we construct from our past experiences and memories, and which we then communicate to others, all story-based. Jeremy Bruner (1991, 2002) similarly argues that narrative’s cognitive importance is based on it’s ability to connect the individual to the social environment beyond oneself. Bruner claims that narratives, in many different forms, including myths, stories, and even justifications to ourselves and others, are the way humans “come to construct the social world and the things that transpire therein” (1991: 4). Mark Turner (2003), adapting a more cognitive scientific lens, argues that basic spatial stories we perceive in everyday life, such as opening a door or throwing a rock, become the basis for more complex and abstract conceptual story-making.

Adopting a more interdisciplinary approach that applies research from cognitive science and psychology to the field of narratology, David Herman (2003a, 2003b, 2007, 2013) argues that stories shape how human beings problem-solve in all facets of knowledge, beyond just the
social realm. Herman’s work is especially useful because he succinctly breaks down how narratives structure intelligent behaviour in five ways: chunking experience into workable segments of data, creating causal relations between events, addressing problems with the typification of phenomena, sequencing actions, and distributing ways of knowing across time and space (2013). Firstly, narratives enable people to chunk recent events and experiences into a temporarily bounded collection of data, projecting conclusions onto disturbing events that otherwise would remain unresolvable. Chunking refers to a “process by which intelligent agents segment the stream of experience into units that are bounded, classifiable, and thus more readily recognized and remembered” (Herman 2013: 233). Herman argues that narratives enable us to rationalize disturbing events “not as over and done with, but as reaching a terminus that imposes a limit on the trauma-inducing power of the events at issue” (2013: 234). This aspect of narrative’s power connects to the evolutionary scientific research of Abbott (2000) and Spolsky (2001), who both suggest that learned narrative patterns have evolved as a way for humans to create closure and cope with grief and death. Secondly, narratives provide a means to find causality in a sequential network of states, actions, and events, which otherwise would not be logically possible. In a real-world scenario, it is almost impossible to quickly determine what caused a traumatic event, and to determine what the event’s long-term impact will be. The temporal sequencing of a narrative can project a comforting logic of causality onto the event, in order to help people understand how and why such an event took place (Herman 2013: 237).

Thirdly, Herman claims that “stories provide means for balancing expectations against outcomes, general patterns against particular instances” (2013: 239). Developing from Alfred Schultz’s foundational concept of typification (1953/1962), which theorizes that all our knowledge of the world is dependant on constructs—abstractions, generalizations,
formalizations, and idealizations, Herman says that stories “fill the breach when typification fails” (2013: 240), providing a cognitive construct to problem solve through atypical events. Fourthly, narratives provide a model for individuals’ courses of action and sequences of behaviour. According to Herman, narratives “support the sequencing of behaviours not only by providing protocols for communication but also by modeling in storyworlds what, how, where, and when a particular course of action can or should be pursued” (2013: 245). Lastly, narratives reinforce the “supra-individual nature of intelligence” (2013: 248) by providing a framework for cultural norms and assumptions that an individual can connect to, enabling the distribution of intelligence across time and space. This claim connects to the research of scientists and psychologists who, counter to the idea of the individual-centered conceptualization of consciousness, argue that consciousness emerges from a dynamic engagement between mind and world (Thompson 2007, Clark 2008, Noë 2009).

Herman’s analysis can help explain why so many people might turn to a popular story like *The Lord of the Rings* to help cope with a real-world tragedy. We can see the five ways Herman theorizes that narratives shape cognition played out in the public’s response to Astin’s post. The evocation of the fictional narrative enabled people to chunk the event and their emotions into a temporarily bounded narrative, which helped people project closure onto the shooting’s lingering trauma. Additionally, the fictive narrative provided easily accessible frames of reference for character motivations, causality, and event sequences that can be mapped onto the real-world scenario to make its meaning and uncertain repercussions seem less complex. *The Lord of the Rings* also built a dichotomous framework of morality in its division of characters into the forces of moral good and extreme, unnuanced evil, which helped people understand how such a large-scale hate crime could happen. As well, *The Lord of the Rings* provided a model for
a course of action people can pursue to cope with the shooting. Sam’s words tell how and why each person should express grief, while also providing a means for how to get past such feelings and “fight” for the “good of this world”. Lastly, the large-scale sharing of this Facebook post enabled the individuals interacting with it to align their conceptualizing of the event across time and space with an online community of hundreds of thousands of people, who also perceived the shooting as a threat against their shared values of sexual diversity, tolerance of differences, and the sanctity of human life.

A new approach

This example reveals the value of analyzing specific cases of narrative evocation as evidence of how people use narratives in everyday discourse to think and communicate. As Marie-Laure Ryan argues (2010), in the field of narratology the proof of the power of narratives to shape minds has primarily come from the close reading of narrative texts and broad speculations about humans’ innate narrative ability. Because this methodology relies on such a widely applicable definition of narrative, its proponents risk inflating the cognitive primacy of narrative without offering compelling proof. The more recent interdisciplinary approach of cognitive narratology, led by Herman, advocates applying “hard” cognitive science to find more definitive evidence of what happens in our minds. One such “hard” scientific tool is brain scans, which can measure and compare the brain activity of person engaging with a narrative to the brain activity of a person physically experiencing the situation evoked in the narrative. Yet, according to Ryan, thus far these techniques “have not yet reached the necessary precision to tell narratologists something truly new and interesting concerning the cognitive foundation of narrative” (2010: 472). This inaccuracy is because of the complexity of the brain’s neural networks and because of the more philosophical mind-body problem—the doubt that
consciousness can be fully explained through purely physical aspects of the brain (Ryan 2010: 473). Another avenue for evidence has come from the field of evolutionary psychology (Abbott 2000, Spolsky 2001, Carroll 2008, Boyd 2009, Dutton 2009,). An evolutionary psychology approach centres on the hypothesis that narrative processing is a cognitive tool developed out of evolutionary need. While these arguments are compelling, their conclusions remain speculative because we cannot yet physically study and compare the storytelling of past human beings to modern day human beings.

In contrast to these approaches that make conclusions about the power of narratives as a broadly-defined cognitive process, this analysis will adopt a cognitive linguistics paradigm and toolkit to breakdown individual examples of how people use specific fictive narratives in online discourse to make sense of traumatic events. I argue this will provide a productive new approach for studying how people process traumatic and disturbing events through specific narratives in real-time. Social media posts and the comments of social media users are not definitive proof of how people think, but multimodal online discourse can provide evidence that might not be uncovered in a lab or text of how people use fiction to project closure and causality onto a traumatic event, inform future behaviour, and connect their own experiences to online communities. Moreover, the rapid speed at which these artifacts are created and shared (Astin’s post was created in the hours after the tragedy in Orlando and more than 100,000 people shared the post on their own Facebook pages within the same day) suggests that these comparisons between fiction and reality are not after-the-fact reactions to current events, but rather formative structures for informing behaviour, guiding cognition, and connecting individuals to like-minded communities in response to traumatic events. Finally, as I will explore in my case-study in Chapter 2 and in my final set of conclusions, the reoccurrence and manipulability of the same
fictive narratives to help explain a wide range of situations and events reveals how culturally salient stories become embedded in individual and cultural consciousness.

**Why memes?**

Specifically, my project will focus on the creation, sharing, and transformation of memes in online discourse across a variety of different social media platforms. Richard Dawkins (1976: 192) coined the term meme in the late 1970s to describe “a unit of cultural transmission”. Dawkins conceptualized culture through the theoretical lens of genetics, and came up with the term meme to theorize the cultural equivalent of a person’s genetic code, which he argued similarly determines the traits of an individual. Dawkins claims that “[j]ust as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (1976: 192). Online communities coopted this term to describe multimodal artifacts that spread and propagate in the same manner as the cultural phenomenon Dawkins described, but at an exponential growth rate akin to biological viruses—hence, why popular online memes are said to have gone viral (Shifman 2013). An internet meme can be many things. In his book, *The World Made Meme*, Ryan Milner defines memes as the “linguistic image, audio, and video texts created, circulated, and transformed by countless cultural participants across vast networks and collectives” (2016: 18). He argues that what makes memes unique are that their ability to combine different modes of communication into one single artifact that can be transformed and shared. Like a virus or gene, a meme is not a static individual text, but rather a dynamic aggregate that transforms as it circulates. Thus, “an individual tweet or image or mashup or video isn’t in of itself a *meme*” (Milner 2016: 18) but becomes a meme
through the social process in which it is created, spread, and transformed by the collective online community.

What makes internet memes such a rich area for cognitive linguistics to study is twofold. Firstly, although the term meme describes the aggregate whole of any shared and transformed text, we still can study an individual articulation of a meme as a unique discursive artifact embedded with dense cultural and intertextual connections. This density enables us to identify cultural influences on individuals’ cognition, behaviour, and discourse that would not be so easily accessible in other texts and artifacts. Secondly, as Milner points out, memes are inherently multimodal:

The internet as a medium—one premised on the near-universal digitization of information—can carry many modes of communication, blurring word, image, audio, video, and hypertext in its constellation of messages. This blur influences the complex tapestry of mediated conversation; the more semiotic codes participants have to work with, the more versatile their mediated conversations can become. (2016: 38)

Memes compress all of the modes of communication offered by the internet into individual artifacts with mimetic potential, i.e. the viral potential to spread across online communities. Analyzing these multimodal creations as a cognitive linguist would analyze a novel, conversation, or even an image or video, enables us to better understand the interaction between various semiotic codes that human beings navigate in their everyday lives to communicate.

This study will differ from the previous cognitive-linguistic study of memes by Barbara Dancygier and Lievan Vandelanotte (2015, 2016, In press) in two key ways. Past research has focused on the subgenre of image macro memes, which are an established popular template for memes that follow a fixed visual pattern whereby a manipulatable phrase is overlaid on a single...
still image. “Image macros facilitate expression by reappropriating a collectively predetermined visual subject. Participants annotate this predetermined subject with a new joke or insight, tying their creative expression to a socially understood premise” (Milner 2016: 28). Figure 2 below is an example of a single image macro meme reappropriated to provide insight to two different contexts.

Figure 2: The “One does not simply” meme

While my research will include some examples of image macro memes, I will examine these types along with a broad range of other examples—including screenshots from popular films overlaid with captioned dialogue, single screenshots like Figure 1, and blended images with multiple sources. While these types of memes do not follow the set template of a visual with overlaid textual prompts as in image macros, they do maintain the inherent adaptability and transformative capacity of memes because, as I will demonstrate, they can be transformed by countless individuals and groups to explain and enrich a variety of unrelated events and emotions.

The other unique aspect of my approach is that I study multimodal memes within the context of the social media platforms they are created and shared on. Dancygier and Vandelanotte’s work on memes (2015, 2016, In press) focused solely on the linguistic and visual constructions within the frames of a meme’s input image and text. I will also consider various contextual elements of each meme that any viewer of a meme in online discourse would consider
alongside the visual and textual creation of the meme itself. This includes the real-life timing of creations and shares; the social media platforms memes are shared through; and the comments, likes, shares, and hashtags unique to these platforms that enable users to interact with the memes.

I argue that each of these factors contribute rich cognitive scaffolding that affect the overall viewpoint and interpretation of a meme, and therefore must be included in any analysis of a meme’s function and meaning. For example, the image in Figure 1 has little explanatory value in itself—nowhere does it explicitly reference the shooting in Orlando. However, the fact that the post was created and shared on Facebook the day after the shooting in Orlando, Astin’s accompanying *Lord of the Rings* quotation in the comments section, and the hundreds of thousands of shares and comments, connect the image to the real-world tragedy and reveal the important relevance of the fictive narrative to the real-world tragedy. While this approach risks overvaluing the comments and reactions of social media users as proof of cognition and emotions, it is nevertheless worthwhile because of how it demonstrates how individuals’ conceptualizations of memes are shaped by collective conceptual frames and viewpoint contributions that come from input sources outside the frames of the shared multimodal artifact.

**Scope of this project**

My goal with this project is introduce a cognitive linguistics approach to multimodal Internet memes to learn more about how culturally salient fictive narratives are used by individuals and groups in everyday online discourse to inform behavior and cope with threatening new events. I apply the theories of conceptual blending (Fauconnier 1994[1985], 1997; Fauconnier and Turner 2002), frame metonymy (Fillmore 1976; Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2015, 2016, In press), viewpoint networks (Dancygier & Sweetser 2012; Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2016) and narrative spaces (Dancygier 2012a) to a set of multimodal
memes that blend recent real-world events with fictive narratives. I argue this will reveal new insight into how people use fictional narratives in response to traumatizing events to inform future behaviour, project needed closure and causality onto an uncertain reality, and connect to supportive and like-minded communities.

My first chapter will introduce the cognitive linguistic toolset that will be the theoretical foundation of my analysis, and then apply this framework to the emerging new field of online discourse and memes. I will begin by explaining how we can use Fauconnier and Turner’s theory of mental spaces and blending (2002), as well as Charles Fillmore’s theory of frame evocation and metonymy (1976), to help breakdown any form of discourse into its various meaning-making components. I then build on the work of Tobin and Israel (2012), Verhagen (2005), and Dancygier & Vandelanotte (2015,2016, In press) to explain how viewpoint impacts everyday discourse, regardless of the medium. Specifically, I use Dancygier and Vandelanotte’s theories of hierarchal viewpoint networks and discourse viewpoint space to breakdown how viewpoint shifts and compression help coordinate and structure a meme’s complex blend of cultural influences, individual and collective beliefs, schematic frames, and modalities. Finally, because my analysis is focused on memes that rely on fictive narratives for meaning-making, I adapt Dancygier’s past work applying mental space theory to the study of narratives to argue that memes metonymically evoke fictional sources of causality and events sequencing to anchor disturbing events and behaviours into fixed and reassuring patterns.

My second chapter will be an in-depth analysis of a particularly salient case-study that reveals how individuals and groups use fictive narratives in online discourse to make sense of threatening and disturbing new events. I examine how The Lord of the Rings narrative was used extensively in online memes created and shared in the twenty-four-hour period after the 2016
U.S. federal election by those who were shocked and upset at the resulting election of Donald Trump. Using Herman’s theory that outlines the five ways narratives structure intelligent behaviour as my framework, I analyze how these people evoked *The Lord of the Rings* to project closure and causality onto the uncertain threat of Trump’s presidency, rationalize his atypical behaviour, and build a reassuring sense of community.

My last chapter summarizes the primary conclusions that can be drawn from my case-study to explain a broader pattern of behaviour online. I demonstrate through a variety of examples how the adaptability of fictive narratives’ viewpoint networks enables people to project meaning from these stories to support a range of beliefs and values, as well as to build online collectives with other individuals who share a similar set of beliefs. I then map out future avenues of research to support this interdisciplinary field of study. I advocate for a more quantitative study and comparison of what fictive narratives are evoked most often in social media platforms, which can help us to better understand if there are inherent qualities of narratives that make them more likely to be accessed in the wake of a new event. Additionally, I argue that further research should examine whether single modal memes, such as Youtube audio clips, can similarly evoke multimodal fictive narratives and guide cognition.
Chapter 1: Introducing a cognitive linguistic approach to study memes

Mental spaces and conceptual blending

This chapter will outline the cognitive linguistic toolset that will help to break down a meme, or any other type of discourse, into its network of inputs. I first develop an anecdotal example from my own life to introduce the theory of conceptual blending, framing, and metonymy. I then add more complexity to my analysis by bringing together theories of viewpoint, material anchors, and narrative spaces to break down more complex and multimodal forms of discourse.

My cognitive linguist approach relies on Gilles Fauconnier’s theory of mental spaces (1994[1985] & 1997) to break down human discourse into its foundational meaning-making components. Mental spaces are partial collections of information “constructed as we think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action” (Fauconnier & Turner 2002: 102). This theory is useful for cognitive linguists because it is built on the premise that we can represent and study mental spaces through the conceptual tool of language that shapes how we process and discuss the world around us (Fauconnier 1997). Mental spaces are structured by frames, a term introduced by Fillmore (1976) to represent a structured cluster of knowledge metonymically evoked by one of its parts—i.e., the frame of the concept of student is accessed within the broader frames of school, education, and the reciprocal role of teacher. Frames structure our understanding of reality because meaning-making depends on our past base of knowledge that frames new experiences and interpretations. According to Fillmore, “Particular words or speech formulas, or particular grammatical choices, are associated in memory with particular frames, in such a way that exposure to the linguistic form in an appropriate context activates in the perceiver’s mind the particular frame” (1976: 25). Access to any element or part of a frame can
activate our understanding of the whole or to other associated elements of the frame, this
dynamic is called frame metonymy.

Frames, and the mental spaces they help shape, can differ in terms of specificity, detail,
familiarity, and experience (Fauconnier and Turner 2002). Take for example a comment made to
me by one of the first-year English students I taught. When I asked the student how her studying
was progressing for our class’s final exam, she replied, “It’s a long battle, but I’m almost there.”
The student’s response connected two mental spaces. In the first space, she evoked several
frames ranging in complexity associated with school and exams. In the second space, several
frames associated with journeys and conflict were evoked, also ranging in complexity and
specificity. Some of these frames are unique to the past experiences of my student, but what
makes it possible for me to understand her response is that these spaces are shaped by simple,
building block types of frames that her and I are both familiar with.

At the most basic level of conceptualization, mental spaces build on a specific kind of
frame called an image schema. An image schema (originally introduced in Johnson 1987; for
more, see Dancygier & Sweetser 2014) is a conceptual structure that provides the framework for
more complex conceptualization through spatial configuration and physical forces that can be
felt and experienced by humans. In my student’s response, the mental space associated with
school gains part of its structure from the image schema of directed physical motion along a path
towards a goal or target, which helps map exams in more complex terms as a difficult obstacle to
overcome on a progressive journey forward through one’s education, and the image schema of a
physical obstacle or barrier between an interior and exterior, which provides the framework for
viewing exams as a physical challenge to overcome (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014). The second
mental space in this example also gains part of its structure from the additional image schema of
resistance, in which two physical forces are in opposition to one another. This schema helps map the more complex concepts of conflict, an adversarial dynamic, and the possibility of victory and defeat.

Another basic building block type of frame is called a Primary Metaphor. Primary Metaphors are metaphoric mappings that emerge directly from experiential source domains (Grady 1997, 1998; Johnson 1997; Dancygier & Sweetser 2014). These types of metaphors ground subjective social and cognitive structures in accessible terms of physical sensations and experience. For example, the Primary Metaphor of KNOWING IS SEEING develops from the physical experience of infants who learn to follow adult gazes and direct their own in order to draw and share attention to a particular object (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014: 27). KNOWING IS SEEING enables metaphorical mapping between other related source and target domains. If I had responded to my student’s opinion by saying, “I see your point”, I would have been drawing from this foundational metaphor that connects knowledge with the physical sense of sight.

Schematic frames provide the conceptual foundations for richer and more complex frames that shape mental spaces. Returning again to my student’s response, the social roles of student and teacher, the concepts of universities and exams, and the idea of studying, or more specifically cram-studying, all contribute frames to the school-centered mental space. This space also gains structure from evoked experiential imagery, which associates studying with a particular type of physicality—perhaps hunched shoulders over a computer, heavy eyelids, sore fingers, and stress. Likewise, the battle space is shaped by more complex frames associated with war and conflict, such as the locale of a battlefield, the idea of weapons, the stakes of life and death, and the experiential imagery of violence, fighting, and pain.
Both the school and conflict space also evoke more complex and personal framing unique to each speaker and listener in discourse. My student’s conceptualization of exams could be shaped by her previous tests in high school or the experiences told to her through friends, and her idea of war could be shaped by her grade seven history class, or by popularized images of war she saw in documentaries or Hollywood films. The reason I could make sense of my student’s answer is because we are both able to conceptually combine the two mental spaces she evoked quickly in our minds—a process called conceptual blending.

Mental spaces are the foundation for Fauconnier and Turner’s Conceptual Integration Theory, more commonly referred to as blending (1994,1996,1998a,1998b, 2002). According to this theory, conceptual understanding develops through a dynamic interaction between input mental spaces that produces a blend with unique, emergent structure and logic. Fauconnier explains that the emergent structure arises through three interrelated processes:

Composition: Taken together, the projections from the inputs make new relations available that did not exist in the separate inputs. Completion: Knowledge of background frames, cognitive and cultural models, allows the composite structure projected into the blend from the inputs to be viewed as part of a larger self-contained structure in the blend. The pattern in the blend triggered by the inherited structures is ‘completed’ into the larger, emergent structure. Elaboration: The structure in the blend can then be elaborated. This is called ‘running the blend.’ It consists of cognitive work performed within the blend, according to its own emergent logic. (1997: 150–151)

The generic structure, or space, shared by the inputs guides conceptual mapping between the mental spaces, and selective structure and frames are projected from each to construct a new space, the blend. Key to this theory is the idea that the blend has emergent structure, meaning
that there is an elaboration of elements from the input spaces that do not exist in them separately. This emergent structure also allows for backwards projection of meaning onto the input spaces, yielding new insight and structure to the inputs. In the example of my student’s response, the two input spaces, school and war, blend together to create a new concept. The high stakes, the possibility of defeat, and the adversarial dynamic of a physical conflict are projected into the context of a university assessment. The generic space that helps facilitate this blend centres around the fact that my student framed both exams and battles within the spatial terms of a journey. They both share an image schema of a progressive path towards a goal impeded by a physical barrier, as well as a shared physical cost of their respective experience.

The similarities between input spaces enables the process of compression that is central to any conceptual blend (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014). A blend compresses the distance between its input mental spaces so that dissimilar concepts, like warfare and post-secondary education, can be understood in the same terms and project meaning from one to the other. Moreover, structures from the inputs are only partially projected into the blend. In the example involving my conversation with a student, the image schemas and adversarial dynamic of war were mapped onto exams, but other data from this space were not—such as frames related to large armies, military warfare and deadly weapons. The blend also produces unique conceptualization that can be mapped back on the inputs. Through the blend, the adversarial logic of armed conflict projects back onto the act of studying, allowing my student to understand studying as a conflict, perhaps against her own attention span, against the material she is attempting to learn, against her other classmates, or against me and the class’s professor.
Viewpoint

The example of my student’s response reveals another crucial aspect of applying conceptual blending theory and mental spaces to the study of linguistics: viewpoint. My conversation with my student didn’t happen in a theoretical vacuum, it occurred as a part of everyday discourse, which cognitive linguists contend is inherently shaped by embodied viewpoint (Sweetser 2012). We need to examine the role viewpoint plays in mental space networks and blends because each “given mental space is always attached to some perceiver or cognizer” (Sweetser 2012: 4). As Fauconnier argues (1997), and Tobin and Israel develop further in their analysis of irony (2012), discourse participants find their way through mental space configurations by managing the viewpoint at which all other conceptual content is accessed, which in the theory of blending is called the Viewpoint Space. Going back to the example of my student’s claim that studying for her exams is a battle, viewpoint plays a critical role because two people could answer the question very differently. Many of the more complex and specific cognitive frames that guided her view of exams are unique to her embodied and experiential viewpoint. Another student might have a completely different answer to my question, or not even understand the other student’s comparison between exams and battles. Furthermore, to understand her analogy, I, as the listener, had to align my own viewpoint with the speaker. Only through such a shift could I then conceptualize the physical stress and anxiety she was feeling to prompt her answer.

Viewpoint becomes even more important to conceptualization when we consider how frequently viewpoint shifts in discourse as “speakers and hearers try to coordinate their mental representations and share attention to various aspects of those representations” (Tobin and Israel 2012: 32). This multiplicity of viewpoints can involve the profiling of multiple people, for example the sentence: “My older brother told me exams are a joke, but, after hearing Tiffany’s
horror story, I’m worried about them.” Or even a division of the self into multiple temporal perspectives, such as “I told myself in the afternoon I would study later that night, but after 10 p.m. I had different priorities.” Tobin and Israel (2012) explore even more complex examples of viewpoint, in which insincere or sarcastic viewpoints are constructed alongside the speaker’s own. These examples demonstrate the inherent multiplicity and incongruity in viewpoint within everyday discourse, which suggests that the Viewpoint Space within a blend is not a constant, but rather a dynamic and shifting process of elaboration.

Dancygier’s theoretical contributions to viewpoint (2012a, 2012b; Dancygier & Sweetser 2012; Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2015, 2016, In Press) help unpack a more dynamic conception of blending. She argues that multiple-profiled viewpoints within discourse do not remain incongruous because they develop into a hierarchal, mutually-influential network. As a speaker or hearer makes her way through discourse, she must zoom-out from the viewpoint of individual mental space constructions to a higher-level of viewpoint in order to understand the meaning of the overall discourse (Dancygier & Sweetser 2012). Dancygier calls the highest-level the Discourse Viewpoint Space (DV space), and argues it has a reciprocal relationship with each lower-level viewpoint alignment. Low-level viewpoint alignments contribute structure and partially blend together to construct the overseeing DV space, and this higher-level space then is the perspective at which we would reassess and make sense of the lower-level spaces. Dancygier argues this complex process is only possible because of viewpoint compression. She claims compression “enables the continuity and viewpoint coherence [of the blended space] …while maintaining the viewpoints of lowers spaces” (2012b). The process of compression follows the same logic as conceptual blending: the emergent DV space composes, completes, and elaborates
the structure of its lower-level inputs. Backwards projection from this blended viewpoint can then help to make sense of inconsistencies between the lower-level viewpoint inputs.

Dancygier’s approach offers us an effective way to synthesize viewpoint with conceptual blending theory. Because any mental space in a conceptual blending network is fundamentally viewpointed, we can analyze the viewpoint of each input mental space in discourse as a part of its composition alongside the previously discussed contributing frames, such as image schemas, and experiential imagery. This approach contrasts Fauconnier’s conceptualization of viewpoint as its own input space (1997). Theoretically, this means we can identify each input mental space as a discourse space, and the emergent blended space as the higher-level DV space. This synthesis allows us to have a more flexible understanding of blending in which not all incongruities in viewpoint between inputs are always completed into one coherent blended emergent construction. Rather, the zoomed-out DV Space can provide the cohesion needed to blend structure from the multiple, possibly incongruous, viewpoints together, while at the same time maintaining access to their unique qualities. This distinction may not seem important in the context of the example involving my student’s conceptualization of exams, but it becomes critical when we begin to breakdown the more complex processes of blending in multimodal forms of discourse.

**Breaking down multimodal discourse**

In Figure 3, my student’s studying for exams is a battle blend is elaborated in a meme with a screen shot and quote from The Lord of the Rings film trilogy—bringing several new frames and viewpoint complexity to the blend.
The two mental spaces previously analyzed in the purely linguistic analogy are enriched with the visual image. The image of a wounded and soot-covered face visualizes the experiential imagery associated with the physical toll of a physical battle and studying for exams. The single face also reinforces the idea that the conflict is an internal struggle, a journey, rather than a fight against a visible enemy. As well, the top-line of text in the meme explicitly frames the image as the emotionally charged moment “after an exam”, which reinforces the image schemas of directed motion along a path towards a destination and a physical barrier overcome in the recent past. This temporal distance from the barrier is further entrenched in the bottom-line of the meme, and visually reinforced with the face in the image, who is looking upwards and forward, paralleling the forward progress on the path of exams.
The viewpoint network of the meme is also more complex than the linguistic example because of its multimodality. Memes construct viewpoint through both visual and linguistic techniques. The meme’s text relies on deictic cues to align the reader with specific embodied viewpoints, but it also relies on visual cues, common in film, to add more complexity. In Figure 3, the deictic “I” in the top-line of text acts as a viewpoint marker in the blend, but so too do aspects of the visual screenshot—including the camera angle that visually align the viewer’s perspective with the face within the photo and the camera’s fixed field of vision that delineates what we can and cannot see.

The meme’s multimodality enables more viewpoints to become embedded within the blend. In my previous example, the two mental spaces are embedded within the one viewpoint of my student. Yet, in this meme the two spaces of school and battle are framed by two different discourse viewpoints: the meme-creator or “speaker”, and the evoked fictive character, Frodo Baggins. The top-line of text, “How I feel after an exam”, constructs the discourse space associated with school, and its viewpoint is aligned with the student who created or put together this meme. Yet, as the gaze of the viewer or “listener” of the meme shifts down to the image below, the viewpoint in the construction swings to the perspective of the physically worn-down face of Frodo. It is from this viewpoint that the discourse space associated with war and a journey is constructed. Thus, there are two profiled viewpoints within this construction—both of which could be the viewpoint source for the bottom-line the meme’s text: “It’s over…It’s done”. This line could be attributable to either the student or the evoked character. Yet, because we compress and blend the two discourse spaces and the associated viewpoints, the viewer of the meme interprets this text from the higher DV space. In other words, we can quickly
conceptualize that the last line of text is attributable to the blended viewpoint space in which the meme speaker and Frodo are one and the same.

Hutchins’ theory of material anchors (2005) helps conceptualize how a fixed structure, like a meme, can stabilize such a complex blend that involves multiple sources and modalities. Hutchins claims that material anchors are the everyday structures or patterns stabilizing conceptual representations and holding together the complicated conceptual elements of a blend. He argues that the complexity of the manipulations of structure needed to blend very different inputs “can be increased if the stability of the representations can be increased. The stability of the representations is a necessary feature of the reasoning process, but it is often taken for granted. The need for representational stability becomes more visible in circumstances where the necessary stability is not present” (2005: 1557). Anchors provide such stability as they enable people to complete more complex reasoning processes than would be possible otherwise. Hutchins uses a common wrist-watch as an example. The repeated shape, design, and movements of a watch’s interface easily help us conceptualize the abstraction of time—we read the movement of tiny lengths of metal synonymously with the passing of seconds, minutes, and hours (2005). For the exams and battle blend, the Frodo meme functions like a watch—its repeatable linguistic structure and image provide stability for the abstract comparison and viewpoint compression. The semi-fixed pattern of memes is a large reason why they are such a popular online form of discourse—the malleable yet constrained structure acts as a stabilizing physical representation of a blend that can be understood by others almost instantaneously, and transformed into various manifestations that speak to different circumstances and viewpoints, as evident in Figure 4 below.
Narrative and viewpoint

A meme can do more than simply enrich and stabilize existing frames and viewpoints in a complex blend; it also contributes additional narrative frames and discourse spaces. Taking for example *The Lord of the Rings* memes I’ve spoken about thus far, it’s safe to assume that someone who uses this structure to express their feeling of accomplishment would find the evoked narrative frames salient—after all, there are countless other meme templates that could similarly help facilitate a blend between a difficult task and a battle without evoking this fantasy series. The image is salient for the blend not simply because of its explicit qualities, but because the blend gains structure and framing from the metonymically evoked narrative. A demonstration of this phenomenon took place after a presentation of my work to a group of students at my university. I analyzed this same meme and argued that Frodo’s face evokes the emotions of hope and accomplishment that a student would feel after finishing exams, which is why the image was chosen. Those in the room who were familiar with *The Lord of the Rings* narrative nodded in
agreement, but other members of the group, who were not as familiar with the story, pointed out that the facial expression is much more ambiguous than I had suggested—they argued the face of the character Frodo could be read as concerned, desperate, or even terrified, just as easily as it can be read as hopeful. These students made a valid point, objectively speaking the facial expression in the image is ambiguous. Yet, the fact is that most creators and sharers of a meme don’t access its content objectively. Rather, Milner argues a fundamental aspect of memes are their embedded and reappropriated frames of cultural and narrative references, which make a meme’s message salient and quickly accessible for those familiar with the source material (2016: 40). In the meme template I’ve analyzed thus far, anyone familiar with The Lord of the Rings story can almost instantaneously interpret its image and its bottom-line of text immediately as the face of the character Frodo in the moments after the ring has been destroyed—relieved that its physical and psychological burden has been lifted. These are the people who, like me and my nodding peers, will find this blend most salient and rich.

This anecdote reinforces the conclusions from Dancygier and Vandelanotte’s cognitive-linguistic analysis of memes that stresses the importance of frame metonymy (2015, 2016, In press). These scholars argue that popular memes, such as the “One Does Not Simply” meme also from The Lord of the Rings (Figure 5 below), metonymically evoke frames from the narrative their visuals and text are drawn from.
While their approach is useful, Dancygier and Vandelanotte’s work is self-admittedly an introduction for cognitive-linguistics into the field of online discourse, and their explanation of narrative frames does not go far enough to explain why different memes framed by the same narrative can convey very different narrative information. For example, the “One Does Not Simply” meme in Figure 5 ironically connects to real-world situations in which one has a daunting task ahead of them, evoking the narrative moment in *The Lord of the Rings* when a council of the story’s heroes meet to brainstorm how they will accomplish the seemingly impossible task of walking into the enemy’s territory to destroy the evil ring of power. The meme accesses and foregrounds a moment within the fictive narrative that is much earlier in the temporal sequence of the fictive story than the moment evoked in the “It’s Over” meme, which takes place at the story’s conclusion. We therefore need to look beyond just the concept of frame metonymy to explain how the same fictive narrative can be evoked in different memes to foreground different narrative details and events.
Dancygier’s application of blending theory to the process of narrative construction in her book the *Language of Stories* (2012a) provides a framework for understanding how memes can select specific narrative data while suppressing a much larger collection of narrative details. Dancygier coins the term narrative spaces to describe conceptual packets of information that shape the construction of a text’s story. Narrative spaces share much of the same features as mental spaces—they both vary in complexity and familiarity, shift between different viewpoints, gain structure from linguistic choices like perspective and tense, and develop from metonymically evoked frames. In the same way that mental spaces link and blend together to shape cognition of the world around us, narrative spaces blend together to construct an emergent story. For Dancygier, story is a process of continuous meaning construction, prompted by the interaction between narrative spaces, that culminates in a final mega-blend arrived after the completion of the text. This mega-blend is the final result of the reader’s interactions with text, which includes “reading the words, activating the frames, searching for correlates in one’s experience, making cross-space connections, [and] blending narrative spaces” (2012a: 54). Different elements from each narrative space selectively project into the blend, and the mega-blend projects structure back into its component spaces.

Dancygier argues that quite often the richness of a narrative depends on not immediately knowing the entire content of its narrative spaces. She claims that “narrative coherence crucially depends on selection of the content needed at a given point in the story, and on suppression of all information which would reveal too much” (2012a: 42). A meme evokes complex narratives metonymically and compresses them into one or two images and an accompanying piece of text through rapid framing and extremely tightly constructed blends. I argue this is only possible because a meme selects and foregrounds a very specific and small set of narrative spaces from a
fictive story, while suppressing the majority of its other narrative spaces, to make a complex narrative such as *The Lord of the Rings* quickly accessible, coherent, and adaptable to real-world blends. At the same time, because of frame metonymy, a meme also evokes a simplified version of its complete story, or mega-blend, that will be enriched by the meme viewer or creator’s previous engagement with the narrative.

A meme can evoke a wide array of frames from its activated narrative spaces, which vary as much in complexity as those that contribute to a mental space. For example, the “It’s done” meme evokes salient image schemas that frame Frodo’s journey throughout the story, such as directed motion on a path towards a goal, physical barriers, and physical resistance—so too does it evoke the idea that a personal journey can be a form of conflict. The narrative spaces also elaborate the Primary Metaphor of KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT, and the related metaphors of GOOD IS LIGHT and BAD IS DARK, that define the story’s good and evil forces.

The meme’s evoked narrative spaces also provide a temporal anchor for the positioning of viewpoint into a causally-linked sequence of relational events. One of the five ways Herman argues that narratives shape intelligent behaviour is the idea that we use stories to superimpose causal and temporal ordering onto states, actions, and events that are not inherently inter-related (2003a: 172). The images and quoted text within the meme align the viewer not just with the emotional viewpoint of a fictive character, but also with a specific temporal viewpoint in that character’s sequential and completed narrative timeline. This temporal viewpoint is salient because the perceived stakes of the moment for the character, along with his or her emotional state and embodiment within that moment, mirror the meme speaker and viewer’s perceived position. For example, the temporal viewpoint evoked in Figure 3 is at the successful conclusion of Frodo’s long journey to destroy the ring. This moment is salient for a student, who is likewise
relieved that the physical and mental strain of exams are over, and imagines him or her self at the end of an important personal journey. The viewpoint compression with Frodo’s narrative position can provide a sense of emotional closure that might otherwise not be possible because, unlike in a novel, our lives continue on after a challenge is completed.

Figure 6: Anonymous Twitter post from Dec. 21, 2016

The sequence structure and assumed causality of a fictive narrative evoked in a meme can also anchor our viewpoint in another key way. Because the memes metonymically evoke both a foregrounded set of narrative spaces and the larger complete narrative these spaces fit into, meme creators and sharers can project consequential events and closure from the narratives onto uncertain and unforeseeable futures. Take for example, Figure 6 above. The meme sharer aligns her viewpoint with the narrative viewpoint of Frodo at a moment in the middle of his journey when he wishes to give up. Like Frodo, the user has gone through a challenging period, 2016, that has left her hopeless that things will get better in the future. She gains hope from the same
source as Frodo, the words of his companion Sam—the same quote used in the viral Facebook post after the Orlando nightclub shooting that I analyzed in my introduction. Yet, it is more than just the content of Sam’s words that provide her hope for improvement in the next calendar year. It is also the fact that Sam’s words connect to a larger narrative with a known happy ending—Sam’s prophetic claim that “it’s only a passing thing this shadow, even darkness must pass” is salient because it comes true in the fictive narrative. Thus, the meme user aligns herself not only within the narrative moment of Frodo’s hopelessness, but within a larger narrative sequence of events that suggests better days lay ahead.

Figure 6 also demonstrates how social media platforms contribute additional viewpoint structure and framing to shared memes. The meme creator posted this blend on Twitter, a social media platform that enables users to publicly share posts with a set of followers, who can in turn respond to the post by retweeting its contents, replying with a comment, or giving the post a like. The meme is ultimately an act of communication between the individual and a larger community of Twitter followers. These followers’ likes, replies, and retweets can align the user’s unique blend between fiction and reality with their own perspective, which demonstrates what Herman identifies as the “supra-individual nature of intelligence” (2013: 248). The meme’s platform acts as a forum to assess if the individual’s viewpoint connects with a much broader set of collective values and cultural norms. This enables the distribution of intelligence across time and space—one of the five ways Herman argues narratives shape intelligent behaviour.

This theory of consciousness connects to the collectivism that Milner argues is one of the fundamental logics behind the creation, circulation, and transformation of mimetic media (2016). Milner argues that the connection to an online community is the “core of participation in participatory media. Individuals connect to social groups and social identities by and through
shared texts and conversations. Because of this, memetic participation is populist and reminiscent of older conceptualizations of oral and folk cultures” (2016: 34). Considering Herman and Milner’s collectivist conceptions of consciousness and online discourse, the viewpoint of a meme viewer is not just her own, but actually a compression and alignment with the viewpoints of a collective who share her same values and culture. It is therefore crucial for our analysis of a meme’s DV Space to zoom-out past the frames of a meme’s image and text to consider the viewpoint compression occurring between the meme creator, sharer, viewer, and a large online community.
Chapter 2: Case study

This chapter adapts the theoretical foundation of my approach that was explained in Chapter 1 and applies it to a series of memes that were created and shared in the twenty-four-hour period after the U.S. federal election on November 8, 2016. The electoral victory of Republican candidate Donald Trump over Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton shocked pundits and pollsters alike, as almost all of the most recent polls before the election suggested Clinton had more than a three per cent lead over Trump.

In the early evening of Nov. 8, the *New York Times* forecasted that Clinton had an 85 per cent chance of victory. Still, there was more to the event’s shocking reverberations than simply Trump’s underdog status. Many people and collectives across the world saw Trump’s victory as a direct threat to their identities and values. Only a month before the election, a video obtained by news agencies revealed to the public a recorded conversation from 2005 between Trump and Billy Bush, then a reporter on the celebrity news program *Access Hollywood*, in which Trump made several lewd and degrading comments about women—an incident that only reinforced signs of Trump’s misogyny that had surfaced throughout his campaign, and in his Twitter account. Trump’s harsh stance on immigration—centered around his promises of a Mexican border wall and a mass deportation of illegal immigrants—as well as his stated intolerance for religious freedoms—centered on his promise to ban all Muslims from entering the U.S., meant his victory could have immediate and direct impact on the lives of many visible minority groups within and without the U.S. Furthermore, Trump’s hard-line military rhetoric amplified fears over possible large-scale international warfare in the future.

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My point is not to highlight Trump’s faults, or give my opinion on his presidency, but rather to suggest that many people were legitimately threatened and frightened by his victory. I do not wish at all to judge the validity of these fears, but believe the people who articulated and shared such fears over social media genuinely felt personally threatened by the election. As such, I argue the publicly shared and available portion of this data presents an opportunity to study people’s cognitive processing of a shocking and traumatic event. I acknowledge that there are risks in extrapolating people’s reactions to an election to make more broad claims about human cognition of the intensely personal emotions of loss and fear. However, such a large-scale event presents a wealth of data that makes it possible to research stabilizing cognitive blends that in more individual cases of trauma could not be analyzed using the tools of cognitive linguists.

Another factor for choosing to focus on Trump’s victory is the high-level of outcome uncertainty associated with any election. While voters have some sense of an election’s impact based on the characteristics and campaign promises of a political candidate, there is little evidence to know what their actual policies will be, especially for a candidate new to the political world such as Trump. The uncertainty of an election’s long-term repercussions make a narrative’s ability to chunk experience into workable and bounded segments of data, one of the five ways Herman argues narratives structure intelligent behaviour (2013), incredibly useful as a tool to limit the trauma-inducing power of the event. The evocation of a fictive story in response to Trump’s victory allows those who were frightened to project a positive and assured fictive ending onto the uncertainty of the future.

My analysis will be a cognitive linguistic analysis of two multimodal memes created and shared across the social media platforms of Instagram and Facebook in the twenty-four-hour period after the election results became public. My criteria for selecting my examples is not
based on any sort of measure of virality (such as how many likes, shares, or comments a meme has); rather, I have selected paradigmatic examples based on the complexity of their framing and viewpoint structure, as well as the richness and salience of their blend between fictive narratives and reality. I have chosen to study memes created, shared, and commented on in the twenty-four-hour period after the election because I believe the rapid speed of their creation suggests how fictive narratives are used for more than just novel metaphoric comparisons made for entertainment purposes after an event has already been comprehended. The near instantaneous creation of these memes after a shocking event like Trump’s election suggests that fictive narratives help shape how we fundamentally conceptualize the world around us.

My analysis will focus solely on fictive blends involving *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy because of the popularity and accessibility in online communities and social media platforms of its narrative frames. Despite the fact that the last film in *The Lord of the Rings* series, *The Return of the King*, was released to theatres in 2003, screenshots and quoted dialogue from the series have remained one of the most popular sources for memes and gifs more than a decade later. On the date of the election, I was in the process of gathering data for the beginning of this project, and a search using the term *The Lord of the Rings* on the morning of Nov. 9 across the public feeds of Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook revealed hundreds of memes, quotes, and gifs based on the film series that had been created since the night before. Milner argues that memes are fundamentally cultural artifacts—what makes their limited information, often just an image and two lines of text, so salient for online users and communities are the easily-accessible layers of embedded cultural frames (2016: 40). A meme that relies on a fictive narrative for part of its structure and meaning would therefore need that narrative to be part of the cultural fabric of those creating and sharing it in online communities. The large amount of references to *The
*Lord of the Rings* in the short time period after Trump’s election demonstrates that the film franchise and the fantasy novel series written by J.R.R. Tolkien are still part of this fabric.

My anecdotal evidence for this narrative’s popularity lacks the validity of a more quantitative analysis comparing the online references of *The Lord of the Rings* and other fictive narrative on the dates of November 8 and 9, 2016. Yet, this type of study is beyond the scope and purpose of my work. I am certain that are many other fictive narratives that were used to make sense of Trump, and which are similarly popular in everyday online discourse. I am not concerned with arguing which fiction is used most, or in narrative-specific conclusions. My aim is to look broadly at how any fictive narrative can be used to make sense of real-world events. I focus only on *The Lord of the Rings* because I am quite familiar with its story and its frames, and therefore can more consistently and coherently breakdown how its content is used in the meme examples I analyze. My conclusions drawn from these examples in no way are specific to this one narrative, as I am attempting to provide a paradigmatic example of the type of approach I believe should be applied to future research on the cognitive power of narratives. However, in my final chapter, I will briefly explore the question of whether fantasy narratives, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, have any inherent characteristics that make their narrative spaces more adaptable to real-world events than other narratives.

**Analysis**

Figure 7, an Instagram post created on Nov. 8, 2016, demonstrates the cognitive power of quickly accessible fictive narratives in its striking visual blend between a screenshot from *The Lord of the Rings* film series and a photo of the White House. The post is not the traditional image macro template for a meme, but still fulfills Milner’s broader definition for a meme as a multimodal text “created, circulated, and transformed by countless cultural participants across
vast networks and collectives” (2016: 18). Within this image, two discourse spaces are evoked and blended together—the first space builds on frames from *Lord of the Rings* fictional universe, the second from the real-world event of Trump’s election. We can breakdown how this meme works through the same cognitive linguistic toolset introduced in Chapter 1: conceptual blending, frame metonymy, viewpoint networks, and narrative spaces.

![Image](https://www.instagram.com/p/BMlS6WUjky2/?taken-by=georgenr1)

*Figure 7: Anonymous Instagram post from Nov. 8, 2016
https://www.instagram.com/p/BMlS6WUjky2/?taken-by=georgenr1 (Accessed on Nov. 9, 2016)*

On the most basic level of frame complexity, the image gains structure from its contrast of light and dark imagery, which function as metaphoric building blocks for more complex and abstract conceptualizations. Forceville and Renckens (2014) argue that GOOD IS LIGHT and BAD IS DARK are prevalent visual metaphors in film premised upon the physical sensation of seeing. These scholars base their argument on conceptual metaphor theory, which, similarly to the idea of Primary Metaphors, suggests that complex and creative metaphors draw from more basic conceptual metaphors that activate embodied image schemas (Forceville and Renckens 2014: 161). They argue that GOOD IS LIGHT and BAD IS DARK metaphors are based upon the embodied experience of seeing. We cannot see threats or obstacles as well in darkness as we
can in light, therefore light connects to the idea of safety and comfort, while dark connects to danger and harm.

Figure 7 evokes the visual metaphors of GOOD IS LIGHT and BAD IS DARK in the two blended images. The discourse space structured from the top-part of the blended image, the screenshot from *The Lord of the Rings*, shows a dark sky, blackened with dense cloud cover. This darkness is contrasted in the lower-half of the image, which shows the bright-white front façade of the U.S. White House on a sunny, summer day. The blended image of these contrasts suggests that the goodness associated with light and the White House is now overshadowed by an evil darkness, which we know to be the election results because of the timing of the post and Trump’s name in the comments section.

I argue the image can give even more evidence of the embodied experience that Forceville and Renckens claim is the source of this metaphoric mapping of light and darkness onto the abstract moral qualities of good and bad. As seen in the top image, darkness is associated with the night sky, as well as dense, storm clouds—a natural phenomenon that brings heavy rain and wind, blots out the sun, and makes it difficult to see. These features of dark clouds can map onto the abstract concept of evil because these qualities of a storm have direct and adverse effect on humans, whose physical safety are potentially at risk. The contrasting metaphor of GOOD IS LIGHT gains part of its structure from the embodied sensations associated with sunny, clear skies seen in the image of the White House. The natural phenomenon of sunlight is associated with the physical sensation of warmth, visibility, as well as a healthy intake of Vitamin D.

The light and dark imagery in the meme also elaborates the embodied Primary Metaphor of KNOWING IS SEEING. This Primary Metaphor develops its structure from the physical
experience of infants who learn to follow adult gazes and direct their own in order to draw and share attention to a particular object (Dancygier & Sweetser 2014: 27). KNOWING IS SEEING enables metaphoric mapping between other related source and target domains, such as KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT because light is necessary to see something clearly, and seeing is connected to understanding. If knowledge is indeed light, then ignorance is darkness, or even an opposition to knowledge because this is the environmental condition that precludes visual learning.

Additionally, metaphoric mappings of light and dark imagery in the meme build on influential cultural and ideological frames. In Christianity, light is associated with heaven, God, and those who are morally good, while darkness is associated with hell, sinful behaviour, and those who are damned. This type of imagery is extremely common in the tradition of English literature— for example, Milton describes Hell as “darkness visible” in Paradise Lost (2003[1732]:1.63) —and it contributes structure again in the meme. The concept of God and moral goodness also adds spatial dimension to light and darkness. In Christianity, Heaven is conceived of as a place above Earth; while the devil, hell, and its associated darkness is below Earth. These spatial dimensions of GOOD IS LIGHT and BAD IS DARK are inverted within the meme, the dark skies loom over the light building below—suggesting the traditional moral authority of God is inverted. This visual inversion elaborates on more abstract social framing of God and Trump as both figures of power and authority.

The metaphors of GOOD IS LIGHT and BAD IS DARK are also enriched in this image with specific contextual information about each from the metonymically evoked The Lord of the Rings narrative. The story’s heroes are helped and protected in their journey by the race of pale-skinned and often white-clad elves, who not only personify moral good, but also represent a deep
connection with the natural world and a natural hierarchy of order. Elves dwell in forests, barely impact the ground they walk on, and possess natural immortality and foresight. In opposition to elves are the black-iron-clad orc forces of Sauron, and the black-cloaked Nazgul, his closest servants. These dark forces destroy forests, dam rivers, and disrupt natural habitats to fuel their propensity for conflict. The orc armies are also unnaturally spawned, as they were artificially created and bred for Sauron’s purposes. Such racial mappings of good and evil can obviously be problematic when mapped out of the fantasy world and into our own. In this meme however, the racial element is not selected for the blend with the discourse space of the election. This contrast between a natural, moral good and unnatural evil contributes to the meme’s blend by portraying Trump and his followers as personified evil, and framing his election as a distortion of the natural order of the U.S. political system. The narrative specific framing of this visual metaphor demonstrates another one of the ways Herman argues narrative can shape cognition. Herman argues stories provide a means to make sense of events when the generalizations and idealizations we rely on to rationalize expected outcomes and behaviours fail (2013: 240). The unnatural evil evoked in The Lord of the Rings image provides a reference point for those whose cognitive typification efforts have failed to account for Trump’s election. Thus, the fictive narrative provides a heightened threatening comparison to Trump that otherwise could not be found in historic parallels.

The meme builds on many more frames from its two input spaces than just the visual contrast of light and dark, which contribute to the emergent structure of the blend. From the narrative space in the top-half of the meme, the lidless eye of Sauron atop a tower evokes the threat of an ever-present, all-seeing opposition, as well as a physical manifestation of an extreme form of tyrannical political power. Within the bottom-half of the meme, the image of the White
House evokes the concepts of the United States’ political system of democracy and the country’s unique history. As opposed to the one eye, power is spread out across the width of the building in the dozen visible windows of the front façade. The generic structure that helps facilitate the blend between the two inputs is that both images evoke symbolic structures and locales of power.

The top-image shows the tower of Barad-dûr, the home of Sauron’s evil eye and the epicentre of his evil. This tower also metonymically evokes the larger locale of Mordor, which is, as the comments section of the image reminds us with a quote from the story, “where shadows lie”.

Sauron’s symbolic structure of power is respectively paralleled in the White House, the home of the U.S. President and the symbolic epi-centre of this role’s enduring power, while the locale of Mordor is paralleled in the metonymically evoked district of Washington, the home of the White House, and the rest of the U.S. government’s political power.

Both the U.S. electoral system and the opposing forces of good and evil in the fantasy world share a dichotomous structure, which also helps to facilitate a blend between the two inputs. The dominance of the Democratic and Republican parties in U.S. politics essentially transforms the country’s federal election into a choice between two candidates. In the case of the 2016 election, the choice was between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. This system creates an us against them mentality for voters, which is paralleled in the conflict between good and evil in The Lord of the Rings. The differences between the political parties are much more nuanced than the adversaries in the narrative world. Sauron and his forces embody an extreme form of evil and tyranny, and Frodo and his allies embody moral good and fight to defend the freedom of their entire world. Regardless of your political views, I think we can agree that the differences between the platforms of Clinton and Trump were not quite as severe. The subtleties of the political candidates and system are not selected for projection into the blend, instead the extreme
contrast between sheer evil and moral good become mapped onto the two political candidates and parties.

This shared structure of the inputs enables cross-input mapping of Sauron’s extreme personification of evil onto the person of Trump, the tyranny of the Sauron’s power structure onto the democratically-elected new president, and reshapes the White House into the epicentre of evil and Washington into the land of shadow. The structure and frames from both inputs are only partially selected to shape the blend. The many differences between Trump and the abstract evil of Sauron are wiped away, as are the facts that Trump was fairly elected (questions of Russian influence aside) through a democratic process of voting, while Sauron gained power through the creation of a ring of power. So too are the differences between the two leaders’ intentions—Sauron’s goal of conquering all of Middle-Earth is projected onto the future president, whose intentions, even with a troubling and disturbing platform, are more nuanced than that. The meme also suppresses many of the narrative spaces from the completed story of *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo’s journey shaped by the image schematic frame of directed motion along a path towards a destination is not needed to complete the blend. Instead, the meme foregrounds the narrative spaces that highlight the looming threat of Sauron’s power.

The meme’s salient and striking visual blend quickly amplifies the stakes of Trump’s electoral victory to a tyrannical seizure of power, but I argue it also has the potential to help people cope with this perceived traumatic threat. This trauma-coping capacity can be found in the meme’s viewpoint network and its temporal narrative anchoring of the event. Both discourse spaces are shaped by visual viewpoint data from their respective images. The tower of Barad-dûr and the White House are both captured in images from the perspective of a distant bystander, which frames their threat to the viewer in less immediate terms than a foregrounded image of a
weapon or physical adversary would. However, this is complicated by the fact that the evil eye of Sauron is directly pointed at the meme viewer. The viewpoint of the viewer is thus aligned in opposition to Sauron—on the other side of the fictive clear dichotomy between good and evil. If this viewpoint alignment was the only contributing viewpoint structure to the meme then the meme-viewer would be left only with a sense of threat, but because this meme was posted on Instagram, a public social media platform, we must also consider the viewpoint contribution of the meme’s community of creators, sharers, and commentators. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, the viewpoint of a meme-viewer is not just her own, but actually a compression of an online collective who share her same values and culture. In this example, the highest viewpoint space would not place the viewer in the powerless position of a single person facing the evil eye of Sauron, but instead, in the empowering position alongside a community of people who similarly position themselves in opposition to Trump’s election. The platform of Instagram provides an opportunity for this community to demonstrate its solidarity with the individual meme-creator or meme-viewer by “liking” and commenting on the post.

The other reason for this meme’s uplifting cognitive power is because the metonymically evoked temporal narrative sequence gets mapped onto the disturbing election. Because all memes rely on frame metonymy (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2015, 2016, In press), the image from *The Lord of the Rings* evokes the entire fictive narrative alongside the specific narrative spaces it foregrounds. Therefore, the threat of Sauron is accessed alongside his eventual defeat at the story’s end. The meme acts as an anchor to map this temporal sequence of events and closure onto Trump’s election—projecting his victory as a temporary evil that will one day be overcome. The meme’s blend uses structure from the fictive narrative to realign the viewpoint of the meme viewer with a collective in opposition to the election results, while at the same time using the
narrative to project a fixed and bounded sequence of events that diminishes the threat and uncertainty of Trump’s victory.

Diagram 1: Visualization of viewpoint and blending structure in Example 1

Example 2

Figure 8 is another example of a meme shared on Nov. 9, 2016 that uses *The Lord of the Rings* to make sense of the electoral victory of Donald Trump. This creation is not an image macro meme; instead, it uses two sequential screenshots from a scene in the first film of the series, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and connects them with the text of the shots’ matching dialogue. In contrast to Figure 7, no explicit reference is made to Trump or the election in the actual image or text of the meme. The only contributing frames to this input space come from the accompanying comments in the Instagram post, as well as the timing of the post—as its creation
on Nov. 9 connect its visuals and text with event-specific frames from its temporal real-world context. This again stresses the importance of considering the delivery platform and accompanying comments, shares, and likes in any analysis of a meme’s viewpoint network and frame structure—such an example would be impossible to explain otherwise.

Figure 8: Anonymous Instagram post from Nov. 8, 2016
https://www.instagram.com/p/BMmWODPgnL/?tagged=lordoftherings (Accessed on Nov. 9, 2016)

On the most basic level of frame complexity, Figure 8 gains its structure from evoked image schemas and Primary Metaphors within both its fictive and real-world input spaces. The meme builds on the image schemas of directed motion along a path towards a destination, physical barriers, and oppositional forces with narrative frames from The Lord of the Rings. Galadriel’s hope that her gift “be a light for you, in dark places, when all other lights go out” frames Frodo’s quest with the directed motion along a path schema, while also evoking the rich metaphoric mappings of light and darkness to portray his journey as a path from light to
darkness. The quote also uses the image schema of physical barriers, or “dark places”, to conceptualize future obstacles ahead on Frodo’s path. Finally, the meme maps the metaphoric mapping of light and dark imagery onto the image schema of two oppositional forces. The evoked scene frames light and darkness into an adversarial dynamic between those who are naturally good and those who are unnaturally evil.

The metaphoric mapping of light and dark is even more complex in this meme than in Figure 7 because the visuals connect multiple Primary Metaphors within the gift of the objectified light. Galadriel, also known within the story as the “Lady of Light”, is blessed with the ability of foresight and embodies the natural power and knowledge of the elf race within the fantasy world. Her gift of a physical phial of light to Frodo develops the KNOWLEDGE IS LIGHT Primary Metaphor because her gift involves the sharing of the elves’ source of knowledge and wisdom. The light’s change of possession between Galadriel and Frodo also gains structure from the Primary Metaphor, COMMUNICATION IS EXCHANGE OF OBJECTS, which builds from the source-target mapping between objects and ideas to represent communication in the same terms as physical object transfer (Dancygier 2014: 15). The gift of light to Frodo gives a physical shape to the metaphoric gift of knowledge. The top image shows Frodo grasping Galadriel’s gift in his hand, which builds from another Primary Metaphor, UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING. This metaphor develops from the metaphorical mapping between the physical sensation of grasping an object to the idea of understanding that object (Dancygier 2014: 28). Thus, an idea or concept can similarly be grasped as it becomes understood. When Galadriel says, “I give you the light of Eärendil, our most beloved star”, she is giving Frodo both the physical object of the phial and the figurative advice and support of the elves. Frodo grasps both, suggesting he has “taken”, or understood, both her gift and her advice.
The screenshots and quote from the film in effect combine the mappings from three different Primary Metaphor sources, and enrich this structure with frames from the fictional narrative. Frames from the comments section of the post contribute further structure to the meme’s metaphoric mapping of light and darkness. The meme creator accompanies the meme with the message: “Because a lot of us need some light today. Stay positive. Be kind. No matter what’s going on in the world, you can always make it a better for yourself and the people around you.” This comment reframes the narrative’s contributing dichotomous and adversarial structure of the GOOD IS LIGHT and BAD IS DARK metaphors within the context of the U.S. election. Light becomes analogous not just with the forces of good in Middle-Earth, but also with the qualities of positivity and kindness that the meme connects with the voters who did not support Trump in the election. The darkness of Sauron’s forces becomes one and the same as the opposing qualities of negativity and hate that the meme-creator suggests Trump and his supporters symbolize. The metaphoric meaning of light in the meme-creator’s comment also gains framing from the physical effect of sunshine on plant life. The linguistic construction, “need some light today”, gains meaning from the physical nourishing effect of sunlight on plants, which use sunshine to survive and grow through the process of photosynthesis. In this sense, it is the opponents of Trump who need some light, to continue to grow and get through the dark day after the election. The source and metaphoric meaning of light in context to the meme-viewer is not as explicitly clear as it is in the evoked narrative spaces. For Frodo, light represents the elves’ knowledge and a physical tool to help in his further journey, but the meme-viewer does not seem to physically receive anything, so the reassurance and help offered to her must come from a different source.
The meme’s reassuring message can, like Figure 7, be found through breaking down its viewpoint network and sequential anchoring of the election to the fixed fictive narrative. The quote in Figure 8 is a first-person address to an unnamed second person, ambiguous in its “I” and “you”, but because this quote is interpreted multimodally, alongside the meme’s visuals and through the metonymically activated narrative spaces from *The Lord of the Rings*, we can identify the speaker as Galadriel, and the addressee as Frodo. The two screenshots use the zoomed-in eyeline matching shot, a common viewpoint alignment technique in film (Deleyto 1991), to compress the perspective of the meme-viewer with Frodo. His hands receiving Galadriel’s gift become our own, as too does his forehead receiving her kiss. The viewpoint of the gift giver in the meme’s blended DV space does not map as well from the fictive character of Galadriel onto the meme creator. Galadriel is the giver of a gift of light that, as previously discussed, metonymically evokes the natural force of good that she embodies but also is a physical object to help Frodo in his quest. The meme-creator’s gift lacks this physical object and there is no suggestion that she is the embodiment of the figurative light she offers the viewer. Rather, as demonstrated in the analysis of Figure 7, the inherent collectivism of mimetic participation compresses the collective viewpoint of the whole community of creators, sharers, and commenters involved with the meme to align with Galadriel’s viewpoint in the DV space. It is not one person’s gift or kiss that supports the meme-viewer, but rather the reassurance that there are many others who share her beliefs, values, and political views of Trump. We need the zoomed-out DV space to fully breakdown how the meme can provide a cognitive framework for healing, as well as how emergent viewpoint alignment and structure projects back onto the
The meme’s healing cognitive power also emerges from the metonymically evoked temporal narrative sequence that gets mapped onto the disturbing event. The screenshots and quote from *The Lord of the Rings* foregrounds narrative spaces that are near the beginning of Frodo’s journey. Galadriel’s encouragement and gift come to Frodo after he has experienced difficulties on his journey, yet knows the next part of his journey will be even harder because he will have to accomplish the rest on his own. Like Frodo, the viewer who finds this meme salient also feels a sense of isolation because the election has confirmed that the majority of Americans do not share her same values and have voted for Trump. Frodo’s sense of isolation in this narrative moment, and the other visual viewpoint alignment techniques in the screenshots, align the character’s temporally-specific viewpoint with the viewpoint of the meme-viewer. Because
the entire fictive narrative sequence of events is metonymically evoked alongside the foregrounded space, the viewer can then blend their own distress into the larger fictive and bounded timeline of Frodo’s journey. She can project the successful conclusion of his journey to destroy the ring onto the uncertain threat and repercussions of the election. This process demonstrates how a salient narrative can limit the traumatic power of an event by chunking experience into workable and bounded segments of data (Herman 2013: 232). The evocation of Frodo’s viewpoint at the beginning of his journey in response to Trump’s victory projects a fixed pattern of events onto the unknown future, providing a sense of closure and optimism for the meme-viewer. This process is outlined in the diagram below.

*Diagram 3: Breakdown of how fictive temporal viewpoint projects closure and sequencing onto real-world event*
Chapter 3: Conclusions and directions for future research

This analysis has sought to apply a cognitive linguistic approach and toolkit to examine the cognitive power of narratives to inform behaviour and limit the traumatic impact of events. Unlike previous research on this topic in the fields of narratology and cognitive science, I have attempted to study examples of how specific narratives are used in everyday online discourse to make sense of new events, rather than to defend arguments that define narrative and cognition in broad categorical terms. Using the theoretical framework of frame metonymy, viewpoint networks, material anchors, and narrative spaces, I have analyzed paradigmatic examples of how specific fictive narratives are used in online discourse to help people cope with large-scale tragedies and perceived threats. I analyzed how the memes shape cognition according to the criteria of cognitive narratologist David Herman, who theorizes that narratives structure intelligent behaviour in five ways: chunking experience into workable segments of data, creating causal relations between events, addressing problems with the typification of phenomena, sequencing actions, and distributing ways of knowing across time and space (2013). I have focused my analysis on memes because, as I have demonstrated in my analysis of Milner (2016) and Shifman’s (2013) research on memes, they are evolving, multimodal evidence of how individuals and groups come together as collectives to conceptualize threats quickly in real-time. I argue that memes provide proof of how people use specific narratives that are salient to their culture, values, and identity to make sense of the world around them. My approach also differs from past analyses of memes in the field of cognitive linguistics by considering more than just the multimodal data of a meme. Instead, I have also considered the contextual frames that shape the way we interact with memes in everyday online discourse—this includes the social media platforms memes they are shared through; the accompanying comments, “likes”, hashtags, and shares these platforms enable; and the real-world events that prompt their creation.
While Chapter 1 outlined the cognitive linguistic toolkit for my analysis, Chapter 2 centered on two demonstrative examples of memes made in the twenty-four-hour period after the U.S. federal election on Nov.8, 2016 that blended Trump’s victory with the popular *The Lord of the Rings* narrative. These memes metonymically evoked narratives frames and viewpoint structure from the fictive story to project an adversarial dichotomy of moral good and extreme evil onto the dichotomy of the U.S. electoral system. On one hand, the memes aligned Democrats, the viewer, and the larger participatory community of the meme—made up of its creators, likers, sharers, and commentators—with the side of moral good. On the other hand, the memes aligned Republican voters and Trump with the extreme manifestation of evil in the narrative, framed by metaphoric mappings associated with unnatural and dark imagery. The memes also transformed the U.S. democratic election and political system into a high-stakes battle between freedom and tyranny, as the person of Trump is blended with the story’s villain Sauron to personify not just evil, but a tyrannical form of power.

I focused on these two specific cases of how *The Lord of the Rings* helped people cope with the election of Trump to breakdown how narrative frames and viewpoint contribute and blend with frames from real-world events. I did so with no intention to argue if the moral categorization of Trump and his followers into fictive extremes is factually correct or morally right. The connection between Trump and Sauron, or between the election and a journey to destroy a ring of power, is not inherent to its real-world or narrative inputs. Rather, it is the viewpoint of the meme’s collectivist community, and their set of values, identities, and beliefs, that map a generic space for the blend between fiction and reality. In other words, I have not tried to make an argument about Trump’s morality, type of leadership, or scale of threat he presents to the public. I have tried to show how people who believe him to be an immoral threat
to democracy use parallels found in narratives to rationalize his election, and to find reasons for hope. In fact, what my research has shown is that the popular narrative’s frames, sequencing of events, and viewpoint structure are malleable to fit a variety of different contexts, events, and positions.

Many of the memes I found in my research evoked different characters’ viewpoints, as well as different quotes, scenes, and frames from *The Lord of the Rings* to anchor blends between reality and fiction from a variety of different outlooks. Figure 9, 10, and 11 show this wide range. Figure 9 evokes a scene from early in the narrative in which Frodo expresses regret for accepting the task to carry the ring to his mentor, Gandalf. Figure 10 evokes a scene from the second film and book in which the king of Rohan believes his forces have been defeated. Figure 11 evokes the same conversation between Frodo and Sam that was used after the shooting in Orlando. Each meme foregrounds a unique set of narrative frames, viewpoint structure, and temporal anchoring within the narrative’s sequence of events.

![Anonymous Instagram post from Nov. 8, 2016](https://www.instagram.com/p/BMmUKXBkp6/?taken-by=ricknerdvarro) (Accessed on Nov. 9, 2016)
While the majority of the memes created and shared in the twenty-four period after Nov. 8, 2016 used *The Lord of the Rings* narrative to portray Trump and his followers as evil, Figure 12 demonstrates that Trump followers also used the narrative to frame the election in...
reverse terms. In this example, Frodo’s journey and the forces of good are aligned with Trump’s campaign. The accompanying comment and hashtags from the creator reveal that she aligns her sense of accomplishment after Trump’s victory with viewpoint of Frodo after he has destroyed the ring. What’s interesting to note is that the temporal anchoring of the election with the fixed sequence of events within the narrative is not fixed. As Figures 7, 8, 9, 10 & 11 demonstrate, anti-Trump supporters used the narrative to cope with their uncertainty and fear by evoking a position near the beginning of the fictive timeline—framing Trump’s presidency as a difficult journey they will eventually be overcome. Trump supporters positioned the election at the end of the narrative—suggesting the journey has already proven a success.

The goal of this analysis is not to suggest *The Lord of the Rings* is unique in its salience for online users or in its capacity to blend reality with fiction. Any number of other fictive narratives could provide the framework for an individual to make sense of new events. However, because memes are fundamentally cultural artifacts and rely on easily accessible layers of embedded cultural frames for salience (Milner 2016), narratives that are popular and known to an online community are more likely to be chosen for meme production. That is not to suggest
these are the only narratives people think of when faced with a threat, but merely that they will not be as easy to study through online discourse. Figure 13 and 14 demonstrate this dynamic in another very popular and culturally accessible narrative, the *Harry Potter* series, which was used by others online to make sense of Trump’s presidency (These two examples were not created in the 24-hour period after the election). Figure 15, a screenshot from a popular Youtube mashup video, similarly combines the *Game of Thrones* television series with Trump’s presidential campaign.

*Figure 13: Anonymous retweet from Nov. 17, 2016*

*Figure 14: Anonymous tweet from Nov. 13, 2016*
While a discussion of what types of fictive narratives are more likely provide rich and salient frames to blend with real-world trauma and threatening events is beyond the scope of this analysis, I do think Ryan’s analysis (2012) of an experiment comparing people’s neural activity when asked to imagine real and fictional characters (Abraham, Cramon & Schubotz 2008) can help us to make some predictions and suggestions for future research. The study revealed that different aspects of the brain are activated for fictional and real-life characters—the fictional characters were associated with a region of the brain that corresponds to established facts, while the real-life characters activated a region more revisable. Ryan argues this research reveals people may turn to specifically fictive narratives for meaning because “truths about the real world are more problematic than fictional truths” (2013: 472). I would expect this also to mean that people turn to narrative genres that take place in worlds that rely on different logics of causality and different physical forces than our own.

Genres such as science-fiction and fantasy might be used more often for memes because they present a more graspable and explainable set of logics and forces for causality and
behaviour than we expect in our own world. Furthermore, I expect narratives that rely on extreme personifications and manifestations of threats, such as the unnuanced evil of Voldemort or Sauron, make for more salient and quickly-accessible cognitive blends with reality. A comparison between Trump and a historical figure such as Richard Nixon is more difficult because, regardless of your view of him, we can assume the motivations of Nixon were more complex than the wish for sheer domination. This propensity for extremes in memetic blending parallels Mike Godwin’s early conclusions on memetics, which is now commonly referred to as Godwin’s Law (1994). Godwin argues that as any online discussion progresses the probability for a comparison to Nazis or Hitler will increase dramatically because this group and leader are our most culturally accepted and salient historic manifestations of extreme evil. These specific comparisons to the historical past are not unlike the comparisons to fictional evils I’ve analyzed in this work because they can be evoked without any nuance or insight into the historical context of the interwar period this form of fascism developed in. Instead, Nazis and Hitler evoke the same type of extreme evil found more commonly in fiction. Future quantitative research that tracks and compares narrative evocation in different social media platforms could provide more insight into determining commonalities, other than popularity, that link together fictive narratives with the potential to shape cognition.

Lastly, I believe future research on the topic of the cognitive power of narratives should explore how easily accessible online artifacts other than visual memes can metonymically evoke a complex structure of frames, viewpoint, and event sequencing from a narrative to cope with real world trauma and threats. In my research, I found preliminary evidence in online forums and in the comments sections of Youtube clips that people turned to specific songs from The Lord of the Rings soundtrack to help them rationalize Trump’s victory. I believe this suggests that single
modalities can metonymically evoke complex and multimodal frames and viewpoint structure, as well as foreground and suppress particular narrative spaces to project a fictive timeline onto real world events. Future work on this topic that focuses on the influence of specific modalities on cognition may better inform us what makes multimodal online artifacts, such as memes, unique in their structure and impact.
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