

# **From Iconic to Abstract: How Internet memes create their own grammars**

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# Introduction

- **iconicity and arbitrariness in language (Dingemanse et al., 2015; Haiman, 1980)**
- **iconicity as a key feature of the origins of language (Monaghan & Roberts, 2021)**
  - **language evolution does not have the full record**

# Introduction

- **iconicity and arbitrariness in language (Dingemanse et al., 2015; Haiman, 1980)**
- **iconicity as a key feature of the origins of language (Monaghan & Roberts, 2021)**
  - **language evolution does not have the full record**
  - **but Image macros (“meme” in this talk) as multimodal constructions can provide a wealth of data on this evolution pattern**



**“One does not simply” meme**

# Introduction

- **Image Macros: multimodal constructions with text superimposed on an image (Zenner & Geeraerts, 2018; Dancygier & Vandelandotte, 2017)**
  - **we focus on memes with origin from known sources**
  - **we focus on viral memes that resulted in a meme template**
- **How do Internet memes change over time?**
  - **we argue that memes evolve just like linguistic constructions, from iconic and concrete to abstract and grammatical**

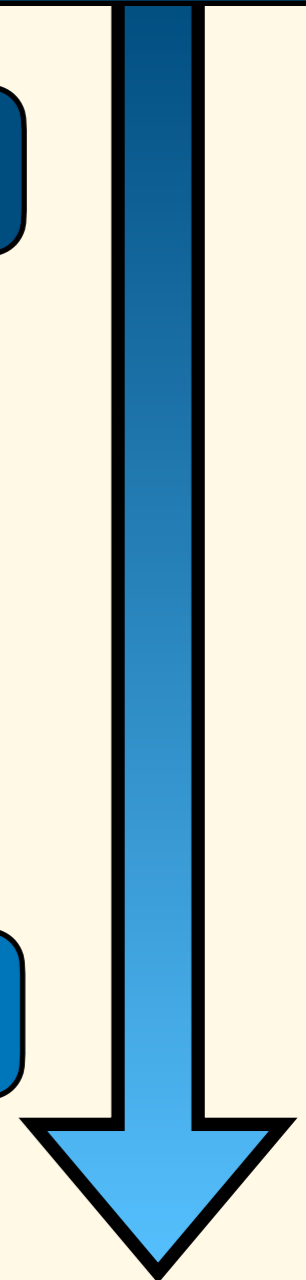
# Grammaticalization

- Grammaticalization is a process of language change:
  - from lexical to grammatical
  - from concrete to abstract
- Stages of grammaticalization (Kuteva et al 2019:3):
  - extension: use in new contexts
  - semantic bleaching: loss in meaning content
  - decategorialization
  - erosion: phonetic reduction
  - possible renewal (Hopper & Traugott, 2003)

**LEXICAL  
MEANING**

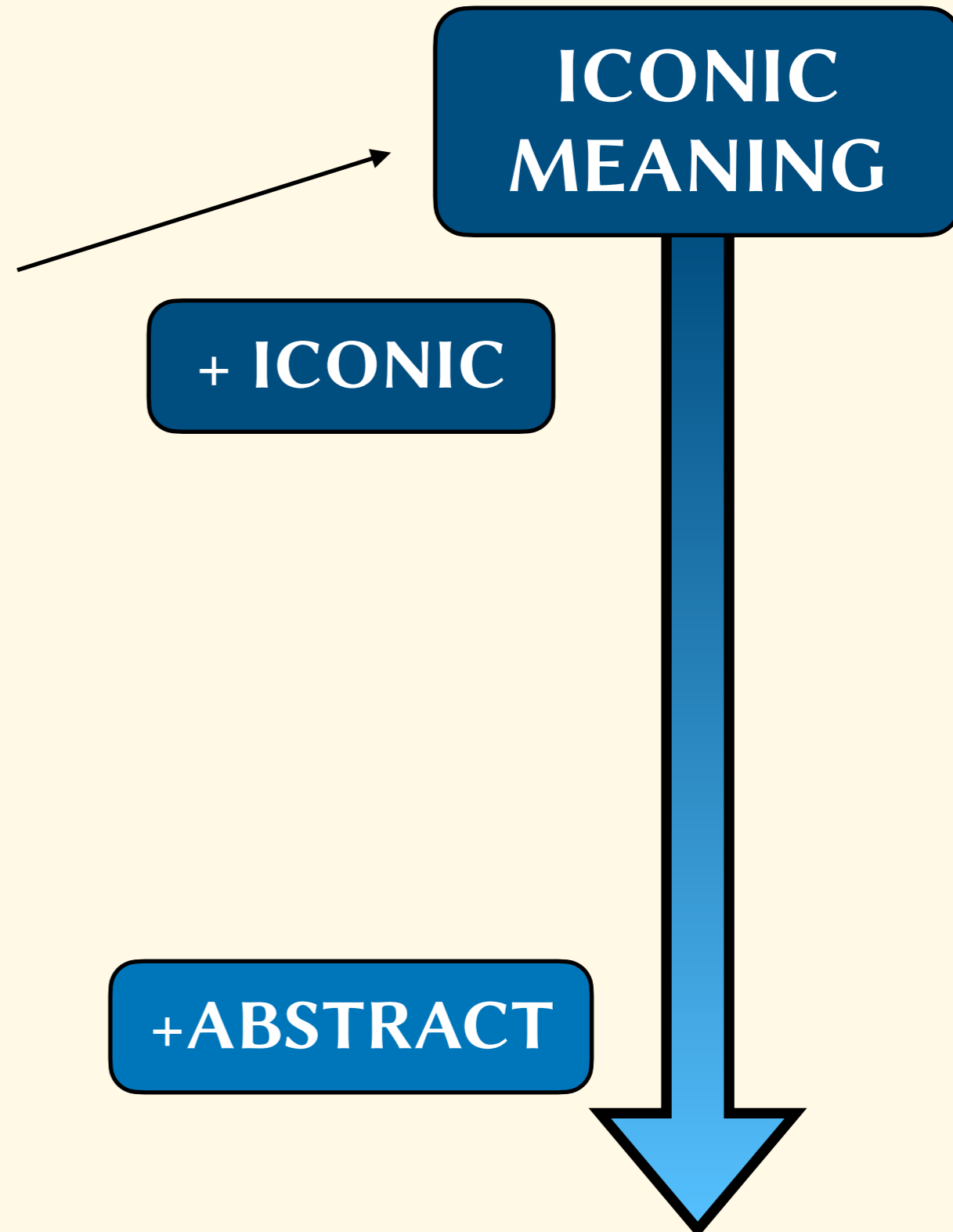
**+ LEXICAL**

**+ABSTRACT**



# From iconic to abstract

- **Iconic:**
  - **Diachrony:** referring directly to the original source material



# From iconic to abstract



A scene from LOTR

**ICONIC  
MEANING**

**+ ICONIC**

**+ABSTRACT**

# From iconic to abstract



**ONE DOES NOT SIMPLY  
WALK INTO MORDOR**

A picture from the film  
referring to that scene  
(use in a new context)

**ICONIC  
MEANING**

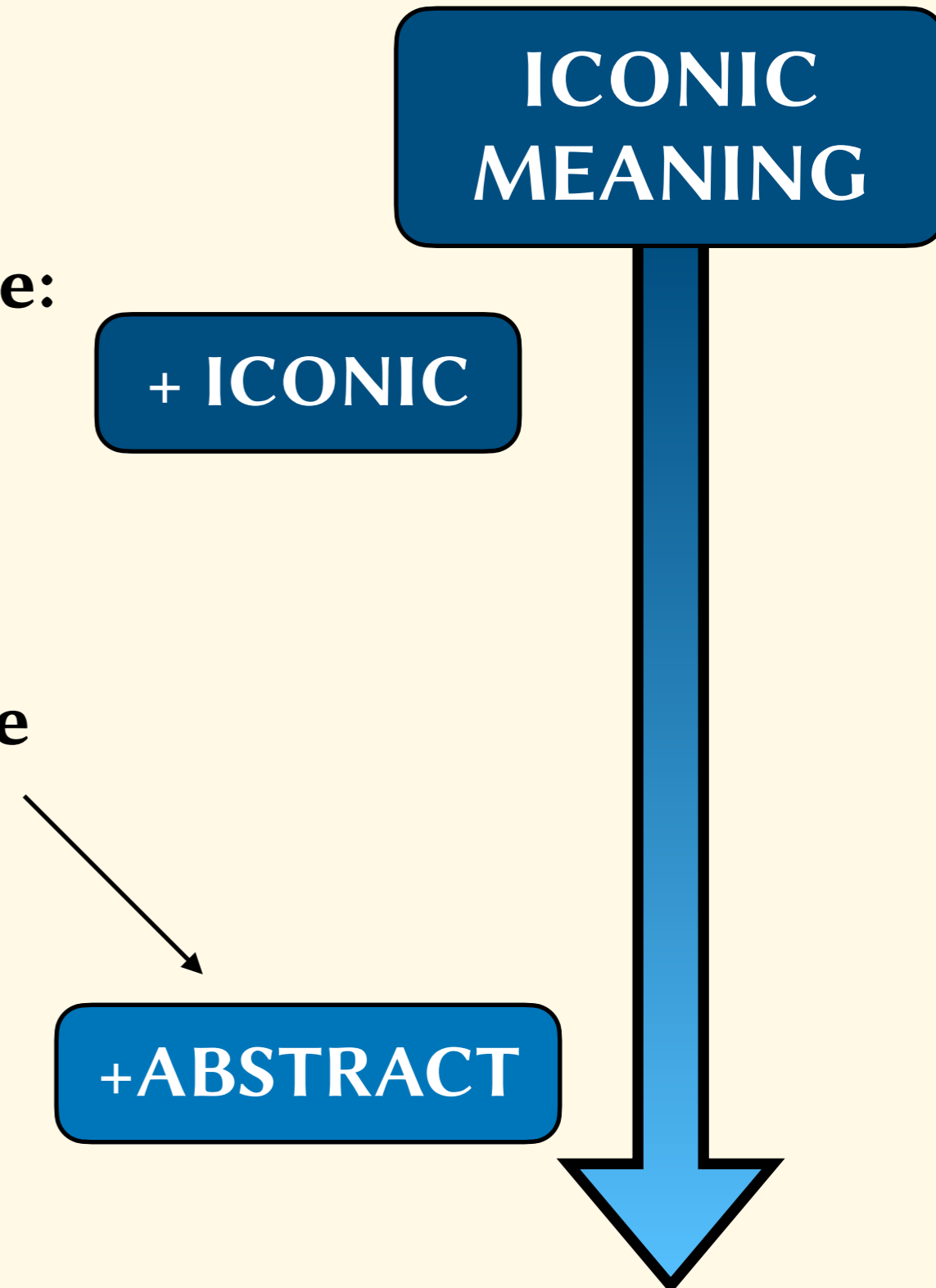
**+ ICONIC**

**+ABSTRACT**

# From iconic to abstract

- **Abstract:**

- **Arbitrary in a diachronic sense: the relationship between the pictures, text, and the form of the meme is less and less motivated by the iconic meaning of the original source**
- **this arbitrary relationship (=grammar) needs to be acquired for a correct interpretation**



# From iconic to abstract



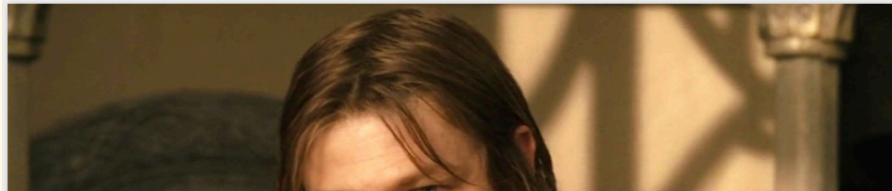
A meme template based on analogy  
(semantic bleaching)

ICONIC  
MEANING

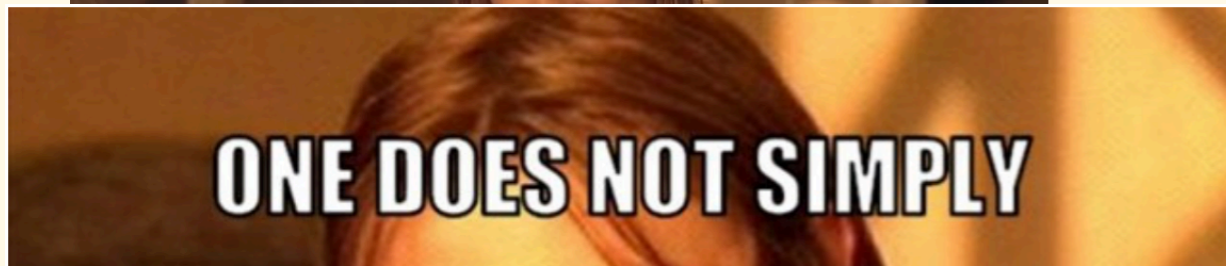
+ ICONIC

+ABSTRACT

# From iconic to abstract



**ONE DOES NOT SIMPLY**



**ONE DOES NOT SIMPLY**

**KARENS NOW DAYS**



**ICONIC  
MEANING**

**+ ICONIC**

**+ABSTRACT**

Meaning based on the knowledge of the meme  
(erosion, decategorialization?)

# How memes create their own grammars

**The case study of “For the better, right?”**

# How memes change over time

**1. ORIGINAL SOURCE**

**2. INNOVATION**

**3. MEME TEMPLATE**

**4. PICTURES ARE ALTERED**

**5. PICTURES CHANGE**

**6. NEW MEME**

**ICONIC  
MEANING**

**+ ICONIC**

**+ABSTRACT**

# 1. Film scene



I don't think the system works.

How would you have it work?

Original scene from “Attack of the Clones” (Screenshot from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSaciLxv4XU&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSaciLxv4XU&feature=emb_logo))

# How memes change over time

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**ICONIC  
MEANING**

**+ ICONIC**

**+ABSTRACT**

# Innovation

## 2. A single new interpretation on Twitter

**April 21, 2021:**

**First appearance in**

**<https://twitter.com/starwarsposting>**

**April 22, 2021:**

**Goes viral on Reddit**



# Innovation

## 2. A single new interpretation on Twitter

- Iconic pictures in a new order with new text
- Analogy to the theme of Anakin's turn to the dark side



# How memes change over time

1. ORIGINAL SOURCE

ICONIC MEANING

2. INNOVATION

SPREAD

3. MEME TEMPLATE

- gradual increase in abstraction

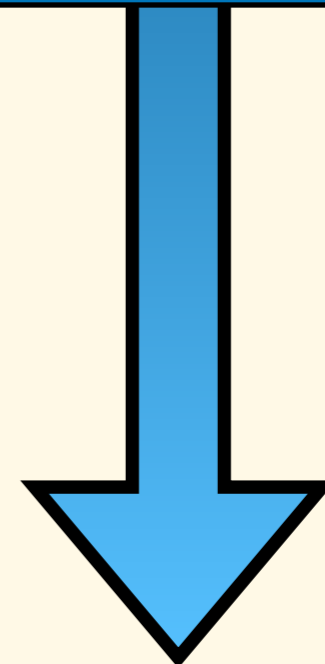
ACQUISITION

ABSTRACT  
MEANING/GRAMMAR

4. PICTURES ARE ALTERED

5. PICTURES CHANGE

6. NEW MEME



# Meme template

## 3. New interpretation as a productive template

**April 25, 2021:  
Reddit**

- spread to new contexts
- increase in frequency



# Meme template

## 3. New interpretation as a productive template

- Metaphor: the pictures and text are interpreted as placeholders for something else
- The pictures and text are more arbitrary
- no knowledge of Star Wars is necessary to understand the meme



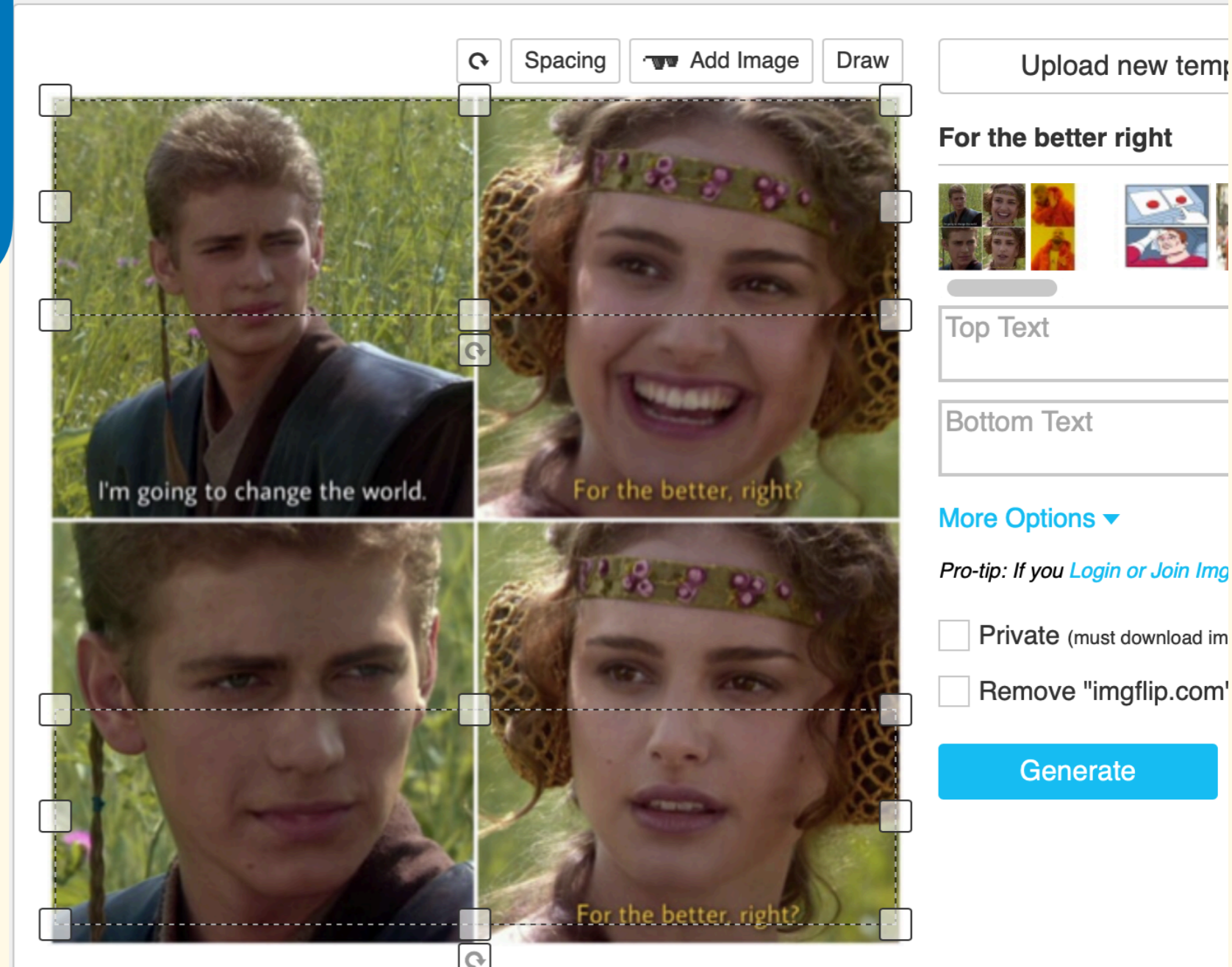
# Meme template

## 3. New interpretation as a productive template

April 29, 2021:  
Imgflip Meme Generator

For the better right Meme Generator

The Fastest Meme Generator on the Planet. Easily add text to images or memes.



The screenshot displays the Imgflip Meme Generator interface. At the top, there's a header with the title "For the better right Meme Generator" and a subtitle "The Fastest Meme Generator on the Planet. Easily add text to images or memes." Below this, the main workspace features a 2x2 grid of images. The top-left image shows a young man with the text "I'm going to change the world." The top-right image shows a young woman with the text "For the better, right?". The bottom-left image is a close-up of the same young man, and the bottom-right image is a close-up of the same young woman with the text "For the better, right?". To the right of the grid, there are several controls: a "Spacing" button, an "Add Image" button with a trash icon, a "Draw" button, and an "Upload new template" button. Below these, there's a section titled "For the better right" with a row of small image thumbnails. Further down, there are input fields for "Top Text" and "Bottom Text". A "More Options" link with a dropdown arrow is also present. Below that, a "Pro-tip" message reads "Pro-tip: If you Login or Join Imgflip". There are two checkboxes: "Private (must download images)" and "Remove 'imgflip.com' watermark". At the bottom right, there's a large blue "Generate" button.

<https://imgflip.com/memegenerator/314678138/For-the-better-right>

# Meme template

## 3.1. Text and its meaning change

**May 29, 2021:  
Know your meme**

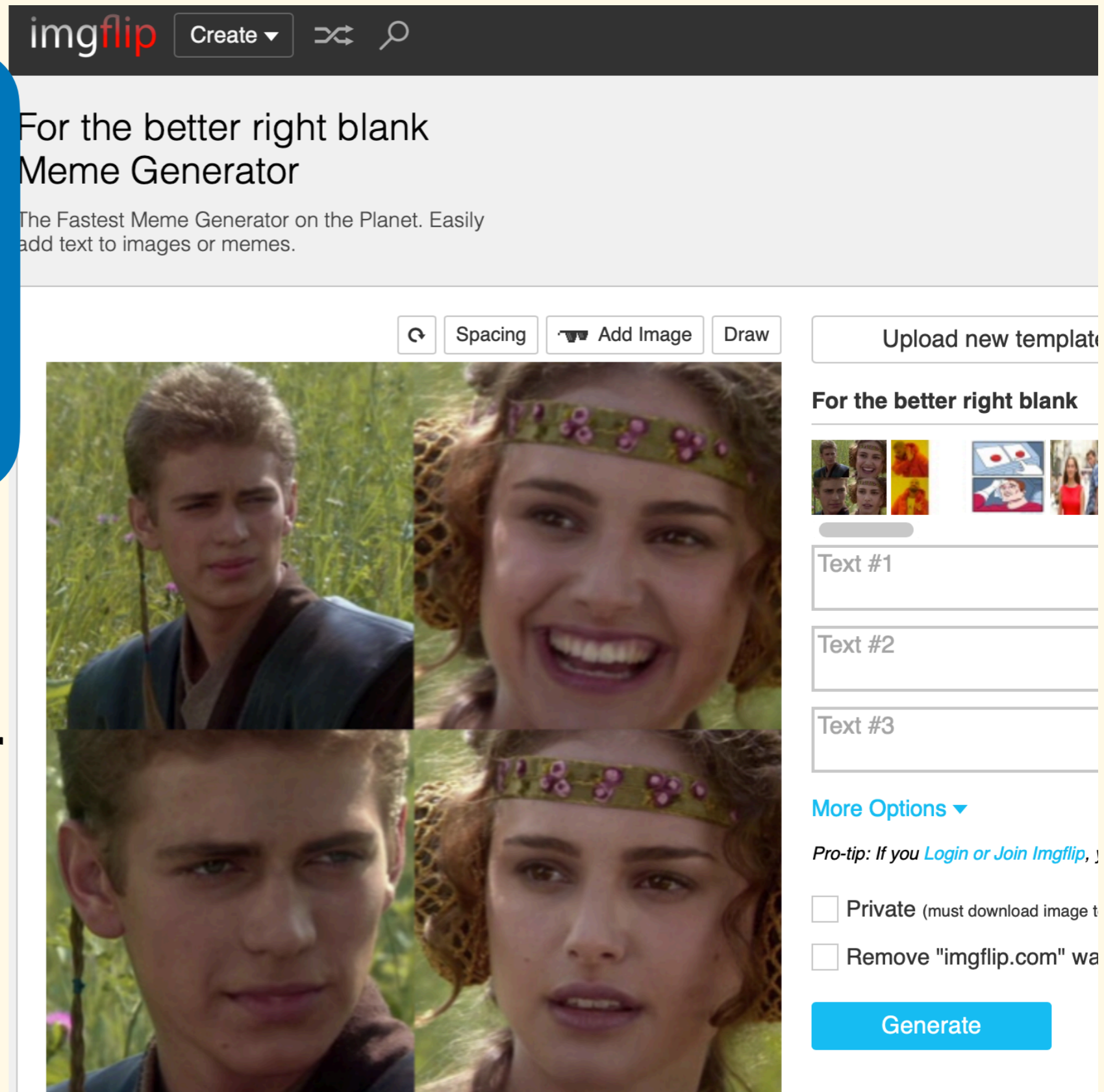
- erosion of the text
- semantic bleaching



# Meme template

## 3.1. Text and its meaning change

**May 30, 2021:  
Imgflip Meme Generator  
with a blank template**



The screenshot shows the Imgflip Meme Generator website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with the 'imgflip' logo, a 'Create' dropdown menu, and icons for undo, redo, and search. Below the navigation bar, the main heading reads 'For the better right blank Meme Generator'. A subheading states 'The Fastest Meme Generator on the Planet. Easily add text to images or memes.' The interface includes a toolbar with buttons for 'Spacing', 'Add Image', and 'Draw'. A 'Upload new template' button is located on the right. The main area displays a blank meme template with two panels of images: a young man (Luke Skywalker) on the left and a young woman (Princess Leia) on the right. On the right side, there are three text input fields labeled 'Text #1', 'Text #2', and 'Text #3'. Below these fields is a 'More Options' dropdown menu. A 'Pro-tip' message suggests logging in or joining Imgflip. There are two checkboxes: 'Private (must download image to)' and 'Remove "imgflip.com" watermark'. A large blue 'Generate' button is at the bottom right.

imgflip Create

For the better right blank Meme Generator

The Fastest Meme Generator on the Planet. Easily add text to images or memes.

Spacing Add Image Draw

Upload new template

For the better right blank

Text #1

Text #2

Text #3

More Options

Pro-tip: If you [Login or Join Imgflip](#), you can save your memes.

☐ Private (must download image to your device)

☐ Remove "imgflip.com" watermark

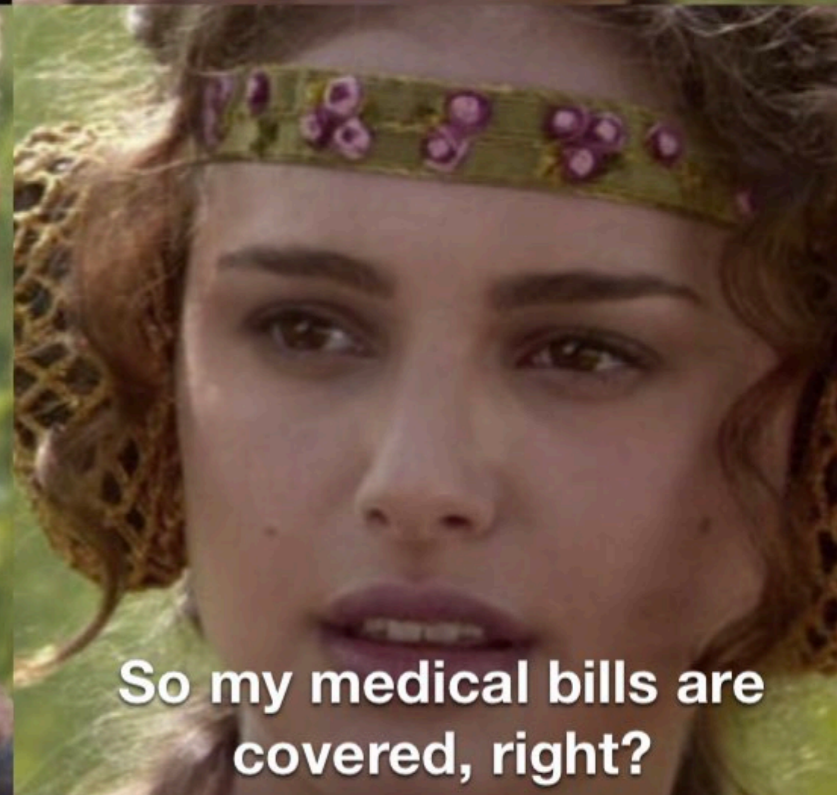
Generate

<https://imgflip.com/memegenerator/321592868/For-the-better-right-blank>

# Meme template

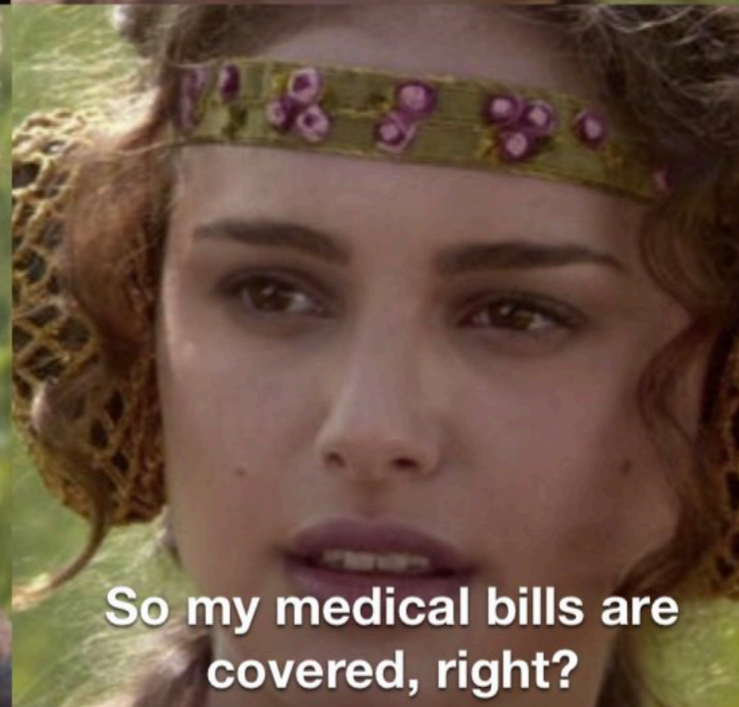
## 3.2. Text and its meaning change significantly

- highest level of abstraction so far
- meme “grammar”
- beyond metaphor: knowledge of the meme motivates the meaning, not the knowledge of Star Wars



# Meme template

The uttering of  
a statement

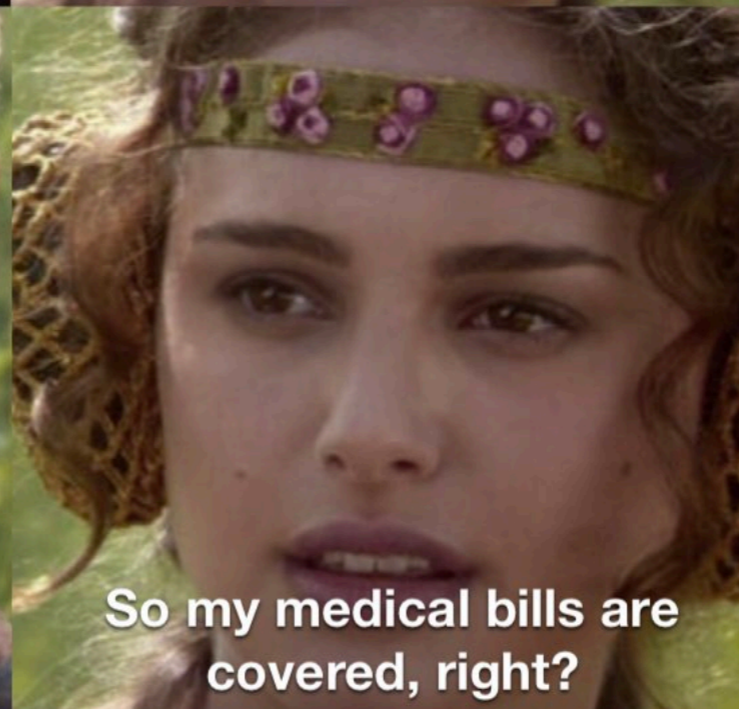


# Meme template

The uttering of  
a statement




The question:  
Is the  
implicature  
true?




# Meme template

The uttering of  
a statement





You have health  
insurance



So my medical bills are  
covered, right?

The question:  
Is the  
implicature  
true?

Implying the  
implicature is  
not true



So my medical bills are  
covered, right?

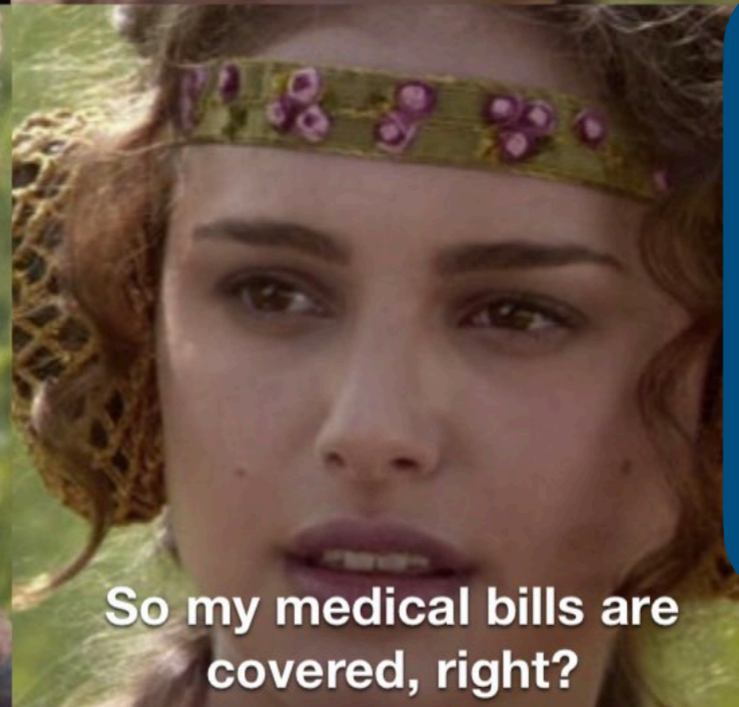
# Meme template

The uttering of  
a statement



The question:  
Is the  
implicature  
true?

Implying the  
implicature is  
not true



Repeated  
question  
(author's  
critique)

# How memes change over time

1. ORIGINAL SOURCE

ICONIC MEANING

2. INNOVATION

3. MEME TEMPLATE

- gradual increase in abstraction

ABSTRACT  
MEANING/GRAMMAR

4. PICTURES ARE ALTERED

5. PICTURES CHANGE

6. NEW MEME

# Synchronic iconicity

**+ ICONIC**

**ICONIC  
REFERENCE**

Meaning motivated  
by the iconic reference  
of the picture



**+ABSTRACT/  
ARBITRARY**

# Synchronic iconicity

**+ ICONIC**

**ICONIC  
REFERENCE**

Meaning motivated  
by the iconic reference  
of the picture

**+ABSTRACT/  
ARBITRARY**

**That look your little  
brother or sister give you  
when you open a candy bar**



# Synchronic iconicity

+ ICONIC

ICONIC  
REFERENCE

Meaning motivated by  
the “grammar” (more  
arbitrary arrangement  
of picture, text, and form)

+ABSTRACT/  
ARBITRARY



# How memes change over time

1. ORIGINAL SOURCE

ICONIC MEANING

2. INNOVATION

3. MEME TEMPLATE

- gradual increase in abstraction

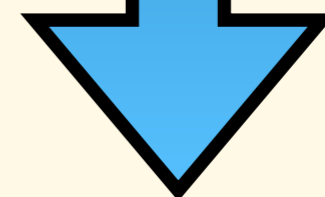
ABSTRACT  
MEANING/GRAMMAR

4. PICTURES ARE ALTERED

5. PICTURES CHANGE

ICONIC  
REFERENCE

6. NEW MEME



# Pictures

## 4. Pictures are altered

**June 1, 2021:  
Know your meme**

- erosion of pictures



# Pictures

## 5. Pictures change

- June 14, 2021:**  
**Know your meme**
- complete erosion of pictures



# How memes change over time

1. ORIGINAL SOURCE

ICONIC MEANING

2. INNOVATION

3. MEME TEMPLATE

- gradual increase in abstraction

ABSTRACT  
MEANING/GRAMMAR

4. PICTURES ARE ALTERED

5. PICTURES CHANGE

ICONIC  
REFERENCE

6. NEW MEME

# How memes change over time

1. ORIGINAL SOURCE

2. INNOVATION

3. MEME TEMPLATE

- gradual increase in abstraction

4. PICTURES

ICONIC  
REFERENCE

ICONIC MEANING

5. PICTURES CHANGE

6. NEW MEME

ABSTRACT  
MEANING/GRAMMAR

ICONIC MEANING

ABSTRACT  
MEANING/GRAMMAR

## 6. New meme

**August 9, 2021:  
Know your meme**

- renewal



# Summary

1. ORIGINAL SOURCE

ICONIC MEANING

2. INNOVATION

SPREAD

3. MEME TEMPLATE

ACQUISITION

4. PICTURES ARE ALTERED

ABSTRACT  
MEANING/GRAMMAR

ICONIC REFERENCE

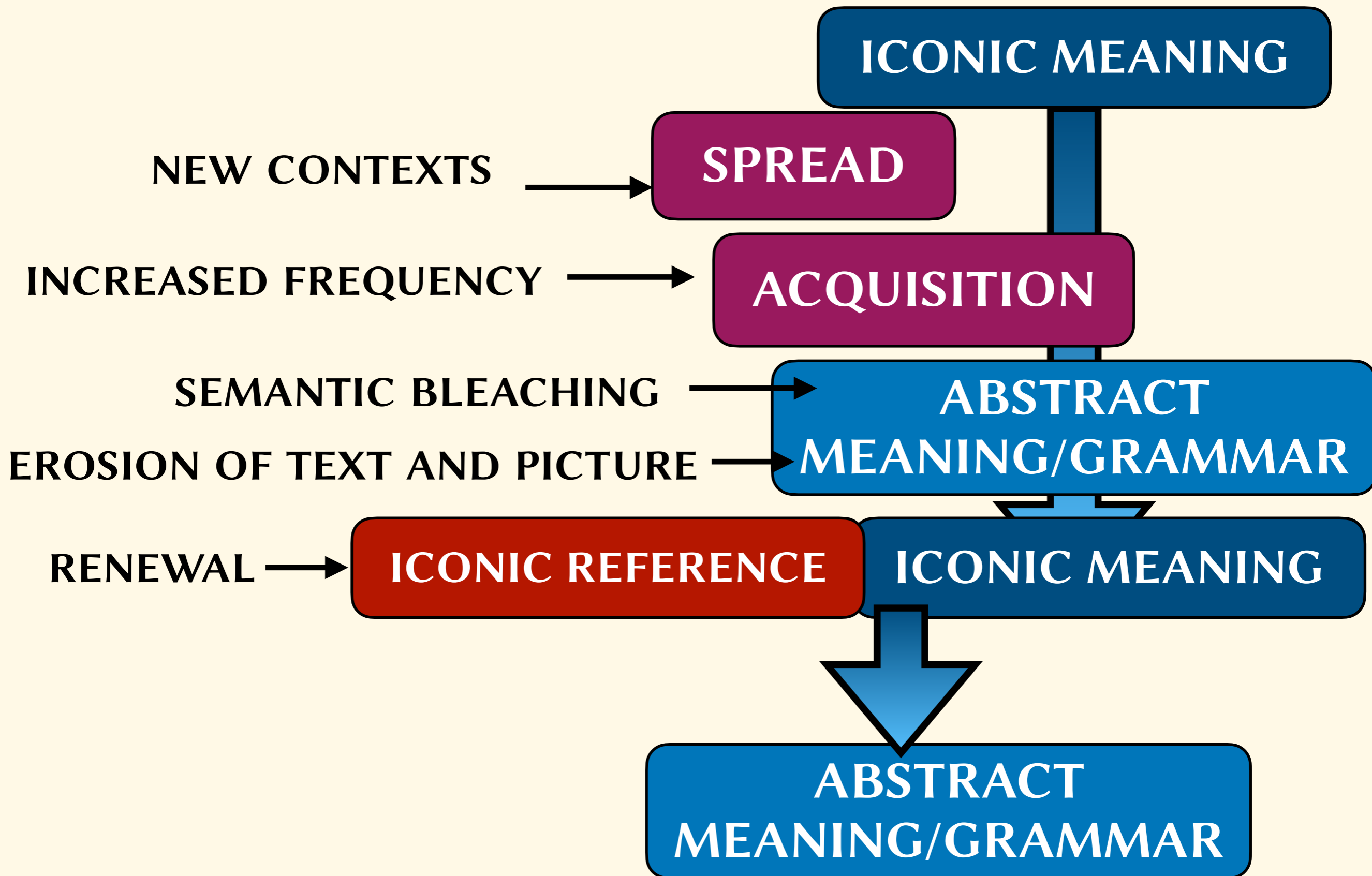
ICONIC MEANING

5. PICTURES CHANGE

6. NEW MEME

ABSTRACT  
MEANING/GRAMMAR

# Grammaticalization vs. memes



# Conclusion

- multimodal constructions also have a tendency to create **abstract patterns** over time
- viral memes evolve to become more abstract over time—in a process similar to **grammaticalization**

# Conclusion

- multimodal constructions also have a tendency to create **abstract patterns** over time
- viral memes evolve to become more abstract over time—in a process similar to **grammaticalization**
  - with every text and picture change they move further away from the original iconic meaning
  - viral memes become multimodal constructions with “grammatical” templates:
    - with different levels of abstraction, depending on the meme’s structure and the complexity of the original iconic meaning
  - memes evolve in a cyclical way, but not all memes will give rise to a new meme

**Semanticists be like:**



**Do research  
on Romance  
subjunctive**



**Do  
research  
on memes**

**THANK YOU!**

# References

Dancygier, Barbara & Lieven Vandelanotte. 2017. Internet memes as multimodal constructions. *Cognitive Linguistics* 2017; 28(3): 565–598. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cog-2017-0074>.

Dingemanse, Mark, Damián E Blasi, Gary Lupyan, Morten H Christiansen & Padraic Monaghan. 2015. Arbitrariness, iconicity, and systematicity in language. *Trends in cognitive sciences* 19(10). 603–615.

Haiman, John. "The iconicity of grammar: Isomorphism and motivation." *Language* (1980): 515-540.

Hopper, Paul J., and Elizabeth Closs Traugott. *Grammaticalization*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Kuteva, T., Heine, B., Hong, B., Long, H., Narrog, H. and Rhee, S., 2019. *World lexicon of grammaticalization*. Cambridge University Press.

Monaghan, Padraic & Seán G Roberts. 2021. Iconicity and diachronic language change. *Cognitive Science* 45(4). e12968. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/cogs.12968>.

Zenner, Eline & Dirk Geeraerts. 2018. One does not simply process memes: Image macros as multimodal constructions. In Esme Winter-Froemel & Verena Thaler (eds.),

# References: meme sources

## **One does not simply:**

- Slides 6-9: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/one-does-not-simply-walk-into-mordor>, <https://dailystatuss.com/one-does-not-simply-meme/>

## **For the better right:**

- Slide 14: the first instance of the Anakin and Padmé meme (@starwarsposting, from Knowyourmeme.com 2021, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/for-the-better-right>), [https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/mw058z/from\\_his\\_point\\_of\\_view\\_yes/](https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/mw058z/from_his_point_of_view_yes/)
- Slides 17-18: [https://www.reddit.com/r/HellenicMemes/comments/myb5mx/for\\_the\\_better\\_right/](https://www.reddit.com/r/HellenicMemes/comments/myb5mx/for_the_better_right/)
- Slide 20: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2111970-for-the-better-right>
- Slide 22-26: Lawrence, Andrew (@ndrewlawrence). 2021. Twitter. [https://twitter.com/ndrew\\_lawrence/status/1403710723285475340?s=20](https://twitter.com/ndrew_lawrence/status/1403710723285475340?s=20).
- Slide 31: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2113607-for-the-better-right>
- Slide 32: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2124647-for-the-better-right>

## **Baby Yoda:**

- Slides 28-29: <https://screenrant.com/funny-baby-yoda-looking-up-memes-mandalorian/>

## **Drakeposting:**

- Slide 39: <https://imgflip.com/memegenerator/95889524/Drakeposting>

## **You are known for:**

- Slide 35: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2168681-you-are-known-for>

**(Accessed on 24 May 2022)**