

DERAILING DEFAULT
INTERPRETATIONS:
INVESTIGATING THE *MY HOBBY*
WEBCOMICS BY RANDALL
MUNROE

Elizabeth Closs Traugott

In collaboration with Arnold Zwicky

IPra 14, Antwerp

July 26-31 2015

Prelude

- The main content of cartoons and comic strips is visuals, usually (though not always) with speech (McCloud 1993).
- Visual literacy, cognitive processing and how we derive meaning from sequential images have been the main topics of research on the language of comic strips to date (e.g. Cohn et al. 2012, Cohn 2013).

- The topic of this paper is different: non-narrative, stand-alone cartoons, with focus on how metadiscourse can be used to counter default linguistic pragmatic expectations.
- The data are from Randall Munroe's webcomic series MY HOBBY within xkcd (<http://www.xkcd.com>).
- For index of categories of MY HOBBY see Munroe (2015).

Acknowledgements:

- inspiration from Qian (2013),
- great indebtedness to
 - *Arnold Zwicky's Blog, a blog mostly about language* (<http://arnoldzwicky.org>),
 - http://www.explainkcd.com/wiki/index.php/Category:My_Hobby.

Outline

- Definition of metadiscourse:
 - textual
 - interpersonal
- Textual types in cartoons, comic strips, and webcomics
- Metadiscourse in Munroe's MY HOBBY
- Two case studies
- Conclusion

Metadiscourse

“Metadiscourse”: comments on accompanying text.

- Of two types (Hyland 2005, Cuenca 2015):
 - **Textual**: explicit guidance to interpretation (cognitive orientation; “metatext”).
 - **Interpersonal**: personal commentary and explicit interaction with reader (social orientation).

Webcomics provide a rich medium for exploiting metadiscourse, because of mouse-over capability as well as visuals.

Types of metatext in comics

- Zwicky 2014a analyzes metatext in cartoons (e.g. *Rhymes with Orange*), comic strips (e.g. *Zippy*), webcomics (e.g. *xkcd*). Identifies at least six types, sometimes in combination:
 - inserts
 - captions
 - titles
 - footnotes
 - (on the internet):
 - mouseovers
 - accompanying text

Metadiscourse in Randall Munroe's MY HOBBY

Questions:

- How does metadiscourse contribute to online pragmatic interpretation of texts in the webcomic series MY HOBBY by Randall Munroe?
- In particular how are potential default readings “derailed” (Munroe’s term)?

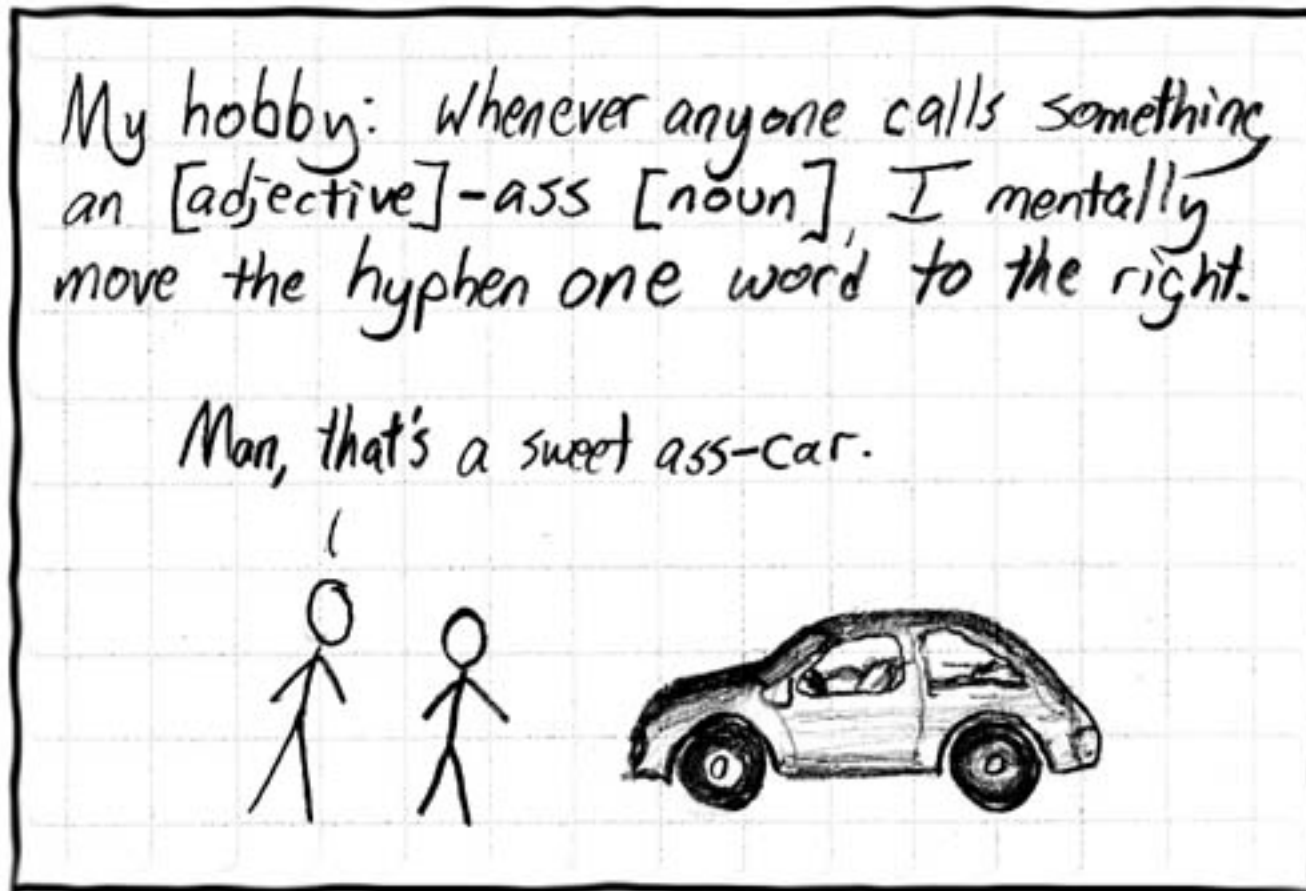
Derailing

- “Derailing” may be defined in pragmatic terms as flouting with the result of cancelling/calling into question:
 - norms of language use (cognitive and social),
 - meanings that are:
 - (i) already part of the common ground but
 - (ii) were not overtly spelled out in the (immediately) preceding context (“presuppositions” in Danckaert 2015).

- In MY HOBBY, Munroe derails conventions and normed expectations in a wide range of situations, from how one might explain why the sky is blue to a child to 9/11 conspiracy theories.
- One of the characters in MY HOBBY is Cue-ball: a stick-figure with nothing on his head, who usually personifies Munroe and revels in being uncooperative as an individual regarding linguistic prefabs and social norms.
- Metatext: used within cartoon, mouse-overs.
- Interpersonal: sometimes used in mouse-overs.

- Among linguistic topics: punctuation, phonology, mispronunciation and prescriptive reaction, curse levels.
- An example—[xkcd #37, Oct. 28th 2005, Hyphen.](#)
<http://xkcd.com/37/>
- *Sweet-ass* means ‘very cool’.
- But *ass-car* in #37 implies ‘stupid car’; a taboo usage.

Hyphen



Title text/Mouse-over: I do this constantly

- Metatextual:
 - describes punctuation shift
 - invites reader to infer that the addressee has said (or might have thought)
That's a sweet-ass car
 - positive evaluation of car shifted to negative
- Interpersonal:

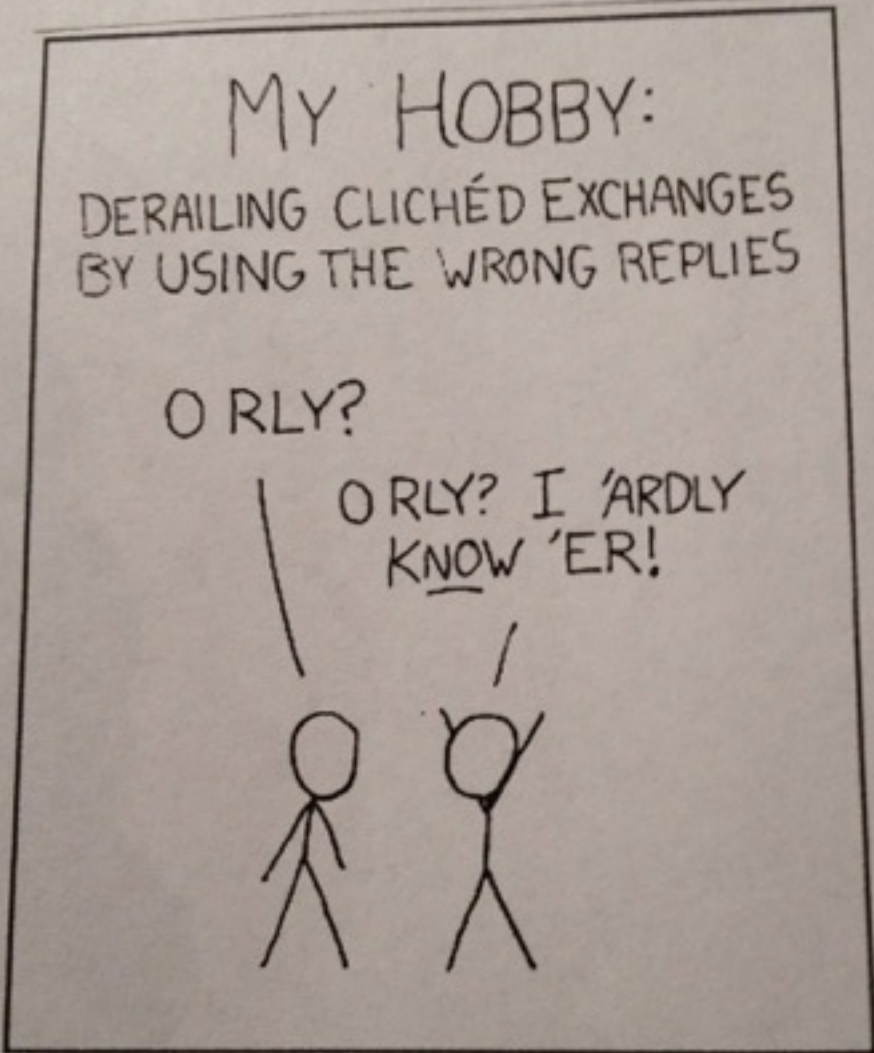
The mouse-over *I do this constantly*, flouts the conventions 'avoid being repetitive' (of *whenever*), 'avoid rude words'.

- Munroe assumes there is a social space where conventions of various types are formed, transmitted, and sometimes prescribed.
- Individuals like himself often deliberately flout these conventions to unsettle communication. This is an issue of social (collective) vs. individual meaning (“minds-in-communities vs. “individual minds”, e.g. Harder 2015).

Case study 1

xkcd #259, May 9th 2007, Clichéd Exchanges

[http://www.explainxkcd.com/wiki/index.php/259: Clichéd Exchanges](http://www.explainxkcd.com/wiki/index.php/259:_Clichéd_Exchanges)



Title text: It's like they say, you gotta fight fire with clichés.

- The metatext at the top:
**DERAILING CLICHÉD EXCHANGES BY USING
WRONG REPLIES**
directs the reader how to understand the
represented interaction.

- **O RLY** (SMS for 'Oh really?') is an Internet meme typically used to express sarcastic agreement with/feigned surprise at a statement (metatext cues the reader to take it as a cliché).
- The typical response to O RLY is usually (explainkcd):
 - YA RLY ("Yeah really")
 - NO WAI ("No way!")
 - SRSLY? ("Seriously?").

Derailment #1 in text: Cueball's response avoids this typical exchange. Instead he replies by repeating **O RLY?** (to be understood as a cliché).

- Derailment #2 in text. Cueball then adds *I HARDLY KNOW 'ER*, an inappropriate/ "wrong" reply (also to be understood as a cliché).
- The new cliché is unexpectedly complex (given the exchange O RLY? - O RLY?)
- *I HARDLY KNOW 'ER* is a double entendre—a phrase with two intended meanings: one innocent, the other lewd.
- It is a clichéd response to a statement containing a word ending with *-er*, that turns the original into a sexual reference ('er "her'), e.g.:
 1. [tee-shirt logo] *Poker? I don't even know her.*
<http://www.cafepress.com/digyourshirt/4072840>



Derailment #3, the mouse-over

It's like they say, you gotta fight fire with clichés

- takes the real cliché *fight fire with fire* ('use the same tactics as one's opponent/meet aggression with aggression'),
- decomposes and blends it with the more literal *fight clichés with clichés*.

This mouseover comments and exemplifies (metatextual). It:

- distances Munroe (*It's like they say*)
- suggests use of clichés can be a mild kind of flaming (interpersonal speech-acting).

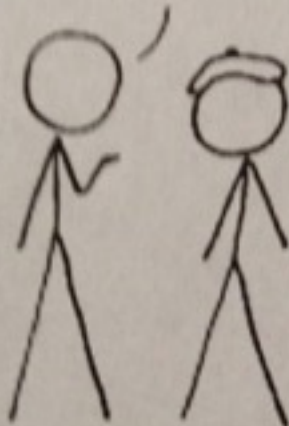
Case study 2

xkcd #559, March 23rd 2009, No Pun Intended

[http://www.explainxkcd.com/wiki/index.php/559: No Pun Intended](http://www.explainxkcd.com/wiki/index.php/559:_No_Pun_Intended)

MY HOBBY:
APPENDING "NO PUN INTENDED"
TO LINES WITH NO PUN IN THEM.

I THINK HE'S INTERNALIZED
HIS GIRLFRIEND'S ATTITUDES—
NO PUN INTENDED—AND SO...



THREE HOURS LATER:
"INTERNALIZED"?
LIED? ANALYZED?
OR IS IT "ATTITUDES"?
DAMMIT.



- The metatext at the top

APPENDING “NO PUN INTENDED” TO LINES WITH NO PUN IN THEM

tells the reader to read the cartoon as a special exchange-type.

- The metatext in the side-panel

THREE HOURS LATER

appears to do narrative sequencing work.

- The mouse-over interpersonal metadiscourse

Like spelling 'dammit' correctly -- with two m's -- it's a troll that works best on the most literate.

evaluates and calls on a specific type of reader.

- The content of this webcomic is a little-studied conversational exchange-type called “messing with someone’s mind” in American street language.
- It is a form of especially aggressive teasing that involves saying something that is thought-provoking but not evidently appropriate to the situation at hand — often communicated with a formulaic expression like ‘no pun intended’ or ‘pardon my French’ (Zwicky 2014b).
- **APPENDING “NO PUN INTENDED” TO LINES WITH NO PUN IN THEM** frames the content as a “messing-with X’s mind” exchange.
- Without the subtitle, readers might, like Beret Guy, fail to recognize that Cueball is being uncooperative.

- **Derailment #1.** The treatment of Beret Guy's response as an insert, rather than as a separate panel, undercuts the potential narrative implied by **THREE HOURS LATER.**
- It focuses attention on the length of time that Cueball's cliché has occupied Beret Guy's attention (stasis rather than narrative action).
- Beret Guy has been tricked into spending hours fretting to make sense of the original.

- Derailment #2. “INTERNALIZED”? LIED? ANALYZED? OR IS IT “ATTITUDES”? DAMMIT” suggests Beret Guy has lost track of Cueball’s statement. Conversational coherence has been derailed for Beret Guy by adversarial ludic interaction.
- Derailment #3. The mouse-over
Like spelling 'dammit' correctly -- with two m's – it's a troll that works best on the most literate, like many of Munroe’s discursive metatextual comments, is mildly insulting – it seems to presuppose the reader won’t “get it” (interpersonal).

CONCLUSION

- To fully appreciate the xkdc webcomics, readers must understand:
 - the multiple conventions, both
 - **conversational**: what A says to B and what B is represented in the comic as interpreting,

- **metadiscursive:**

- metatextual, guiding the reader's interpretation, not necessarily that of a character in MY HOBBY (cognitive)
- interpersonal, involving the reader (social)
- how conventions of comics are used within the comic (interpretation is usually left to the reader),
- the importance of ludic aspects of language use.

Webcomics are a gold-mine for interactional pragmatics, and for studying the relation of individual to social meanings and norms.

THANK YOU

References

- Cohn, Neil. 2013. *The Visual Language of Comics. Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Cohn, Neil, Martin Paczynski, Ray Jackendoff, Phil J. Holcomb, Gina R. Kuperberg. 2012. (Pea)nuts and bolts of visual narrative: Structure and meaning in sequential image comprehension. *Cognitive Psychology* 65: 1-38.
- Cuenca, Maria Josep. 2015. Lexical connectives as grounding devices in political discourse. Paper presented in workshop on Anchoring utterances in co(n)text, argumentation, common ground, organized by Kerstin Fischer and Maria Alm, IPra14, Antwerp, Belgium, July 27th.
- Danckaert, Lieven. 2015. Spelling out the obvious. Latin *quidem* and the expression of presuppositional polarity. *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 16: 109-141.
- Hyland, Ken. 2005. *Metadiscourse*. London: Continuum.

McCloud, Scott. 1993. *Understanding Comics. The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperCollins.

Munroe, Randall. 2015. Category: My Hobby, Jan 30. http://www.explainxkcd.com/wiki/index.php/Category:My_Hobby.

Qian, Kyle. 2013. My Hobby: Violating Gricean Maxims. Term paper, Freshman Seminar on the Language of Comics led by Elizabeth Traugott and Arnold Zwicky, Stanford University, March.

Zwicky, Arnold. 2014a. Metatext in the comics. Paper presented at SemFest 15, Stanford University, March 14th.

<http://arnoldzwicky.org/2014/02/12/metatext-in-the-comics/>.

Zwicky, Arnold. 2014b. Messing with my mind. Arnold Zwicky's blog, February 11th. <http://arnoldzwicky.org/2014/02/11/messing-with-my-mind/>.