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Analyzing the semiotic nature of GIFs: visual nominalization and visual telicity

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Abstract: GIFs, short audio-free loops of moving sequences, are active members of social semiotic resources in the era of Internet 2.0 that could generate humor, mediate power and signal identity. This paper proposes the perspective of *visual nominalization* and *visual telicity* as GIF properties that, in the environment of social media technologies, become capable of expressing polyphonic evaluation, transcontextualized polysemy, and dual deixis. Visual nominalization expresses the freeing of movement from integration into a time-dependent narrative and the abstraction resulting in deemphasized participants and emphasized processes. These traits are activated and realized by visual telicity, which is looping movement that can be conceptualized as an atelic visual container which packages and expresses both telic and atelic processes. This paper argues that visual nominalization and visual telicity are what establishes GIFs' semiotic differences from still images and film videos, and facilitates their integration with written language in online and computer-mediated discourse.

Keywords: GIF; multimodality; polyphony; transcontextualization; visual nominalization; visual telicity

1 Introduction

Technologies can greatly alter a sign system – affecting the manner it is created or deployed, redefining its meaning potential, and opening the way to its interaction with other sign systems and modalities. Just as the traditional printed image and text found such transformation with digitalization, so the modes and media types of the digital age, such as the GIF, also transform alongside social media technologies.

GIFs are short audio-free loops of moving sequences, whose name derives from Graphic Interchange Format (with file type noted as .gif), an open data image format developed in 1987 (cf. Eppink 2014). Despite their relatively long existence,

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GIFs have achieved new significance and scholarship attention only in recent years, as social media technologies have drastically affected the dissemination, organization, and availability of GIFs, unleashing their semiotic potential and fostering an online culture around their usage. GIFs feature in digital diplomacy and online corporate marketing campaigns just as in private missives, group chats, and forums, demanding of their users and viewers a visual but also multimodal literacy. Social media technology design may have also influenced how we conceptualize these special moving images, as “GIF keyboards” inclusion within social media platforms and integration into smartphone systems mean that GIFs can be retrieved and deployed by digital communicators with the ease and regularity of a sign system. Such keyboards possibly draw a line of distinction from the traditional still image, whose repositories have not experienced a similar degree of integration. Thus, the GIF referred to in this paper is not constrained to the file type in the technical sense; it is defined by the set of unique traits that affect its use in virtual multimodal discourse. Short audio-free loops of moving sequences currently may exist in other newer formats such as HTML5 video, but are still understood and used by the public in the same way as “bona fide” GIFs.

Indeed, the particular social semiotic value of GIFs, as something beyond a subcategory of image, can be illustrated by the colorful monikers given to them in popular culture: “visual popcorn” (Rugnetta 2012), – signaling their clear belonging to the visual mode, acknowledging their brevity, and also perhaps their vernacular status in culture consumption; and “visual vocabulary” (Finley 2017) – recognizing that they are discrete meaningful units, to some extent shared by a group, and subject to organization – something language-like. GIFs can give rise to whimsical musings such as, “If a picture is worth a thousand words, is a GIF worth a billion?” This is not only a nod to their multiple frames, but also to their associations with expressing affect and having intertextual meaning. Researchers also have diverse ways of categorizing the GIF: ranging from the technical sense of a kind of visual media (Jiang et al. 2018), to a “cultural text and device” (Miltner and Highfield 2017, p. 2), to “multimodal sign system” (Gürsimsek 2016, p. 330), to something as broad as an “emerging genre” of multimodal communication (Adami and Jewitt 2016, p. 265).

However, the formal scholarship on GIFs that have surged in recent years is still fragmentary. Historical overviews (such as Eppink 2014) and cultural evaluations (such as Miltner and Highfield 2017; Wagener 2021) have begun to map out the various facets of GIFs’ significance. Tying in with larger traditions in media studies on user-generated digital content, empirical studies on GIF have included the qualitative examinations of thoughts of GIF creators (Gürsimsek 2016) or GIF users (Jiang et al. 2018; Tolins and Samermit 2016), and the quantitative examinations of GIF popularity and engagement on platforms compared with other media and other image format types (such as Bakhshi et al. 2016, for GIF posts on Tumblr).

Research on GIFs would benefit from works that approach them from a social semiotic perspective that encompasses the dimensions of its semiotic practice. Although Gürsimsek uses a social semiotic perspective, it is only in terms of GIFs as visual vernacular design, when the majority of GIF use is with users who are not themselves the creators of the GIFs. Furthermore, much can be said about the relations of GIF in repositories and how repositories connect GIFs as design products and GIFs in use as semiotic resources.

There is much to be explored about GIF's distinction from other previously studied multimodal genres or excerpts from genres (e.g., magazine and billboard advertisements, political cartoons, illustrated manuals and textbooks) on a theoretically significant level. While other genres typically remain at the level of being an independent multimodal discourse, the GIF, as the norm of its "genre", has a second level of deployment – it is twofold multimodal: itself a potentially multimodal entity, its use, in turn, creating larger specialized multimodal discourses. Each level of its tiered nature has additional areas that merit investigation.

Social media technologies (the platforms, repository spaces, and keyboard apps) unleash the GIF's semiotic potential, enabling the derivative GIF to move in textual trajectories across virtual space and social space. I argue that GIF has particular properties that give certain affordances, which become activated differently at different stages of the trajectory, leading to interesting ways of mediating power and signaling identity. The trajectory is a united look that reconciles the account of GIFs as visual design (inter-GIF multimodal relations and organization) with GIF as embodied enactment (beyond-GIF multimodal discourse). "Texts can be dynamically conceived as [...] emergent out of social practice" (Maybin 2017, p. 419), and are "resemiotized and often become increasingly abstracted as they move along trajectories across time and space" (p 416). The perspective of the trajectory is very suitable for the GIF as it is inherently concerned about context, decontextualization, and recontextualization.

The author will treat GIFs in general as a semiotic mode, with the recognition that individual GIFs can also be understood as semiotic artefacts. The notion of semiotic mode follows the definitions of Jewitt (2014), Jewitt et al. (2016), and Adami (2016), that they are semiotic resources for making meaning in a culture, and includes writing, speech, gesture, gaze, posture, image, sound, and color, to name a few. The notion of semiotic artefact follows Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) (in Zhao et al. 2014) as a resource with material form, itself a composition of selections of different modes, which is subsequently implemented alongside other resources for meaning-making. The social semiotic approach takes Halliday's (1978) Systemic Functional Theory, originally applied to language, and extends it to other modes (O'Halloran and Lim 2014; O'Halloran et al. 2016), so that all semiotic resources are viewed as possessing systems organizing the ideational,

interpersonal, and textual metafunctions (or analogs thereof). Such functions may be adapted differently for different modalities: Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) have recasted the three as representational, interactive, and compositional in their examination of the image; Lemke (2002, 2009) has recasted the three as presentational, orientational, and organizational in the case of the multimedia website.

This paper will start with the properties of the GIF: visual nominalization and visual telicity, and explore the processes and mechanisms of meaning change in polyphony integration, transcontextualization, and dual deixis through examples.

2 GIF properties: visual nominalization and visual telicity

To characterize the trait of the GIF affords its versatility as a semiotic resource, this paper advances the terms *visual nominalization* and *visual telicity*. Nominalization and telicity are both terms originating from descriptions of language; while semiotic resources are often understood from their own internal structures, for the specific case of the GIF, a cross-application from language has some merits, because GIF use is often integrated alongside written language in digital communication, sometimes arguably substituting segments of written language.

Nominalization, put plainly using traditional syntactic categories, is the expression of verbs and adjectives as nouns. It is “a resource for extending the lexical resources of a language” (Martin 2008, p. 803). *Visual nominalization*, used here, is metaphorical. First, it refers to depiction of action in static-like manner – freed from a temporal sequence, but still viewable as literal motion. This can be understood in the sense of situating the characteristics of the GIF in relation to other visual media. In terms of transitivity, the still image is very suited for depicting participants; while film, in comparison, can capture processes in a way a still image may only suggest at best. GIFs can clip out an action of a film, and through its looping, present the action as a particular hybrid of stasis and unfolding, packaging action into stillness, nominalizing a process. This visual nominalization extends the “lexical” resources for communication, by unmooring movement from an obligatory integration into a time-dependent visual narrative.

Second, visual nominalization expresses the abstraction that visual content can undergo when it is in the GIF form. Just as nominalization in language achieves a certain level of abstraction through deemphasizing or obscuring the participants of the process (Compare *The volunteers renovated the library* with *The renovation of the library*...), so the visual nominalization of GIFs allows for the possibility of deemphasizing visually depicted participants (Compare *The*

Great Gatsby, the film – whose narrative includes a scene where Nick Carraway looks for Gatsby at a party, and finally spots Gatsby raising a glass – with the GIF of the toast moment isolated and on repeat). As in language, this does not mean the participant is entirely eliminated or does not contribute to meaning; rather, the possibility is opened that the recognition of the process may take precedent over the recognition of the participant. The foregrounding of the process and the de-emphasis of participants through visual nominalization enable the GIF to be suitable for what Tolins and Samermit (2016) term “embodied reenactment or demonstration” (p. 76), when the GIF is deployed in multimodal discourses.

The dual static-and-dynamic nature and the abstraction that characterize visual nominalization are activated and realized by *visual telicity*. Telicity in language refers to an aspectual trait of predicates: whether they have a temporal culmination (i.e., telic) or no endpoint (i.e., atelic) (Dahl 1981). It is stated earlier that GIFs are characterized by looping, but this is from a technical perspective; metaphorically adapting the term of telicity has the merit of enabling focus on a plane of meaning rather than a physical plane. We can understand GIFs as an atelic visual container, into which telic processes can be packaged, and in which atelic processes can be preserved (see Figure 1). The original telicity of the action, though contained, is not lost from recognition.

What an atelic visual container enables is the cyclic processing of GIF content as visual nominalization: first, a recognition of the process, the participant(s), and the circumstance; next, an attuning to the process in an abstract manner; then, a consideration of the process in relation to the discourse setting the GIF may appear in.

The abstraction and cyclic processing facilitated by the GIF’s visual telicity may sometimes confer advantages to GIF use in discourse compared to the use of written language or other semiotic modes. For instance, a GIF may assume the role

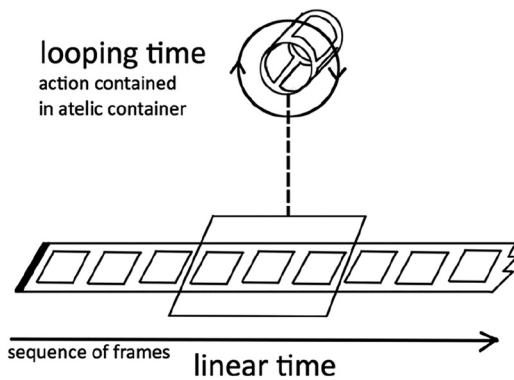


Figure 1: Representation of a GIF in contrast to a source film.

of a succinct semiotic label for a cognitive category of events or circumstances that is very specific in some respects but abstracted in others. As one entity, it may register as a more economical way of representing such a category than describing its “essence” with language. Also, GIFs gain the advantage of ad infinitum repetition as a rhetorical device. As Miltner and Highfield (2017) observe, repetition can have an effect of accentuation and emphasis, becoming a magnifying glass that through exaggeration generates humor.

No rule limits the semiotic content contained by a hypothetical GIF, apart from the technical constraints on length and exclusion of sound, but visual nominalization may influence the eligibility and frequency of a GIF’s integration into multimodal discourse and thus, the “felicity” of a GIF. Consequently, GIFs that may see higher circulation are likely to contain a short sequence of an event that is independently complete – a nonverbal process in its entirety, or a representative excerpt of the accompanying gestures and expressions to a spoken proposition depicted.

The still image also has potential for abstraction, but not in the specificity and degree of visual nominalization; abstraction in the still image is most directly realized through graphic design diagrams and simplifications. It can represent atelic processes, but such is inferred, rather than the telicity of actions being a forefront characteristic. Thus, the visual nominalization and visual telicity of the GIF imbue it with versatility and a balance of specificity with generality.

The prototypical GIF presented here is cast as a derivative of a longer sequence of previous existing film. Another category of GIF does exist: those that are constructed, strung from still images, a category which includes cinematographs, which are still photographic images enhanced with moving details, and animated art designs whose intended final product format is the GIF format. While this paper primarily focuses on the derivative GIF, it is worth noting that the constructed GIF still exemplifies meaningful visual telicity: they may exhibit the telicity of the process of emphasis, a nominalization highlighting adjectival properties.

3 The effects of visual nominalization and visual telicity in GIF use

The process of visual nominalization and the trait of visual telicity allow GIFs to have particular characteristics upon their use in discourse.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006):

There are two types of participant involved in every semiotic act, *interactive participants* and *represented participants*. The former are the participants in the act of communication – the participants who speak and listen or write and read, make images or view them, whereas the latter are the participants who constitute the subject matter of the communication; that is, the people, places and things (including abstract ‘things’) represented in and by the speech or writing or image. (p. 48)

With these participants, Kress and van Leeuwen also identify three kinds of interactions: between represented participants, between represented and interactive participants, and between interactive participants.

In GIFs, visual nominalization and visual telicity render these interactions noteworthy in particular areas, such as in the interplay of polyphony, in effects of trancontextualization, and in the facilitation of dual deixis. These can be summarized by Figure 2.

3.1 Multimodal polyphony and interaction

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) note that “[w]hen there is a disjunction between the context of production and the context of reception, the producer is not physically present, and the viewer is alone with the image and cannot reciprocate – an illuminating exception is the case of the ‘defacement’ of billboard advertisements, when graffiti artists ‘respond’ to the initial ‘turn’ or statement of the image” (pp. 114–115).

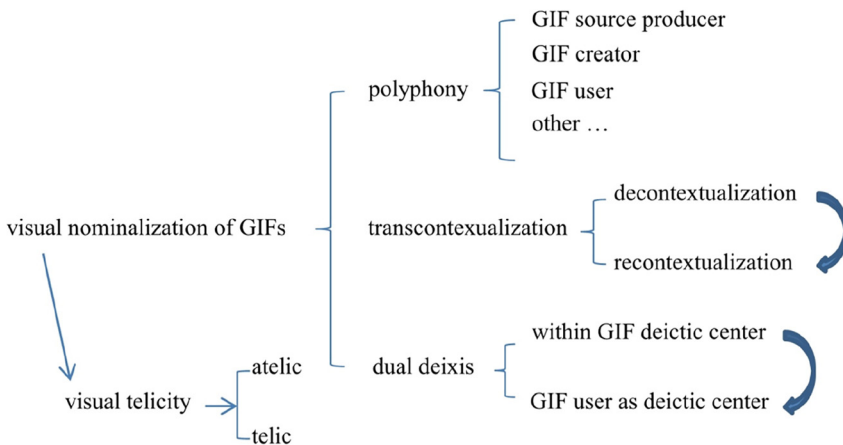


Figure 2: Relationships between visual nominalization, visual telicity, polyphony, trancontextualization and dual deixis.

In the realm of GIFs, such situations are not “exceptions” but are in fact, pervasive. GIFs are responses to the initial turn of the source film or video. It is a whole semiotic mode whose existence necessitates reciprocation to some degree. Compared to the still image and the film, the GIF is in a position of having more possible complex relations among interactive participants and between interactive and represented participants. In the act of creating the GIF, the GIF creator responds to and quotes the source. Many of film’s visual resources percolate to the GIF form: the gaze, the type of shot, the camera angle, the composition, the sequence of shots, and the gesture of the represented participants all generate interactive meaning. The GIF may contain an additional level of meaning from the content added by the GIF creator. This can include, and is not limited to, alterations to sequence and speed; cropping and resizing; changes in focus through partial freezing or zooming; alterations in color and saturation; superimposition of additional images or splicing from multiple sources of media; and superimposition of text.

Gürsimsek (2016) identifies GIF as a form of vernacular expression, as opposed to institutional or official expression, and GIF creators as “transmedia audience members who do extreme close-reading of narratives, performances, and settings in order to isolate specific moments that are GIF material” (p. 347). The extreme close reading, in selection, is passing judgment on what is shareable, what is valuable beyond its context, what can serve as a possible sign, and what can undergo resignifying.

The act of curating is itself significant. At the extreme, the selection of which part of the source film to extract can itself create a change to a “default” meaning interpretation that may differ from the original contextual meaning. Even when such transformations are less obvious, curating signals motivation.

The layers of this semiotic artifact can be understood through the lens of Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of “double-voiced discourse” which originally referred to literature, but seems applicable here as well: “It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author” (p. 324). The represented participants, the visible characters in the film source, refract the intention of the director or the editor of the original film; these voices undergo additional refraction upon GIF creation. “Double-voice discourse” can serve as a model for understanding the multi-voiced layers of multimodal communication: modifications and additions by the GIF creator may serve to amplify, challenge, or repurpose the meanings of the film source. The modifications and additions by the GIF creator can serve as signposts for contextualization, or specification of the otherwise polysemous visual sign, providing a frame for interpretation, when the GIF gains a third level of voice upon deployment. Indeed, as a vast quantity of GIFs

on the Internet remain anonymous creations, the GIF creator's voice can also be thought of as a disembodied voice for which the user may try on, upon selecting and using the GIF. Such selection can hinge upon identifying and aligning with the GIF creator's judgment of curating and commentary.

Additions by the GIF creator typically occupy the same "canvas" or visual space as the source, such that even when differing meanings can be discerned, the holistic GIF presents a complete message. These changes affect the overall visual nominalization meaning and the degree of how participants are backgrounded or kept salient, which then shapes or limits how a GIF may be used in a bigger multimodal discourse. Polyphonous artefacts hold potential for subversiveness, playfulness, and punning, such that, the same time span from the same source film content can result in, from the modifications by different GIF creators, very different end products in the way they express meaning.

When the structure of the processes as well as the identity of the actors and participants in the original is preserved, and additional content serves to reinforce the meaning, emphasize or draw attention to part of the meaning, the interaction can be called refinement. This manifests in image-image interaction as pictorial elaboration through ways such as the partial freezing of the areas in the frame deemed unimportant; zooming in; and pictorial annotations such as circles and arrows drawing the focus on a part of the image. In the image-text interaction, refinement can occur as semiotic repair, where words are used as accurate subtitles to replace the lost audio, or as resemiotization, where captioned words describe the action in the GIF.

When new identities or roles are encouraged for some or all of the main participants, multimodal metaphors, analogies, and personification can be created. This interaction can be called semantic reframing. Semantic reframing takes inspiration from Fillmore's semantic frames (cf. Fillmore 1982). The process is visually unchanged, but conceptually changed or reevaluated, due to the changes in participant identity.

Semantic reframing manifests in the image-image modality interaction as substitutional superimposition, where the GIF creator places an image over the represented participant; and in image-text interaction as role labeling, where words are superimposed on or are in close proximity to the represented participant. A trait of reframing is that the added image or text is typically dynamic to ensure a consistent relative location with respect to the original represented participant. Pictorially, the original represented participant's head is commonly the location covered up, as the face is associated with identity. If the original represented participant is an inanimate object, the central area of the object or the area undergoing action may be selected.

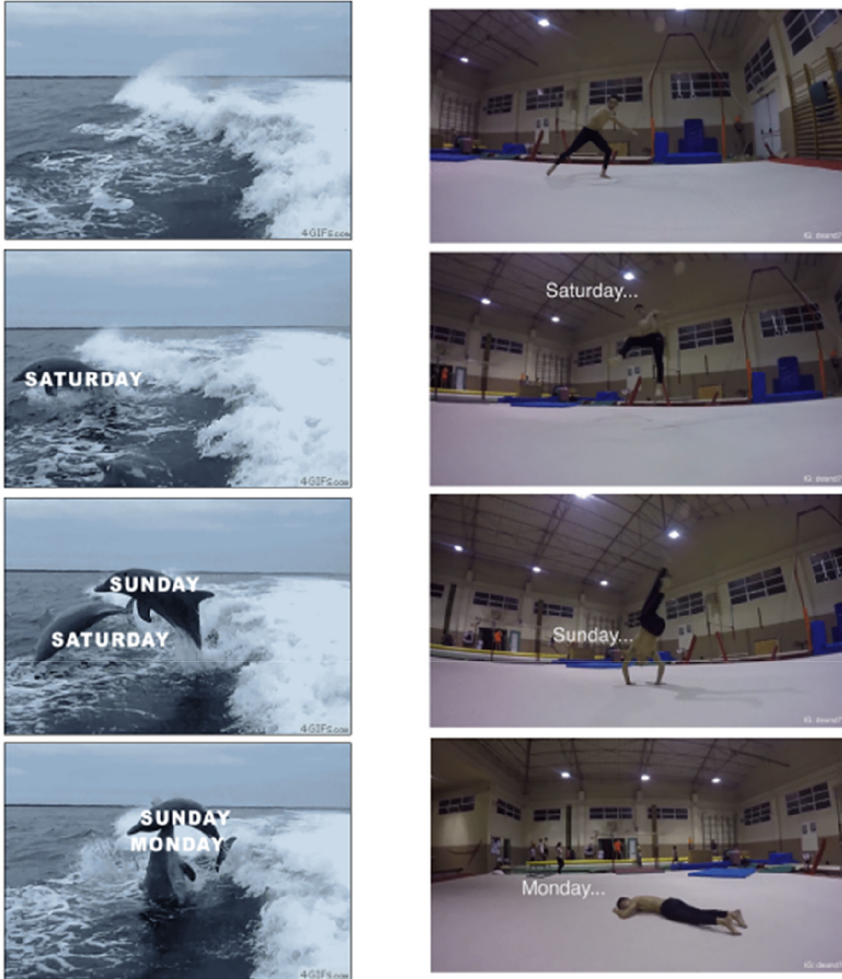


Figure 3: Voice interactions creating metaphor within GIFs. GIF source (left): <https://giphy.com/gifs/monday-fail-weekend-3KVTdGhuQSQM>. GIF source (right): <https://giphy.com/gifs/weekends-AplalsTFQjOU>.

Figure 3 is an instance of role labeling, where the words supplied by the GIF creator interact with the source footage to create a verbo-pictorial metaphor. It shows the sequence of three dolphins leaping out of the ocean one after the other, with Saturday, Sunday, and Monday in bold capitalized white text directly superimposed on the bodies of the dolphins, moving along with them and disappearing when the dolphins vanish out of view in the water. As the “SUNDAY”

dolphin is mid-leap, the “MONDAY” dolphin emerges right below it, crashing into it and butting it off-course. We can interpret the metaphor as: *days of the week are dolphins*. Inanimate abstractions of days are given corporeal form. The sequential leaps become a visualization of the passing of time, and the ill-timed leap of the “MONDAY” dolphin colliding with “SUNDAY” expresses the disruption of the weekend by the new weekday.

Such labeling can result in metaphors with richness and subtlety. Consider a similar GIF that shows through interaction a metaphor for days of the week. The sequence is of a young man doing various gymnastic flips, while white letters hover around him: for the duration of one flip, the word is “Saturday...” the next flip is marked “Sunday...” and the last moment, a direct drop onto the floor, is labeled “Monday...” The words change location to be close to the young man, which serves to bring him into focus, counterbalancing the impersonal social distance brought by the long shot of the sequence. That the words are always hovering close to his head, like in a thought bubble’s position, rather than superimposed on a central location of his body, suggests that the man is not the one transformed, but that the segments of his experiences are transformed. The metaphor appears to be: *the experiencing of the days is the performance of the gymnastic sequence*. What is labeled is invisible; it is a segment of action. The ellipsis in the text, indicating incompleteness, connects to the ongoing sequence of each gymnastic maneuver, mapping the success of the day to the success of the movements, in terms of the height achieved and the smoothness of the performance.

Both metaphors express a negative view about Mondays following the weekend, but in the dolphin GIF, we see subjective perception as objective observable phenomena, and in the gymnastics GIF, we see mental perception as actual bodily experience. Each GIF exploits the traits of their respective source materials to add different nuances and complexity, for example, in their treatment of agency and causality. In the dolphin GIF, wildlife in their natural habitat act without human interference; there is an absence of the experience of days represented in the frame, and there is just the perspective of the passive GIF viewer, which metaphorically suggests a lack of agency: flawed Mondays are a phenomenon dictated by the forces of nature and are not in human control. The ill-timed collision by the Monday dolphin is not the fault of the preceding dolphins but simply due to its own caprice. In the gymnastics GIF, the depicted man is taken to be the experience of days, and expends effort to launch himself into the routine, thus allowing the metaphor to retain a sense of agency: the flawed Monday is of man’s own making. Flips deplete his energy, and each flip builds momentum, which challenges his balance and control. The metaphor retains

causal connections, showing that the failure of Monday is to an extent the result of a cumulative effect of the previous days.

The visual nominalization and visual telicity of the GIF facilitate a play of the visible and invisible, packaged and compressed into the brevity of the GIF that may otherwise take many words to fully describe. The surprise of Monday upon the first viewing evens out to predictability, and when the incidental becomes the routine, the humor in unexpectedness ripens to humor in obstinacy. The Monday dolphin's mistimed leap, originally appearing accidental, may start to seem scheduled and premeditated. The gymnast is forever with an imperfect last flip, as if such a situation is always inevitable.

The interaction of voices enhances our perception of the metaphor as opportunistically clever. The viewer recognizes the metaphor created as an opportunistic commentary. The discrepancy between the two voices is key for enhancing humor. No matter whether the source voice is a casual video or a cinematic production, it is answered by a voice that is consciously public, anonymous, and vernacular, and transformed into something malleable for other kinds of texts. When such connections are made, specificity and abstraction collide.

Arguably, the nature of the process can most visibly be disrupted through means like extreme speed adjustment and frame order reversal. Such drastic disruption can be spotted as unnatural, and the interaction of voices can generate two concurrent meanings: the meanings of the adjustment, and the meaning of the original. For example, a sequence depicting an individual entering a room can be reversed and transformed into a sped-up curious retreat. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) identify three kinds of circumstances in images: location, means and accompaniment (p. 77). Video, through their sequential frames, can express some more kinds, such as purpose and cause. GIFs can alter circumstances, such as splicing source material with additional content to imply new causality relations. Misrepair of audio in purposefully incorrect subtitles and opportunistic mis-resemiotization of the action may successfully obscure or contradict the process, although not entirely change it. We recognize that the source has been "tampered" with. These interactions of voices can create irony, satire, and memes.

Memes are widely circulated social artifacts in the form of images, videos, and discourses. Some GIFs become memes, while some GIFs are created in the model of an existing meme, being a variation of a meme. GIFs belonging to the same meme undergo similarities of modification. The meme, "Deal With It", often involves these three words captioned, along with the participant putting on sunglasses, or sunglasses descending to rest on the participant's face. Footage of people putting on sunglasses in typical circumstances unrelated to the meme can become subject to this meme transformation. This owl GIF (see Figure 4) is an instance where the meme message created by the GIF creator disrupts the original source, which is

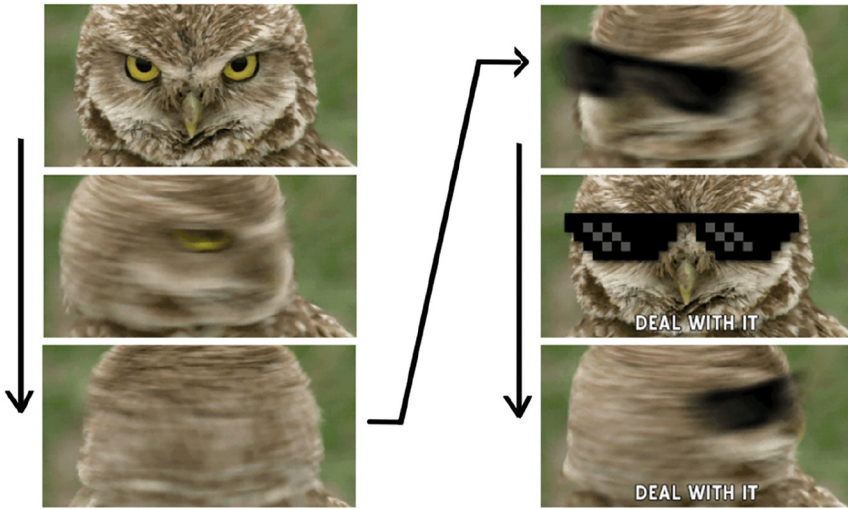


Figure 4: Meme GIF. GIF source: <https://giphy.com/gifs/cat-love-u6z0UkJQnnWzC>.

from a documentary film. The close shot of the documentary spotlights the marvel of the owl's head rotation, but the GIF creator seizes the fluid motion for its atelic presentation potential. The editing of the glasses to appear on alternate rotations, with no hands and no clear indication of how the glasses ended up upon the owl's face as its face is rotated away from the viewer, is a visual equivalence to the sleight-of-hand of glasses descending from above. The source footage becomes secondary and subservient to the meme in the interpretation of meaning. When the meme is a constant, details of the participant that may be backgrounded then have a possibility to be considered more relevant. When multiple variations of a meme GIF exist, the distinguishing details among them gain significance. There is humor in wrestling the content and subjects of copyright into the frame of the uncopyrighted meme culture, in the reduction of public figures and fictional characters to shorthand for subtleties to be added to the same meme message.

The voice of the original artefact has undergone changes through the GIF creator's additions. Going back to Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) example of a graffiti artist defacing a billboard, where it is an individual adding onto a more public or authoritative content sanctioned and created by teams, the polyphony of a GIF can be more dexterous. It can either serve in a similarly graffiti-like manner, a renegade anonymous "defacement" of a content of a formal, public content. It can also serve to elevate informal, personal recordings to become abstract, not just a documentary of some moments but potentially new signs for public circulation. The opportunistic nature of the viewer reciprocation to the producer appeals to the

secondary viewer, the end user who ultimately selects the GIF to become a part of a bigger multimodal discourse.

In theory, there can be instances where there may be ambiguity as to whether some image or text element has been added or is part of the original. What is relevant here is what the culture of polyphony leads the end user of the GIF to believe in. Not everyone is a graffiti artist. However, everyone can experience vicarious exhilaration of a graffiti artist, a visual responding to the turn of various public and private images and videos, by tacitly aligning with the voice of the GIF creator upon selecting the GIF for use. Because the GIF is used not merely to exhibit its literal meaning, but can itself have communicative functions in use, so the voices of the GIF become transformed and embedded in the final voice of the user.

3.2 Transcontextualization

Visual nominalization and visual telicity mediate how context contributes to meaning in a GIF. Context is the situational and cultural background knowledge relevant to happenings and discourses, and it is dynamic, consisting of potential meanings derived from shared subject matters, cultural conventions, and participants' experiences. In the case of the GIF, some of the relevant context may include its placement in relation to the whole sequence or structure of its source video or film; the source video or film's genre; and status of the source video or film in culture. The meanings of the GIF are richly dependent on its cumulative layers and on the ways users highlight and access parts of its layers, and context is never fully removed, but is in fact a resource that transforms. The GIF can be said to undergo transcontextualization, a blending of contexts such that the old original context becomes a reference point for understanding the new contexts. Transcontextualization is in some ways an extension of the meaning organization of visual nominalization. As depicted participants are backgrounded and the process of the action or gesture foregrounded, the identity of the participants becomes fluid as participants can become stand-ins for the communicator. However, the identity is not completely erased, and instead may be understood as resources qualifying the understanding of the action. For example, children and small animals can become qualifications of innocence, harmlessness, or playfulness; certain occupations can stand in for authoritativeness; well-known public figures and characters may have associations that can stand out as attributes. Stereotypes and cultural generalizations enable the transformation of identities into more subjective qualities. Similarly, the context of the original GIF undergoes a transformation for additions of meaning. The context of the original GIF refers to the immediate situation of it in the moment of the narrative, as well as the nature of the source

work as a whole, its genre and type. Qualities of a genre can become meaningful qualifiers. Fictional genres may give a sense of “life as play-acting,” while documentary news genres may convey seriousness or mock-seriousness. The disparity between the original context and the new context the GIF can be used to provide a tension that powers the humorous possibilities of the GIF. Since the identity of the depicted participant is naturally associated with the genre and the context, transcontextualization builds upon the abstract transformative powers of visual nominalization.

There is, indeed, a genre of transcontextualized GIFs where users create a multimodal discourse by supplying the context with written language, a practice so popular it has engendered abbreviations such as MRW (my reaction when) and MFW (my face when).

However, transcontextualization of GIFs cannot be discussed without mentioning the special instance of one-to-one messaging, where the GIF’s new context is not provided by the GIF user, but by the conversation partner. Gif repositories such as GIPHY, Gfycat, and Google Tenor not only have successful integration into many main social media platforms, but also have keyboard apps with phone messaging systems that allows standardized availability, wide distribution, and repeated use, and instant use. There is minimal effort on the users’ part, as there is no need to create the GIF from scratch. The user instead can evaluate the nature of the discourse context to determine what kind of reaction may be suitable, and type keywords in the repositories’ search function to browse GIFs. The process can become a comparison of contexts and a gauging of how GIFs’ source contexts can be used as a resource to indicate the user’s attitude toward the current context. Transcontextualization is also what enables some GIFs to become memes, as each context of use, if visible to many, can become a further reference, such that the history of contexts can even eclipse the original context.

In the previous section, we addressed the interactions of meaning between the content of the source and the content added by the GIF creator. The source content and the GIF-creator-added content share the same semiotic space; they are layered; they are superimposed. When the GIF user deploys a GIF in a multimodal discourse, the GIF’s relation to new content is now juxtaposed; it is serial, instead of sharing the same semiotic space in the way of a digital palimpsest. Furthermore, technology constraints the format and layout, such that certain relations (an image’s display size, its relative orientation with respect to writing) that may have significant meaning in traditional contexts (print advertisements, books) now simply are a product of platform design. For example, the fact that GIFs cannot be inserted in line with text in the same way that emoji can be, limits its function as a replacement for a below-the-phrase unit of written language, and instead shifts it towards functioning as a complete speech act or a complete “phrase.”

Although GIFs become somewhat decontextualized by virtue of their brevity and derivation, there is a market for partially determined new context. Just as there is always a demand for news and facts related to current events of large scope or influence, so there is also a market for pre-formed opinions and stances on such topics for people to quickly identify and align to. Convenience of expression can be appealing in the way of the shortcuts of partially assembled or frozen meals. As new situations can be understood by finding connections to old and familiar content and constructs, so previous footage or GIFs from past media and events are brought in, as if from the Internet's collective memory, to situate new events and topics. Decontextualization may be only in the literal sense, for a GIF can never be fully erased of the nuances of the contexts of its origin and the contexts of patterns of past use, a multimodal palimpsest of the digital age. Recontextualization is never a true replacement of context. Transcontextualization expresses the incompleteness of the two processes of decontextualization and recontextualization.

3.3 Dual deixis

One effect of GIFs' transcontextualization is dual deixis, which is facilitated by GIFs' visual nominalization and visual telicity. GIFs can be multimodal in nature, and many may include written text alongside the image. The words can be from captions originally created in the film or video source, or added by the GIF creator as commentary or to provide intersemiotic repair to account for lost audio.

A significant amount of GIFs in repositories contain words falling in deictic categories. Deixis is the system in language where referents of particular words are dependent on the situation and positioning of the speaker. This system contains egocentric deixis of person, place and time, discourse deixis of text and composition, and social deixis (c.f. Levinson 1983; Lyons 1977). In addressing the deixis of literary texts, scholars of cognitive poetics note in Deictic Shift Theory (see Duchan et al. 1995) that texts can cue readers to create deictic shifts in distinguishing perceptual deictic centers (Stockwell 2020). It is not a far cry to note that the same can occur in visual discourse, i.e., films and videos. The viewer of the derived GIF understands subtitles and captions to relate to the deictic center of the depicted participant in the GIF. Subtitles containing "I" will have its referent as the depicted participant, "you" to an addressee that is often absent from the GIF but whose identity is accessible only through knowledge of the source film or video.

The author argues that GIFs in use allow a double shift of deictic center regarding egocentric and discourse deixis – a dual deixis. That is, there is a deictic shift into the world of the GIF, but also a reshift back to the GIF user as a deictic

center, motivated by visual nominalization and visual telicity. Without this double shift, GIFs would only function as quotes. The disruption of the narrative linear sequence and the abstraction of visual nominalization facilitate this deictic jump for the GIF user's egocentric particulars to be relevant in determining meaning of the GIF in discourse. This goes hand in hand with the embodied enactment in GIFs without words, where the depicted participant is understood as representing the GIF user in enacting gestures and facial expressions. An instance of multimodal deixis in GIF use is the transformation of spatial deixis into discourse deixis – a deictic metaphor of sorts. Written language assumes spatial orientation of top-down to follow time progression, and in multimodal texts, a GIF with gestural deixis of pointing upwards can be deployed as discourse deixis to refer to an immediately preceding point.

In the situation where multiple GIFs in a repository may serve to express a particular response or gesture, the selection of a GIF can be motivated by visual details in GIF functioning as social deixis. Social deixis is when “the different relative social positions of utterer and receiver are marked” (Stockwell 2020, p. 359). Just as “accent and dialect invoke schematic social stereotypes about those speech groups” (Stockwell 2020, p. 362), so visual traits of the depicted person or character also invoke schematic social stereotypes. This can include stereotypes regarding race, gender, age, and occupation. In cases where the depicted person is recognizable as a public figure or a widely-known fictionalized character, specific associated traits become used as social deixis as well. This aspect of GIFs in use symbolically indexes discourse community schema.

4 Social considerations surrounding GIFs

The popularity of the GIF medium means that its advertising potential is being recognized and acted upon. GIF database sites offer partnerships and verified accounts with brands, shows, public figures, and social influencers. The appeal and the hyperpersonal nature of a GIF conversation has been recognized and exploited for use in promotion. While commercially motivated advertisements have traditionally found themselves secondary multimodal discourses or multimodal paratexts – relegated to banners, margin spaces, and areas below the main text, inserted at the start, end, and at time-delineated intervals in television broadcasts and video streaming, with GIFs they are now in the position of potentially working themselves within private discourse, allowing consumers and audience to not only notice but also engage with and reappropriate content targeted for promotion. There is a breakdown of the genre of the advertisement as corporation to individual discourse, to an advertisement camouflaged into private

discourse, for the end user to be the generator of an effective multimodal discourse incorporating the advertised content. Promoters can repackage their content to foreground actions, emotions, and other analogical–metaphorical categories, allowing the identity of their product to be seamlessly integrated in the background, visible and retrievable but not focused. Visual nominalization is thus ripe for commercial use and indirect influencing.

The blend of public and private genres, as well as the blend of person-to-person and corporation-to-consumer communication, is likely see further development with the GIF. The promotional nature of a corporate-driven creation of GIF can hide behind the original GIF culture of fan-driven sharing of personally favorited content, taking advantage of the assumption of anonymity of creators and noncommercialised intention. Even those who may not be affected by the commercial effect may participate in spreading the content further and increasing its exposure, promoting its visibility through frequency of use. Just products in traditional advertisements may use celebrity sponsorship to lend credence and increase appeal, so the average GIF user may, in effect, inadvertently function as a sponsor to the content, towards acquaintances and others in their informal communicative circles. While people may be loath to expend effort to look up something in a clear advertisement genre, there may be less resistance for the GIF, as it may feel like a necessary step to be updated on cultural references in order to belong in a certain social circle, or to fill a gap in the assumed shared information to facilitate communication.

As part of the emerging genres of digital communication, GIFs spotlight a question of accountability. Still images and full-length videos have an established format of presentation in news reporting genres, with source photographers and agencies labeled and contacted for permission for further dissemination. However, the informal contexts of GIF use create a murkier norm where derivative GIFs generally may be shared without tracing the GIF creator or consulting the producers of the original source content. Because the GIF user is not necessarily the GIF creator, accountability for the nature of the content of the GIF or its implications is not quite as clear-cut. Consequently, we can observe a buffer of sorts: a GIF can demonstrate the user's cleverness or deftness in finding apt material, but the user may backpedal from responsibility of a GIF's existence and message. All these characteristics make an interesting situation when the GIFs of popular culture enter into digital diplomacy and the discourses of public figures online. Furthermore, there can be a reversal of sponsorship – the significance here is not that the GIF user becomes a sponsor of GIF content and values, but that the people, products, or franchises in the GIF may become unwitting retroactive sponsors of the public figure's message.

5 Conclusion

The visual nominalization and visual telicity of GIFs render them potent semiotic artefacts in today's social media society. Visual nominalization slants ideational depictions toward abstraction, a kind of abstraction achieved without use of simplifying iconography, and prioritizing processes. This abstraction has its roots in how visual telicity breaks from visual mode's typical mimicry of natural time progression. GIFs are vibrant members of social semiotic resources in the age of social media, cataloguing the pulse of culture and trends. They are capsules created and used in demonstrations of power relations, status, and identity through transcontextualization.

GIFs themselves may be multimodal, composed of moving images and words, and GIFs also form meaning by being integrated into larger multimodal wholes. Derived GIFs can be conceived of as part of a multimodal dialog where the GIF creator responds to the source video through the GIF. GIFs may be uploaded into GIF repositories, and the retrieval of GIFs from the repositories by potential GIF users involves a user-system dialog, where the written language of tags and search terms from the user are matched to a selection of GIFs in computer-mediated partial intersemiosis. Ultimately, GIF users are often not themselves GIF creators, but use GIFs as resources in one-to-one communication, where they may express affect and shared cultural knowledge, as interpersonal signs responding to a discourse partner's remark; as well as one-to-many communication, where they are completed with an imagined context through written text by one author, achieving significance through purposeful mismatch of context. Extensive developments in technologies for GIF collection, GIF search, and GIF keyboards in the past couple of years open up new questions as to whether GIFs are on the path from interchangeable tokens of iconicity or transitory cultural shorthand to a semi-permanent, abstracted and shared semiotic system that is postdigital and may itself affect language.

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