Cowboys and Idioms

Engaging with Cliché through Creative Variation

Creativity can be eye-opening, humorous, and sometimes shocking, but it is always relative. It can only truly be appreciated relative to the norms that guide our expectations about the equivalent un-*creative behaviours. In this chapter we continue our defence of cliché, and of norms in general, and further explore the relationship between the normative and the creative in language. Our explorations of how the latter often arises out of the former will take us from stock phrases and acronyms to the multimodal canvas of comic-books and the cinema.*

The War on Cliché

A recent collection of assorted essays and reviews by the English novelist Martin Amis is provocatively titled "*The War Against Cliché*". Amis is a one-time *agent provocateur* of English letters and a scorchingly funny writer in or out of a "massage" parlour, but he is in a truly militant mood when he argues that cliché is the enemy of "*freshness, energy, and reverberation of voice*". Few would disagree that cliché is a safe harbour for trite and unoriginal writers, but is it really a worthy cause for war? True, clichés can numb our critical faculties, and they are pervasive in language, which does make them an insidious adversary. Moreover, though clichés are obvious and easy to spot, it would be wrong to dismiss them out of hand as worthless and ineffective; rather, they are often too effective for the low costs they demand of an author. As John F. Kennedy put it some time before Amis, clichés allow us to "*enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought*", making the use of cheap sentiments a tell-tale sign of a bargain-basement writer. Amis is clearly no hack, and there is obvious merit in his dislike of cliché. To be creative a writer must be interesting and original, and so it is natural to assume that creative insight, wherever it may lie, does not lie on the well-trodden path of cliché. Surely then, the avoidance of cliché can only be a good thing in creative language?

Yet, there are troubling precedents for Amis's phraseology that make his idealistic war on cliché seem not just clichéd in its own right, but naïvely Utopian and wrong-headed. From Lyndon Johnson's ill-fated *War on Poverty* to Nixon's ill-conceived *War on Drugs* and *War on Crime* to George W. Bush's ill-defined *War on Terror*, the "*War on/against X*" pattern has a lacklustre history that exhibits all the downside of cliché and little of the upside of creative categorization. Amis's title is thus a rather obvious culmination of a long line of political clichés, each based on a common metaphor that emotively views a concerted struggle between clearly defined opponents as a kind of war. War is a bloody and hateful thing, and so the concept of war should not be purchased too cheaply by any author seeking to valorize his own struggle for creative expression.

But if we take the metaphor at face value, who are the combatants in this war on cliché, and who decides whether a phrase is the linguistic equivalent of a freedom fighter or a terrorist? A cliché that is exploited well can, in many cases, yield a more humorous and inspired result than a phrase that is entirely novel but lacking in insight. So the enemy is not cliché *per se*, but the unsophisticated use of cliché to achieve unthinking and unearned results. The irony is that cliché is as intrinsic to our conception of creativity as the notion of a villain is to our conception of heroism, or indeed, the notion of an enemy is to our conception of war. Insofar as we define creativity by our success in breaking with convention to blaze our own paths, the very notion of linguistic creativity would be fatally undermined if such a self-defeating war on cliché were ever to prove conclusive. We may profit by eliminating cliché from our own personal writings, but we are all diminished as speakers if the very idea of a cliché is to be purged from language as a whole. To quote Christopher Ricks, whose insightful observations might well be construed as giving comfort to the enemy, "*Instead of banishing or shunning clichés as malign, haven't we got to meet them, to create benign possibilities for and with them?*"

We argued in the last chapter that creativity is a cognitive lever that allows us to derive disproportionate benefits from small amounts of well-targeted knowledge. In a linguistic setting, creativity thus allows us to leverage a great deal of communicative *effect* from a small amount of communicative *effort*. This effort might involve no more than a single word, a certain intonation, or a knowing look. The benefits of using a cliché

are obvious; indeed, they are *too* obvious. A cliché allows us to concisely evoke a complex attitude or situation in familiar terms, but at the cost of appearing reductive, unoriginal and unsophisticated. No creative leverage is gained unless the cliché is used to communicate more than its familiar meaning, with no more than the usual effort. To appreciate that clichés can be effectively leveraged in this way, we need look no further than contemporary journalism, which often strives to balance familiarity with insight and comprehensibility with originality. For example, a quick scan through the May 23rd, 2009 issue of *The Economist* magazine reveals the following article headlines or sub-headings:

Weak Medicine	(leveraged cliché: *Strong Medicine*)
Bust and Boom	(leveraged cliché: *Boom and Bust*)
Disunited Arab Emirates	(leveraged cliché: *United Arab Emirates*)
That Kitchen-Sinking Feeling	(leveraged clichés: *Everything but the Kitchen Sink*; *That Sinking Feeling*)
Saved by the box	(leveraged cliché: *Saved by the bell*)
Political Climate Change	(leveraged clichés: *Political Climate / Climate Change*)
When bulls chase their tails	(leveraged clichés: *Bull market*; *A dog chases its tail*)
Unnatural Selection	(leveraged cliché: *Natural Selection*)
Charge of the Legal Brigade	(leveraged cliché: *Charge of the Light Brigade*)
There won't be blood	(leveraged cliché: *There will be blood*)
Muck, brass and spleen	(leveraged cliché: *Where there's muck, there's brass*)
Recovery begins at home	(leveraged cliché: *Charity begins at home*)
Balancing ye bookes	(leveraged cliché: *Balancing the books*)

This last example offers a particularly apt categorization for those warrior-writers who would seek to cleanse language of all its clichés:

Stone-throwers in glass houses (leveraged cliché: *people who live in glass houses …*)

These headings typify the house style of *The Economist*, where factual assessments of current affairs are frequently topped by a frothy and disposable wit. Unlike tabloid newspapers, which in Britain are notorious for their willingness to inflict violence on the English language to make it yield a catchy headline, *The Economist* is an up-market publication that gains more mileage from obvious metaphors than from bad puns. If its attempts at crafting a resonant phrase from a clichéd source are often less than sparkling, it is because it errs on the side of caution and does not leverage more from these sources than it is safe to do. This cautiousness means that the reader is rarely challenged, with the cliché in each case undergoing minimal change to yield a minimal, yet easily understood, increase in meaning. Unlike the more outrageous tabloids, which often go to remarkable lengths to force a pun, newspapers like *The Economist* strive for a gentler, lighter wit that appears altogether more effortless. Nonetheless, *The Economist* is not above coining an absolute groaner that would put the tabloids to shame when the punning variation can be grounded in the conceptual as well as the phonetic. On May 1st, 2010, it ran with "*Sachs and the Shitty*" as a headline for the legal woes of Goldman Sachs, after a leaked email knowingly described one of the firm's own financial instruments was "*one shitty deal*".

Now consider this altogether riskier variation on a well-worn phrase. In Columbus, Ohio, a local legal firm advertises its wares with large billboards that show a partially undressed couple in a passionate clinch. The message, across the top in prominent letters, reads: "*When it doesn't stay in Vegas*". Based on the imagery that is used, a viewer might conclude that the "*it*" that refuses to "*stay in Vegas*" is an extra-marital romance of some kind, but this is hardly likely to be of interest to a law firm unless divorce is somehow implied as a consequence. In fact, the message of the billboard alludes to the well-known phrase (in America, at least) "*What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas*". Las Vegas is the scene of many an indiscretion, but is used here as a metaphor for any place that is not home. The cliché is thus as much a directive to enforce a code of silence as it is an observation about human behavior. Of course, the cliché is not explicitly stated on the billboard, but merely alluded to, and in a negative form at that. Though clichés need not always be true, they are certainly at their most banal when true, and become much more interesting when falsified. This billboard speaks to the exceptional circumstances in which the cliché proves untrue, and advocates exceptional actions – divorce – as a

consequence. So it not a war on cliché we see at work here, but a gentle kind of subversion; the cliché is not repudiated, but shown to be limited and prone to exceptions. In its way, the advert actually reinforces the cliché while gaining creative mileage from those rare situations where it breaks down.

So, Not a War, but a Game with Knives

Why should alluding to clichés in partial, roundabout ways produce a humorous result? Perhaps we recognize in these exploitations our desire to have it both ways: to want the widespread recognition and generalization power of the cliché without being seen to do something as crass as to actually use a cliché. The incomplete use of a cliché, and especially a negated use as we see in the "Vegas" example, makes the cliché an interpretative challenge of sorts, and returns to the cliché a sense of the linguistic novelty that is has long lost. Moreover, it signals a playful approach to language that leavens the subject matter of the cliché with humour, as when we laugh at the causes and serious consequences of divorce while mentally noting the name of the law firm, just in case.

Cliché is not the enemy of creativity, and no one is well served by pompous crusades to eradicate it from language. While clichés should always be handled with care, so that we the avoid the trap of "*opinion without thinking*", the familiarity of clichés is a tremendous resource for creative exploitation if it is used in a reasonably sophisticated, if sometimes ridiculous, manner. Like recurring comic-book villains who exist only to be defeated in one episode after another, clichés show us the ability of original thinking to always triumph over received opinion. Much that is creative in language arises out of a healthy rivalry with, rather than a disdainful repudiation of, cliché. Indeed, we find the fruits of this competitive rivalry in all classes of linguistic creativity, and Shakespeare himself was certainly not above the exploitation of familiar forms for humorous purposes. In *As You Like It*, Act III, scene ii, he gives Orlando a remarkably modern brush-off: "*Let's meet as little as we can. I do desire we be better strangers*". This barb exploits the same comic conceit and subverts the same social norm as a memorable Robert Mankoff cartoon in the New Yorker magazine. His cartoon shows a businessman on the phone, responding to a request for a meeting with the brush-off: "*Thursday doesn't*

work for me. How about never? Does never work for you?"

The Birth of A Cliché

The general disdain in which cliché is held is itself explained by the cliché that "*familiarity breeds contempt*". Indeed, it is impossible to talk about cliché without necessarily indulging in cliché ourselves. As the author and critic Christopher Ricks observes, the phrases we most use to express our disdain – such as "flyblown", "timeworn" and "hackneyed" – are themselves clichés for clichés, or as Ricks nicely puts it, *cliché-clichés*. Clichés are nothing if not useful, even for themselves, and this usefulness goes a long way toward explaining their widespread familiarity and appeal.

But it takes more than familiarity and usefulness for a pattern to be considered a cliché. After all, it is hardly a cliché to wear underwear *beneath* our clothes, or to put on our socks *before* our shoes, or to put the subject *before* the verb, or to brush *after* meals, or to kill an animal *before* eating it, or any of a million standardized behaviours that we take for granted. A familiar pattern becomes a cliché when it becomes reductive, lazy and judgmental. Verbal patterns, such as proverbs, platitudes, maxims and idioms, become clichéd when they are used to simplify a situation so that we are spared the effort of dealing with its unique complexities. For instance, the view of the average family as a unit comprising a mother, a father and 2.4 kids is a cliché, because it allows us to disregard the fact that many families live in unique circumstances. Likewise, the biblical story of "Adam and Eve" is a cliché, because it offers a simplified view of the relationship between the sexes, allowing us to judge others who do not match this view (in a rare show of linguistic creativity, the Christian right uses the phrase "*God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve*" to trumpet their adherence to the biblical cliché; note how the exploitation "*Adam and Steve*" is negated, to repudiate any creative interpretation, and perhaps even the idea of creativity itself). Any pattern can become a cliché if its usefulness as a linguistic or conceptual shortcut eventually allows it to short-circuit or bypass our critical faculties.

What other qualities should an idea possess before it can "go viral" as a cliché? First and foremost, it should seem attractive – a powerful generalization or an interesting

observation – something that we want to believe ourselves and that others will want to believe also when they too are exposed to it. To facilitate its viral spread from speaker to speaker, it must also be easily *meme*-ified: for actions and behaviours, this means it must be easily copied; for ideas and observations, it must be easily and pithily expressed in language. As defined by Richard Dawkins and elaborated by Susan Blakemore, a *meme* is a self-replicating mimetic unit that propagates cultural patterns in much the same way that genes propagate biological attributes. Many linguistic memes spread virulently because we mistakenly believe they make us more interesting at parties and other conversational settings. How many times have you heard the one about Eskimos having 26 words (or some other impressive number) for snow, or that the great wall of China is the only man-made structure that is visible from outer-space? Even more amazing than the widespread reach of these chestnuts is the fact that the people who spread them think they are passing on a valuable insight, some kind of secret wisdom, that will really impress an audience. But while these clichés are no better than the mimetic equivalent of junk-DNA, they can still be leveraged to form new and moderately interesting variants.

A cleverly varied cliché can retain much of the familiarity of its underlying source, resulting in an observation that seems both fresh and time-tested. Obviousness *after* the fact is an acceptable and often desirable quality of creative language, but obviousness *before* the fact invalidates the whole exercise. We must guard against the use of variation strategies that require too little thought on the part of an author, and which commoditize the variation process to the extent that even new variations seem clichéd at birth. Some clichés are just too easily varied. This can happen when a cliché has a resonant structure that is still recognizable when most of its content words are removed and replaced with blanks, allowing it to act as a fill-in-the-blank template into which lazy writers can insert their own elements. There is no creative leverage here, as new fillers drop effortlessly into place. An episode of the TV series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* has comedian Richard Lewis (playing himself) trying, and failing, to gain recognition in a book of quotations for his invention of the meta-cliché "*The X from Hell*", while those around him continue to coin uncredited variations (such as "*the lunch from hell*"). In real life Lewis was eventually credited for inventing the phrase by the *Yale Book of Quotations*, but it is a phrase that barely seems worthy of recognition. The problem is that phrases like this are

clichés even in their templatized form, and conform to what Geoff Pullum describes as "*multi-use, customizable, instantly recognizable, time-worn, quoted or misquoted phrase or sentence that can be used in an entirely open array of different jokey variants by lazy journalists and writers*". The only creative question raised by these phrases is what we might choose to call them as a class.

That old chestnut concerning Eskimo words for snow pops up in the most unlikely places. Though its credibility as a linguistic insight was demolished by Pullum in his essay *The great Eskimo vocabulary hoax*, and any remaining rubble was ground into a fine dust by Steven Pinker in his book The *Language Instinct*, this idiocy still has a degree of acceptance outside the world of linguistics. In 2003 it even appeared in an article in the otherwise sceptical *Economist* magazine, but in this particular case the author had the good sense to frame the issue as an open question, asserting "*If Eskimos have dozens of words for snow, Germans have as many for bureaucracy*". This little analogical two-step allowed the author to exploit all the familiarity of the popular cliché while shielding himself from the question of its veracity. First time out, this may seem a somewhat creative exploitation of the cliché, but the pattern is all too easily replicated, and Pullum claims to have spotted or been told about dozens of variations in the media. Other examples of reused patterns include "*[Gray] is the new [Black]*", "*In [Space] no one can hear you [Scream]*" and Saddam Hussein's "*The Mother of all [Battles]*".

Some templatized clichés start out as more or less creative parodies of a Zeitgeist phenomenon, but widespread over-use quickly turns the pattern into a devalued currency. One such phrase is "*This is your brain on [drugs]*", the slogan of a memorable anti-drugs TV campaign that first ran on American television in 1987. In its original version, a man standing at a stove holds up an egg ("*This is your brain*") and a frying-pan ("*This is drugs*") before breaking the egg into the pan and cooking it to complete his metaphor ("*This is your brain on drugs*"). In a more elaborate and visceral 1998 revival, the pan is not used to fry the egg, but to dramatically smash it on the counter-top. By 1998 there was no need to repeat the whole slogan, since by then it had already acquired the status of a cultural artifact easily evoked by a mere mention of its parts. The campaign so captured the public imagination that Google now retrieves over half a million hits for the original

slogan, while revealing that a wide variety of substitutions for "drugs" are also possible, including "music" (86,600 hits), "religion" (10,900 hits), "God" (2,150 hits), "Jazz" (1,890 hits), "caffeine" (1,070 hits), "sugar" (993 hits) "movies" (991 hits), "politics" (945 hits), "chocolate" (441 hits), and perhaps not surprisingly, "Google" (1,470 hits). The pattern has even been co-opted by techies to talk about "Java", "C++" and "Firefox".

These clichés are attractive because they immediately suggest how we too might exploit their pithy structure to convey our own ideas, and as shown by *The Economist* example, they are by no means the preserve of the uncultured or the uneducated. The respected writer Erica Jong has been known to use a few as well, from *X is the opiate of the Y* (aping Karl Marx to say "*gossip is the opiate of the oppressed*") to *Show me an X and I'll show you a Y* (deserting logic for humour with "*show me a women who doesn't feel guilty and I'll show you a man*"). The phrases that are templatized do not have to be staples of popular culture, and mid- to high-brows certainly have their own meta-clichés to play with, such as Charlotte Brontë's line from the closing chapter of Jane Eyre: "*Reader, I [married] him*". Insert what you like here, and imagine Ms. Brontë with your words in her mouth; popular choices range from "*Reader, I murdered him*" (869 Google hits) to "*Reader, I divorced him*" (670 hits"), to "*Reader, I shagged him*" (431 hits) and even "*Reader, I fucked him*" (10 hits). The "shagged" variant has even been used as a headline in *The Guardian* newspaper, for an article that asks us to reconsider the not-so-prim Ms. Brontë from a perspective that her major biographers have largely overlooked.

To describe these phrases as meta-clichés is to somehow suggest that they transcend their status as clichés, when in fact they become all the more ingrained as clichés for their easy reusability in different forms. These are not the "benign possibilities" that Ricks suggests will allow us to imaginatively engage with cliché. Looking for a word to nicely encapsulate this virulent mix of familiarity and reusability, Pullum declared himself stumped, but the economist Glen Whitman has minted a catchy label, "Snowclones", that has found favour with linguists and non-linguists alike. Though obviously and only a metaphor, and a playful one at that, Whitman's evocation of cloning nicely captures our general ambivalence about replication without limits. Cloning is one of those technological possibilities that excites and worries in equal measure, and though many

can see the benefits of thoughtful experimentation on a personal level, most are repulsed by the notion of mass commoditization on an industrial scale. Untrammelled replication, untroubled by thought, is rarely a good thing, either for memes or genes.

Tight Little Units

The language we use can reveal as much about us as the clothes we wear and the foods we eat. Perhaps the most revealing of all are the short-hands, compressions and neologisms that communities invent, to make it easier to talk amongst themselves about the topics they care most about. Ski-bums, for instance, have a curiously technical term for the people who cut the most attractive figures on and off the slopes: they refer to these "beautiful people" as *tight little units*, or TLUs. While the term has an obvious efficiency for text-messaging, it pre-dates the advent of mobile phones and Blackberry devices, and primarily exists to linguistically unite those concepts – such as compactness and elegance – that ski-bums find most aesthetically pleasing. As if to reinforce this point, the term is itself a good example, figuratively speaking, of that which it describes; acronyms like TLU are themselves tight little units of language.

Strictly speaking, TLU is an initialism rather than an acronym since, unlike NASA, NATO and UNESCO, it is not pronounced as a word but as a letter-sequence. But the distinction is, for the most part, a pedantic one; while in spoken conversation ski-bums are forced to pronounce TLU as *Tee-Ell-You* rather than *TuhLoo*, on the printed page (or phone screen) they surely see it as a single word that is a unified whole. Consider WWW, an acronym/initialism that is now used almost everywhere. To speak it aloud, WWW asks us to use three times as many syllables as the phrase "world-wide-web" that it substitutes for. This phonetic excess is tolerable only because WWW offers a degree of conceptual convenience in exchange. As Tim Berners-Lee recounts in his book *Weaving The Web*:

"*The name reflected the distributed nature of the people and computers that the system could link. It offered the promise of a potentially global system. Friends at CERN gave me a hard time, saying it would never take off – especially since it*

yielded an acronym that was nine syllables long when spoken. Nonetheless, I decided to forge ahead."

Visually, WWW acts as a kind of textual logo for the global promise of the web. On the printed page we do not mentally pronounce it aloud, as a learner reader might do, but see it as a coherent, visual whole. On the printed page, WWW is one tight little unit.

A popular acronym represents a conventionalized mapping between a phrase and a conveniently reduced and compacted form of that phrase. Such acronyms are not exactly clichés in the strict sense of the word, but their mappings can certainly become tired with age. Indeed, an acronym can become more than a convenient shorthand, and come to represent, over time, the main linguistic identity of an entity. For example, IBM is more widely known by the name "*AyeBeeEmm*" than by the fuddy-duddy expansion "International Business Machines", allowing wags to suggest alternative expansions that better suit the company's sometimes negative public image amongst hackers and hobbyists, such as "*Impractical But Marketable*", "*Incest Breeds Morons*", and (because many hackers adore Tolkien) "*In Bleakest Mordor*". In Fudan university, Shanghai, where IBM sponsors a research group on e-business, the company provides one of the few Western-style non-squat toilets on campus. Jealously locked by its users, keys to the "IBM toilet" are sought with the same covetousness as the mythical key to the executive washroom in Billy Wilder's *The Apartment*. For these users, and to the company's chagrin, IBM is much more likely to signify "*Imminent Bowel Movement*" than "*Incredibly Brilliant Marketing*". When an initialism gains a foothold in the language, speakers can simply stop caring what the individual letters mean, or whether they even have a meaning. Who cares what the 'E' means in UNICEF (it once meant *Emergency*, but no longer; the 'E' is still useful phonetically, but has no current semantic or pragmatic purpose), or the 'A' in SAT tests (which has gone from meaning *Aptitude* to *Assessment* to meaning nothing at all; the formulators of the SAT apparently have a "don't ask, don't tell" policy about the meaning of the term) or the 'V' in DVD (which can mean either *Video* or *Versatile* if you care to expand the term, which few people do)?

While speakers understandably pronounce DVD as an initialism ("*Dee-Vee-Dee*" rather than the ugly "*Divd*"), speakers curiously prefer to pronounce SAT as an initialism

("*Ess-Ay-Tee*" rather than *"Sat"*). Once firmly established as tight little units, acronyms tend to be more recognizable and exhibit more stability than the entities and phrases for which they are intended, in some cases falling out of lockstep with their erstwhile expansions. As Berners-Lee notes in his description of the scientific laboratory CERN, the institution was first named for the council that established it, the *Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire*. This council no longer exists, and CERN now explores high-energy physics in general, rather than nuclear physics specifically, yet the name CERN persists, not as an acronym but as a standalone name. With this kind of wiggle-room between an acronym and its expansion, there is plenty of opportunity to coin creative variations of popular acronyms, much as we might do for clichés.

Certainly, the excessive use of an acronym can grate just as much as over-use of a cliché, especially when the acronym is used lazily as an emotive substitute for critical thinking. Consider the acronym WMD, for *Weapon of Mass Destruction*, a term that was widely used – and inevitably over-used – in the run up to, and the aftermath of, the Iraq War in 2003. The expansion has itself become something of a cliché, with the vague terror implied by "mass destruction" employed to short-circuit a listener's critical judgements and to give greater credibility to ill-defined threats. While the term "*weapon of mass destruction*" has been in linguistic currency for decades, the handy acronym only truly came into its own in 2002, when the media was abuzz with claims that Iraq had stockpiled large quantities of WMDs while managing to keep these stockpiles hidden from UN weapons inspectors. When the American Dialect Society voted for its word of the year in 2002, WMD garnered more than three times as many votes from society members as the nearest runner-up, "Google" (though "Google" did win outright as verb of the year, garnering all votes that were cast). With the international community split over the likelihood of Saddam Hussein possessing real WMDs, and those believing in their existence leading the cause for a pre-emptive war, this was a fertile environment for the spread of a relatively new but catchy acronym. Prolific use inevitably lead to usage that was often over-wrought, with WMDs commonly used as a catch-all for some indescribable horror. Equally inevitable, however, was a proliferation of more or less humorous variations that undermine the clichéd use of WMD as a geopolitical bogeyman.

All things being equal, the best acronym exploitations are those that use substitutions with the same initials, thereby maintaining the viability of the acronym. In the case of WMD, this obviously requires that *Weapon* is replaced with another *W*-word, or *Mass* with another *M*-word, or *Destruction* with another *D*-word. This alphabetically-sorted list shows the most common web variations on "*Weapons of Mass Destruction*", along with their web frequencies, as found using Google in 2007:

War of Mass Deception	58	Wardrobe of Mad Dysfunction	121
Weapon of Mad Distortion	127	Weapon of Major Disturbance	40
Weapon of Mass Deception	50,070	Weapon of Mass Deduction	227
Weapon of Mass Deconstruction	110	Weapon of Mass Delusion	205
Weapon of Mass Democracy	79	Weapon of Mass Deportation	79
Weapon of Mass Digestion	244	Weapon of Mass Disappearance	195
Weapon of Mass Discussion	17,711	Weapon of Mass Disenfranchisement	195
Weapon of Mass Disinformation	296	Weapon of Mass Disruption	649
Weapon of Mass Dissembling	76	Weapon of Mass Dissemination	500
Weapon of Mass Dissent	67	Weapon of Mass Distortion	3,197
Weapon of Mass Distraction	9,187	Weapon of Mass Disturbance	133
Weapon of Mass Dysfunction	80	Weapon of Math Destruction	169
Weapon of Minimal Destruction	42	Weapon of Minor Destruction	101
Weapon of Moose Destruction	92	Weapon of Mosquito Destruction	392
Weapon of Mouse Destruction	207	Website of Mass Destruction	197
Wedding of Mass Destruction	367	Whining of Mass Distraction	386
Whippet of Mass Destruction	128	Whisky of Mass Destruction	110
William of Mass Destruction	347	Witch of Mass Destruction	262
Woman of Mass Destruction	762	Woman of Mass Distraction	245
Word of Mass Deception	656	Word of Mass Destruction	197
Word of Mass Disinterest	476	Word of Mass Dissemination	752
Word of Mass Distraction	59	Worm of Mass Destruction	63

The proliferation of variations reveals that "*[Weapon] of [Mass] [Destruction]*" is now

so easily modifiable that it has become a snowclone, but a snowclone with a somewhat interesting wrinkle. While the basic template accepts a wide range of substitutions for all of its three key positions, the resulting string can still yield "WMD" as an initialism. Variations are thus recognizable on two different levels: first, because they superficially resemble the original phrase and share its cadence and even some of its wording; and second, because they can be compacted to yield the same acronym. Some variations substitute their own peculiar contents into all three positions of the snowclone – yielding oddities like "*Wardrobe of Mad Dysfunction*" – while others vary just two positions – like "*Woman of Mass Distraction*" – and many more vary just one position, like "*William of Mass Destruction*", the title of a rather odd blog about a cat named "William". When a phrase that can evoke enough fear to successfully drive a campaign for war morphs into a cute name for a cat, we know that the phrase has well and truly lost its power to inspire.

Since the original phrase denotes a weapon – an object that is defined by its effects rather than its material form – it becomes relatively straightforward to vary its parts to produce something that is seemingly potent enough to be dangerous, and thus serve as a metaphorical weapon. For instance, a "*Weapon of Mass Deduction*" can either be seen as a potent tool for performing logical inference, or a nifty weapon to be used against the tax-man. Even a "*Whining of Mass Distraction*" can be seen as a metaphorical weapon if we view anything with nuisance value as potentially damaging. Because these variations preserve the initialism "WMD", they can be considered not just weapon-like, but an odd kind of WMD in their own right, though such a categorization is usually hard to make with a straight face. Generally speaking, the degree of humour generated by a particular variation will be a function of the incongruity that is caused by the substitutions involved. Thus, while still a weapon, a "*Weapon of Mosquito Destruction*" is not quite so serious as a true WMD, since even large-scale killing of mosquitoes is generally seen as a good thing. Likewise, replacing "Mass" with either "Moose" or "Mouse" results in a phrase that may well describe a real weapon, but a weapon that is hardly of the same seriousness; the result is meaningful, but the process by which it is created is shown to be ridiculous by common-sense standards. The incongruity is most obvious when replacement words explicitly negate an important trait of the original concept. Thus, a "*Weapon of Minor Destruction*" can be seen as a deliberate attempt to subvert the idea of

a WMD, and one can imagine this expansion being used with some irony, perhaps to describe an expensive weapon that proves to be a damp squib, or a cache of conventional weapons that poor intelligence had wrongly classified as WMDs.

When it is so easy to generate variations like this, the whole process soon loses its value as a creative exercise. It is hard to imagine any variation on the WMD theme now producing a strikingly creative or humorous effect. However, there are always hidden pockets of creative potential in even the most over-used strategies if they are used in the right context. In particular, the stupidity of some expansions can be used to humorous effect if this stupidity can be attributed to, and used to subvert, a figure of power. In a column of February 2009, *The Guardian* writer Tim Dowling imagines George W. Bush, newly retired, getting a job in a Texas gun shop, leading to this imaginary dialogue:

Customer: *I need me a real big weapon. Something that can kill a lot of stuff at once.*

Bush: *Sounds like you're in the market for what we all call a WMD - a weapon of much damage.*

Bush is an easy target, but result is mildly humorous if we imbue the dialogue with a slow Texas drawl and the ex-president's shoulder shrugs and twitchy laugh. The humour here does not arise out of any *semantic* incongruity as such – the new expansion means much the same thing as the old, though the meaning is more quaintly articulated – but out of a *pragmatic* incongruity, namely the conceit that a president who predicated a war on the existence of WMDs does not know what "WMD" stands for. Curiously, this is not the first usage of "*weapon of much damage*". An annual report of the *Illinois State Charities Commission* in 1911 says the following about a state-run mental hospital:

> "*The wash basins are all provided with plumbing that these patients will tamper with and break. The same is true of the closets. The nickel plated handle bar with white knob will be wrenched loose and in the hands of a desperate patient will be a weapon of much damage and trouble.*"

Not exactly an early form of WMD, but an interesting reminder that the creativity of a new word or phrase is as much a function of how it is used as how it is formed.

In a show of redundancy that is peculiar to acronyms, and to snowclones based on acronyms, the imaginary Bush uses the term "WMD" to preface to his own expansion. This parallelism makes it clear that the expansion – which we know to be wrong – is indeed intended as an expansion of WMD, and is not an innocent use of a phrase that coincidentally yields the same acronym. Yet because of the inherent economy offered by acronyms, this kind of redundancy seems neither heavy-handed nor wasteful. In fact, this kind of redundancy is typical of acronym usage, and is most evident when an acronym is used several times in the same text. Helpful writers do not assume that readers know the meaning of even the most common acronyms, and provide a parenthetical expansion as a useful key the first time one is used in a text. This applies not just to culturally entrenched acronyms like FBI and CIA (which have been popularized by countless movies), but also to foreign-language acronyms like KGB whose expansions are not half as memorable as the acronyms themselves. Not all writers are helpful, but it only takes a few for each acronym to have an easily findable expansion on the web. Computers thus encounter little difficulty in scanning the web to look for acronyms and their expansions *en masse*, as both together are found in a tight pattern, "*XYZ (X-word Y-Word Z-Word)*". Among the tens of thousands of acronym expansions found in this way, we find one beloved of spies and spy-movies everywhere: KGB (*Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti*).

Spy movies throw around acronyms with abandon, to evoke a cryptic atmosphere redolent with secrets. In the third *Mission: Impossible* movie, the hero Tom Cruise reveals to his fiancée (who he has just saved from a tortuous death) that he has lied about his job: he is not a boring civil servant after all, but a super-spy for a secret agency named the IMF. While this goes some way toward explaining recent plot developments, she is puzzled by the acronym "IMF", which Tom helpfully expands as "*Impossible Mission Force*". Eager for the film to end, she takes the explanation in her stride, though it still strikes a false note with the audience. The IMF is such a mainstay of the news pages, with an altogether more boring expansion, that such a confession is much less likely to elicit a "*Wow!*" than a "*you work for the International Monetary Fund?!?*". Where better to hide if you are a spy pretending to be a boring civil servant? Even on the web, where pop-culture trivia tends to trump all other forms of knowledge, the pattern "IMF (*International Monetary Fund*)" has three times as much currency as its rival, "IMF

(*Impossible Mission Force*)", with 158,000 Google hits to the latter's 46,400. Since films like "*Mission: Impossible*" try to have it both ways, often putting their cartoon pyrotechnics in a topical context, this false note also represents a lost opportunity of sorts, by failing to capitalize on the ambiguity of a rather topical and plot-central acronym. Variant expansions of common acronyms can be humorous – not wildly so, but no less funny than many puns or madcap folk etymologies – and provide a concise means of juxtaposing two complex ideas. Perhaps, in these torrid economic times, the International Monetary Fund really is a kind of Impossible Mission Force?

Variant expansions are almost always offered in jest, yet the humour often conveys the sense that "this is the way it *really* is". *The Economist*, for instance, notes that the London School of Economics – the LSE – is so popular with American students that LSE might well be expanded as "*Let's See Europe*" (*The Economist* then builds on this to describe the Nobel-winning economist Paul Krugman as a "*distinguished sightseer*"). Acronyms for organizations that purport to be all about intelligence are especially good targets for deconstruction and ridicule in this way. Consider the most common variations for expansions of CIA and FBI, as visible on the web via Google (2007 web frequencies):

Central Intelligence Agency	370198	Culinary Institute of America	86678
California Institute of Architecture	7877	Criminals In Action	2920
California Institute of Arts	1227	Christians In Action	739
Central Institute of Aviation	461	Central Intelligence for Analysis	458
Central Intelligence for Administration	279	Culinary Institute of America	236
Complex Interface Adapter	224	California Institute of Art	205
Central Institute of Art	127	Central Institute of Arts	124
California Institute of Archaeology	69	Culinary Institute in Arizona	68
Central Institute for Art	59	California Institute for Architecture	41
Federal Bureau of Investigation	373735	Full Blooded Italian	975
First Born Incentive	686	Female Body Inspector	318
Federal Bureau of Intimidation	278	Federal Bureau of Intelligence	208
Federal Bureau of Information	206	Full Blooded Irish	195

Fumbling Bumbling Idiots	174	Federal Bureau of Incompetence	156
Full Blooded Iranian	144	Federal Bureau of Insecurity	87
Federal Bureau of Immigration	83	Federal Bureau of Identification	64
Federal Bureau of Idiots	57	Female Bureau of Investigation	56
Federal Bureau of Infanticide	44	Full Blooded Iraqi	44

Naturally enough, the most frequent expansions are the official readings for each acronym, suggesting that web frequency is a good heuristic for automatically identifying true expansions among large lists of more playful variations. Surprisingly, some high-frequency variations are not obvious jokes, but actually denote legitimate organizations in their own right. One has to question the wisdom of a moniker that gives a culinary institute the acronym CIA, unless the name is deliberately intended to remind us of the more famous home of cloak-and-dagger. CIA is an evocative name, but as evidenced by the fact that it embraces both "*Criminals in Action*" and "*Christians in Action,* it is an acronym that suggests very different things to people at different ends of the political spectrum. If "C-I-A" is a snowclone because of its proven ability to accept a wide range of expansions, then we have to recognize "*[C-word] in Action*" as a snowclone *within* a snowclone, since it too is a highly productive strategy for generating a particular class of CIA expansions (even more so than "*Full-Blooded [I-Word]*" as a strategy for expanding "FBI"). Trawling the web with Google, we find a range of other *C*-words that are used (besides the obviously rude) to instantiate "*[C-word] in Action*", such as *Catholics, Children, Cows, Commandos, Creativity, Consultants, Comics* and *Conservatives*.

On a semantic level, each of these expansions works in much the same way: a simple substitution turns CIA into an evocative description that focuses on the dynamics of a particular kind of person or process. Yet pragmatically, even simple substitutions like this can work in very different ways beneath the hood. While one variation might be intended as a parody of the original phrase and its denotation, another might simply wish to borrow the name-recognition of this original phrase and ascribe it (and some of its associated qualities) to a completely unrelated entity. Only common-sense knowledge of the world can indicate the direction in which the information is intended to flow, from variation to original, or from original to variation. For instance, it seems clear that

"*Criminals in Action*" is offered as an indictment of the CIA, to portray it as an organization that bends or breaks the law in practicing its intrigue and skulduggery. Much commentary about the CIA is critical in nature, so there is significant support for viewing this expansion as an unflattering characterization of the CIA. In contrast, it seems highly unlikely that "*Christians in Action*" is also intended as a characterization of the CIA. Since even the Christian media are not particularly flattering of the CIA, there is little evidence to support a reading that views the CIA as a religious organization whose intrigues somehow adhere to Christian precepts. Rather, the expansion is clearly intended to describe to a group of Christians in a way that strives to be interesting and *cool*, but which ends us sounding quaint, as such attempts by religious organizations frequently do.

Given the interlocking constraints that apply to the production of humorous acronyms, computers are understandably quite good at the semantic aspects of production i.e., generating phrases that yield the correct initialism, and which evoke – through lexical associations – meanings that undermine the conventional reading of the acronym. However, just as understandably, they are poor at recognizing and exploiting the pragmatic dimension of these simple strategies. *HaHacronym* is a computer system that explores the semantic sweet-spot in the space of potentially funny acronym expansions. Its designers, Oliviero Stock and Carlo Strapparava, demonstrate that electronic dictionaries like WordNet, when augmented with domain information, can be used as semantic-networks for automatically finding both apt and ironic replacements for the words in an acronym expansion. *HaHacronym* (which itself expands as "*Humorous Agents for Humorous Acronyms*") has two modes of operation: reanalysis and generation. In reanalysis mode, a known acronym such as FBI is presented to the system, whereupon *HaHacronym* identifies alternate words that share the same first letter as a word in the conventional expansion. Alternates are then chosen that have a meaning which is somehow contrary to the meaning of the original word or to the meaning of the acronym as a whole. In this way, *HaHacronym* suggests "*Fantastic Bureau of Intimidation*" for FBI (compare this with "*Federal Bureau of Intimidation*" and "*Federal Bureau of Incompetence*", which are popular expansions on the web).

In its generation mode, *HaHacronym* requires that the user anchor its search around a given noun topic, and a property of that topic to subvert in the resulting acronym. The

system then searches for other words that are ironically related to these anchors, for which a similarly ironic expansion can be generated. For instance, when given the anchors "tutoring" and "intelligent", *HaHacronym* considers the word "naive" as an inappropriate (and thus humorous) label for a supposedly "intelligent tutoring" activity; it then dissects this label to suggest NAIVE as an acronym for "*Negligent At-large Instruction for Vulnerable Extracurricular-activity*". Note how this expansion contains a mix of near-synonyms and near-antonyms of the given anchor words (e.g., "instruction" for "tutoring" and "negligent" for "intelligent") to make the expansion apt yet incongruous given its goal. Note how *HaHacronym* also cleverly hides awkward words behind hyphens, so that they do not have to be capitalized and break a nice acronym.

Does a system that can generate funny acronyms offer any scalable insights into linguistic creativity more generally? Well, acronyms are just one manifestation of a creative drive for leverage through concision, in which our words are made to work harder for us. Compression at the conceptual level strengthens the connections between ideas, while compression at the phrase level makes our words more efficient and resonant at evoking these ideas. Humorous acronyms engage all the usual suspects of linguistic creativity, from categorization to inference to incongruity resolution to conceptual integration. If approaches like *HaHacronym* seem unlikely candidates to scale into a general approach to creativity, it is because they, as yet, lack the opportunism and initiative to mobilize these mechanisms in the service of their own creative agenda.

Familiar Surprises, Hollywood-Style

The Bible expresses a very dim view of human creativity. True creativity, the ability to create something from nothing, is claimed to be the preserve of God alone. What is left, the lesser ability to create something relatively new out of something relatively old, becomes the allowable preserve of man. This idea of human invention as transformation rather than creation is expressed in *Ecclesiastes* 1:9 as follows:

> "*The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.*"

For mere mortals like ourselves, creativity becomes a matter of knowing what to borrow or reuse, and of knowing how to exploit that which is reused. Yet this is actually quite a comforting viewpoint, since it makes creativity a matter of method rather than magic. We know exactly where we are with a *reuse and combine* view of creativity, and can use empirical investigation to identify the most workable strategies for achieving the best results. The reworking of clichés to leverage more meaning, or even a contradictory and surprising meaning, out of familiar structures is one such strategy that fits well with the *Ecclesiastes* world-view. It is also a strategy that fits remarkably well with the Hollywood view of the world. In fact, Hollywood has been using this strategy to make movies almost as long as there have been movies to make.

As a case in point, the Italian novelist and semiotician Umberto Eco has shown that the classic Hollywood film *Casablanca* is a pastiche of many clichéd cinematic elements, assembled as one might put together a collage or a quilt. Indeed, Eco describes the film as an *inter-textual collage*, noting that characters like Viktor Laslo seem to be simple assemblages of vignettes from other films. For instance, every time we see Lazlo at Rick's bar he seems to be ordering a completely different kind of drink, as if believing himself to be in very different circumstances (and films) each time. Eco's critique is actually quite compelling, at least when read on the page, but it is soon forgotten when viewing the film itself. Who cares if Michael Curtiz, the director, assembled the picture from standardized parts, as a watchmaker might assemble a watch? The important point is that this approach works; *Casablanca* remains one of the most watchable Hollywood films of any era, and is not diminished in the least by our insights into how it was made.

Casablanca is both respected and loved as a movie, which further goes to show that a well-used cliché (or even a collage of clichés) is no hindrance to creativity. Another much-loved film that relies heavily on the artful exploitation of cliché is *Star Wars*, though this movie is perhaps more loved than respected. The critic Pauline Kael offered such a savage critique of *Star Wars* that its director, George Lucas, gave the skull-faced villain of his later fantasy effort, *Willow,* the dread-inspiring name *General Kael*. Here is what General Kael has to say about *Star Wars* in her book *When the Lights Go Down*:

"It's an assemblage of spare parts [...] Star Wars may be the only movie in which

the first time around the surprises are reassuring. [...] Maybe the only real inspiration of Star Wars was to set its sci-fi galaxy in the pop-art past, and to turn old-movie ineptness into conscious Pop Art. [...] the picture is synthesized from the mythology of serials and old comic books"

Well, if you put it like that! Star Wars is indeed a liberal hodgepodge of diverse cinematic influences, from the 1953 western, *Shane*, to the 1954 war movie *The Dam Busters*, to Kurasawa's 1958 samurai classic *The Hidden Fortress*, not to mention the many aspects of the *King Arthur* legends that it helps itself to. However, it is a marvellously well-executed hodgepodge that employs creativity to achieve a coherent synthesis of its parts. It is always easier to be a critic than a creator, and easier to show that a certain narrative is, in Kael's terms, an assemblage of spare parts than it is to identify and assemble those spare parts oneself. Creativity will always look easier after the fact, when faced with a finished product to analyze (from what we have called *the consumer's perspective*) than it does before the fact, when faced with a blank page (what we have called *the producer's perspective*). Nonetheless, Kael makes some good points, and exhibits an acerbic creativity of her own in this analysis. In referring to the elements of *Star Wars* as *spare* parts, she seems to suggest that they are left-overs from other movies. We can assume that these spare parts are clichés, and are spare only because other movies have long stopped using them, or least make an effort to avoid using them. Yet if other movies no longer use them, these clichés may have regained their ability to surprise an audience in some retro fashion. Kael is speaking specifically about *Star Wars* when she memorably asserts "*the first time round the surprises are reassuring*", but her insight extends to the whole idea of exploiting new variations of established forms for creative ends. What Rachel Giora calls optimal innovation and Patrick Hanks calls exploitation of norms is nicely captured by what Kael calls a reassuring surprise.

Kael takes issue with Hollywood's tendency to turn past successes into templates for future success, placing greater emphasis on reassurance over surprise. Much as we might breathe new life into a linguistic cliché with a little lexical variation, Hollywood producers often attempt to exploit established forms by varying them in high-concept ways. Sometimes this variation yields surprising success, both critically and financially. For instance, Akira Kurosawa's 1954 Japanese film *The Seven Samurai* became the 1960

American film *The Magnificent Seven*, by transposing the action to the American West and turning the sword-wielding samurai into heroic gun-slingers. Likewise, the 1961 musical *West-Side Story* is a Hollywood reworking of Shakespeare's 1594 play *Romeo and Juliet*, in which rival families the Montagues and the Capulets become the rival street-gangs the Jets and the Sharks. Baz Luhrman's version, *Romeo + Juliet*, is also a musical set amongst crime families in Verona beach, with most of its dialogue taken directly from Shakespeare's play. Surprisingly, the whole affair not only works, it excels. Big risks clearly produce the biggest rewards. Though cinematic heavy-hitters like Orson Welles had struggled and failed to film a faithful treatment of Joseph Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness*, the director Francis Ford Coppola succeeded with his 1979 movie *Apocalypse Now*. By transposing the action from the Belgian Congo to Vietnam and Cambodia, Coppola successfully exploited Conrad's story as a critique of the U.S. role in the Vietnam war. In its own way, the 1994 film Forrest Gump also found success by making Vietnam the centerpiece of its rather loose variation on Voltaire's 1759 novel *Candide*. The Coen brothers' depression-era comedy *O Brother, Where Art Thou* is also only loosely based on its classical source, Homer's *Odyssey*, but the exploitation works so well that the film was nominated for, and won, an Oscar for best *adapted* screenplay.

These films trumpet their exploitation of earlier source material, and try to vary it in interesting and memorable ways. But these are by far the minority. Most Hollywood variations on a theme really are a calculated assemblage of ill-fitting parts, from pointless remakes that add nothing to the original, to even more pointless sequels that actually diminish our fondness for the original. Does 1995's *Water World* really improve on *Mad Max* and the *Road Warrior* by setting its post-apocalyptic world at sea rather than on land? Unlike 1956's *Forbidden Planet*, which does a nice job of putting Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in a science-fiction setting, 1981's *Outland* does a rather poor job of transposing the classic 1953 western *High Noon* to a mining colony in space. The Tarantino-scripted *True Romance* of 1993 adds a little comic streamlining to the superior *Badlands* of 1973, but 1990's *Days of Thunder* adds nothing at all to 1986's *Top Gun*, so much so that critics nicknamed it *Top Car* upon its release. But even these exercises in cynicism do not make a war on cliché any more sensible. Most films rely on clichés of one form or another, from the boy-meets-girl structure of romance movies to the journey

(metaphoric or otherwise) of self-discovery and renewal that Joseph Campbell argues is the basic structure of most hero-centric stories. The key to using cliché creatively is to exploit the audience's knowledge of cliché to shape their expectations. Once firmly established, these expectations can be used either lazily or creatively. If used creatively, such expectations can serve as the fulcrum on which more creative outcomes – such as surprising wordplay, metaphor and humour – can be leveraged. If used lazily, these expectations serve as little more than templates for more-of-the-same variation, linguistic nests in which uncreative cuckoos can lay their sadly predictable eggs.

This Is Your Brain on Analogy

You see how simple this is? You can put almost anything you like into the template "*This is your brain on X*" and still end up with a vaguely meaningful result. But this bottle of champagne was uncorked a long time ago, and all the drinks now seem flat and stale. The pattern has plainly seen better days, and yet, because it is so easy to exploit, it seems like everyone is doing it. This extreme reusability has lead Geoff Pullum to describe these patterns as "*phrases for lazy writers in kit form*". This laziness extends to the vague relationship between the surface form of the new variation and its original source material. While the original TV advert made a visceral connection between drugs and their effects on the brain, there is only the vaguest correspondence between the linguistic and conceptual levels in many of the easy variants that have followed. In contrast to the original usage, we are not actually shown anything, so there is no "This" to learn from. Adopting the design perspective of famed designer Donald Norman, we can see that many of these new variants emphasise visibility over natural mapping: in my example above, I have used a popular snowclone to advertise my wares – that is, to announce that I want to talk about analogy now – but I have not established a very strong mapping between these wares and the conceptual structure of the pattern I have co-opted.

I really do want to talk about analogy here, since changes to the surface level of an established pattern should imply systematic changes to the conceptual as well. Suppose we are discussing a new, and much cheaper, synthetic variation of the drug LSD, and you ask me about the street name of this new drug. Knowing very little about such things, I

reply "*Lucy in the sky with cubic zirconium*" (in fact, this a line from the TV series *House*, series 3, episode 4). This response is clearly a variation on the title of *The Beatles* song "*Lucy in the sky with Diamonds*", which is widely believed to be the band's lyrical way of referring to LSD, a drug very much in fashion when the song was penned. Because the response works on several levels of meaning at once, so too does the phrase as a whole, and so the variation can be considered creative. On one level, cubic zirconium is a commonplace substitute for diamonds, in jewellery such as engagement rings, bracelets and so on. Because it is a synthetic material, it is cheaper to produce and to buy, and results in a product that might also be deemed cheap and inauthentic. The superficial replacement of "diamonds" with "cubic zirconium" thus has an analogical effect on the conceptual level, to create an apt name for a cheap synthetic drug. Note how the new name is not a direct variant of the drug's real name, but of a song lyric that merely suggests this real name. The analogy may even suggest the existence of a song titled "*Lucy in the sky with cubic zirconium*", perhaps sung by a cheap rip-off of *The Beatles*.

If there were a commercial need to creatively name a synthetic form of LSD, "*Lucy in the sky with cubic zirconium*" would be a most unlikely and unwieldy choice. The phrasing lacks concision and is far more cumbersome than the simpler and more direct "*synthetic LSD*". In fact, while the latter states exactly what it needs to, in a compact two-word phrase, the former is ambiguous, does not yield a valid acronym for what it describes (indeed, it breaks a perfectly good acronym), and takes a gratuitous detour through a song lyric whose relevance may seem spurious to some. But the phrase is not intended to serve as a creatively concise name, rather as a playful expression of a deeper conceptual analogy, and in this role, the phrase serves admirably. Structurally, the analogy is a simple one, based on the following proportion:

Synthetic LSD : real LSD ::   cubic zirconium : diamond

Though simple, this proportional analogy communicates buckets of attitude, much more than the bland "synthetic LSD" ever could. It tells us that while the synthetic drug is superficially similar to the real thing, it is cheaper, of lower quality, and designed to appeal to buyers with little money or discernment. This critical attitude contributes a

sharp-edged sardonic tone to the description, though the humour also largely derives from the gratuitous use of a *Beatles* lyric, which ironically suggests that this new drug might actually be worth singing about. This very idea is as implausible, and laughable, as the idea of a band like *The Beatles* singing enthusiastically about cubic zirconium.

Scientific analogies allow us to establish proportional relations of the form *A is to B as C is to D*, as in *planets are to the sun as electrons are to the nucleus*. Humorous analogies likewise allow us to communicate proportional *attitudes*. Suppose a man gives his girlfriend a ring with a diamond-like stone so large and flashy that it is clearly not a real diamond, and she replies, in a singing voice, "*Cubic zirconia are a girl's best friend!*". Once again we have a situation where cubic zirconium drives a person to ironic lyricism, but this time the reply evokes a song lyric made famous by Marilyn Monroe, in her 1953 film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. In fact, Monroe is so strongly associated with this song that the following proportional analogy is implied by the new, variant lyric:

girlfriend : Marilyn Monroe :: cubic zirconia : diamonds

In other words, whereas Monroe received diamonds as a reflection of her worth, the girlfriend receives cheaper, synthetic stones as an apparent measure of her own worth. The response is ironic because *cubic zirconia* cannot meaningfully be used as a replacement for *diamonds* in the lyric, even if the girl's benefactor appears to believe that they can be a physical replacement for diamonds in his gift to her. So the girl does not actually believe that "*Cubic zirconia are a girl's best friend!*", but uses the inappropriateness of the resulting lyric (and the implausibility of Marilyn Monroe ever singing such a lyric) to highlight the inappropriateness of the gift she has been given. Some statements are appropriate, and some are incongruous, but as humour theorist Elliott Oring as noted, humour only arises from statements that are appropriately incongruous and incongruously appropriate.

Form as a Container of Meaning

Clichés allow us to structure our thoughts in very familiar ways. When used without

nuance or modification, clichés express generalities that have been articulated a thousand times before in exactly the same way. Yet as we have seen, clichés can often be varied to better suit the context of their use, by viewing key elements of their formal make-up as replaceable and open to creative substitution. Variations on a familiar form can be well-crafted one-offs or cheap knock-offs that can be cloned a hundred times by others. In each case we use the familiar form of the cliché as a container for our own specific meaning, exploiting the fact that audiences know how to unlock the contents of these everyday containers. Even after the substitution of key elements, a creatively varied cliché gives a recognizable shape to our words, allowing an audience to unpack the meaning it carries. Of course, some variations use conventions against us, to deceptively squeeze an ironic meaning into an innocent looking container. Subverted clichés like "*you have to be cruel to be* un*kind*" and "*money is the root of all* wealth" are the linguistic equivalent of using a violin case to carry a machine-gun.

In a much-cited paper from 1979, the linguist Michael Reddy noted that when we speak about language, we speak as if it is a conduit for meaning, in which our ideas are packaged into words and sentences and then transferred from one speaker to another. Reddy observed that this folk model of language – he called it the "conduit metaphor" – is deeply entrenched in the many related metaphors we use to describe verbal communication, such as "*his promises were empty words, that's all*" and "*I try to put my ideas into words but you just don't get it*". The conduit metaphor is not intended as a model of how language actually works, but as a model of how speakers naïvely idealize the workings of language, and Reddy suggests that mismatches between the ideal and the real can cause genuine communication problems. Is it naïve and misleading then to view cliché as a familiar container of pre-packaged meaning? Perhaps we rely on clichés so heavily *because* language is more complex than the conduit metaphor suggests, since the mapping between form and content in clichés is so firmly and helpfully established by popular convention. The conduit model works when both speaker and listener exploit the same conventions for evoking ideas with words, and breaks down when these conventions are arbitrary or unclear. As we have seen, speakers can make their use of clichés more creative by playing with these conventions and challenging the listener to reconstruct their meanings anyway. As Patrick Hanks has argued, creative producers do

not ignore conventions, but *exploit conventions*, and exploit the fact that listeners are sufficiently familiar with these conventions to recognize when they are being tweaked in more or less innovative ways. Though Reddy calls the prevalent folk model the "conduit metaphor", it could just as well be called the "conduit cliché", such is its hold on the popular imagination and the effect it has on how we communicate.

Conduit clichés play a pivotal role in the medium of the comic-strip, where they are given a clearly identifiable visual form. Comic strips are especially revealing in the study of clichés and how we play with them, because variations also have a visual form that is easy to identify. Consider the most obvious comic-book cliché of all, the speech balloon. A classic example and a common variation are shown in Figure 1.
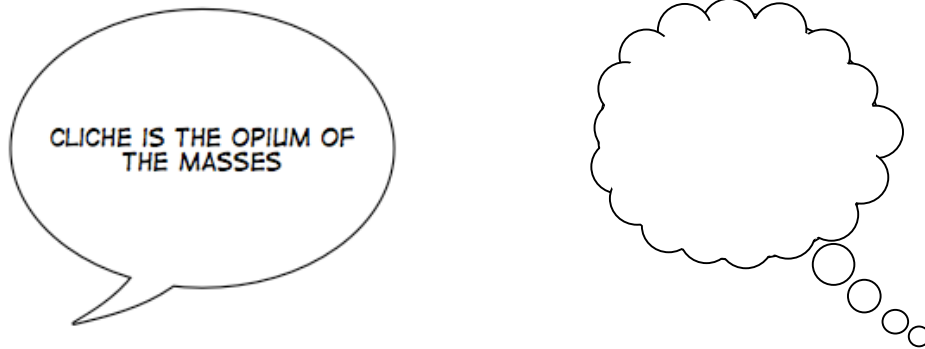
Figure 1. *(a) classic "speech" balloon   (b) a common variation, the "thought" balloon*

In its most clichéd form, as in Figure 1(a), a speech balloon is rounded and appears to float gently in a panel, almost like a real helium-filled balloon. A sharp tail, rather than a string, links each balloon to the character who is speaking, but this convention is stretched when the speech emanates from a radio, a television, a telephone, or from behind a door or inside a box. The tail sometimes points to the edge of a panel, to indicate that the speaker is currently *off-stage*. In any case, speech balloons have a physical presence in a comic panel, and their contents can be physically perceived by other characters. Thought balloons, however, are more ethereal, made of private brain whirring rather than public noise. Comic artists use fluffy cloud-like balloons to indicate that these are intangible abstractions that exist only in the mind. So powerful is the balloon cliché in comic-books that the addition of a single speech or thought balloon to any instance of

NEED
SOME HELP
HERE !!

HOW DARE
YOU TALK LIKE
THAT ABOUT M

I MEAN,
HE WAS. IS.
THE VISION IS
A ROBOT.

IF I WAS
DATING A ROBOT,
YOU'D ALL TALK
ABOUT ME BEHIND
MY BACK.

(b)   (c)

(a)

…sual art – whether an image of the *Mona Lisa* or a photo of Rodin's *The Thinker* – is enough to turn that image into an instance of a comic-book panel.

Tired clichés can often be joined in novel combinations that lend each a new vigor, as when governor Ann Richards described George W. Bush as "*born with a silver foot in his mouth*", or as when the critic William Empson described George Orwell as "*eagle-eyed and flat-footed*". Visual clichés such as those of the comic book can also be combined in simple but highly effective ways, to creatively juxtapose two dramatically different qualities of a speaker. So, for instance, Figure 2 illustrates how clichéd balloons can be composed so as to visually highlight a change in volume or tone by a speaker. Each of these *multi*-balloons exploits differences in relative balloon-area and font-size to convey a transition between volume levels. In 2(a), the speaker switches from a mood of assertive self-justification to soft-spoken timidity. In 2(b), a speaker switches from quiet introspection to a loud cry for help. In 2(c) a speaker is interrupted in a way that causes his utterance to abruptly terminate in a loud cry of pain. It's a safe bet that the speaker in 2(c) has been punched or shot or otherwise zapped at the very moment that the rounded speech balloon morphs into a jagged scream balloon. This allows the reader to align the violent image on the page to a precise beat of the dialogue (the "POW!" moment). But the really interesting thing about these balloons is that no one tells us how to read them. Though each is novel in its way, each variation taps into our familiar conventions and spatial intuitions of how the sounds of speech should be presented on the printed page.
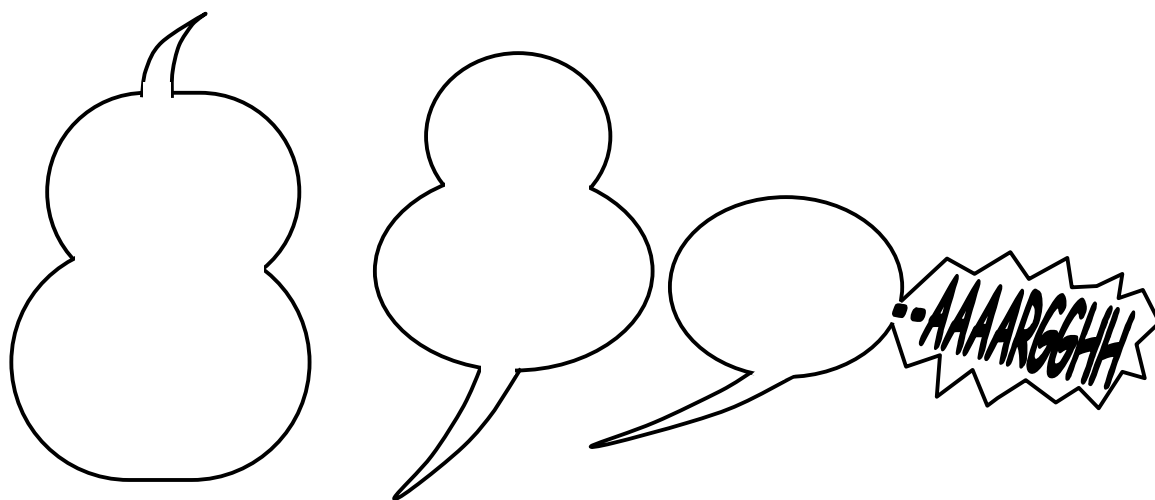
Figure 2. *Examples of speech balloons that convey changes in speaker volume or tone.*

Comic artists also creatively combine balloons to squeeze the back-and-forth turn-taking of a conversation into a single panel. Varying the balloon cliché in this way yields a complex container that makes the dialogue seem snappier and more spontaneous, as well as easier to follow. This kind of variation sometimes allows a whole conversation to be compressed into a single comic-strip panel. Consider examples (a) and (b) in Figure 3, in which each speaker is given two conversational turns within the same panel.
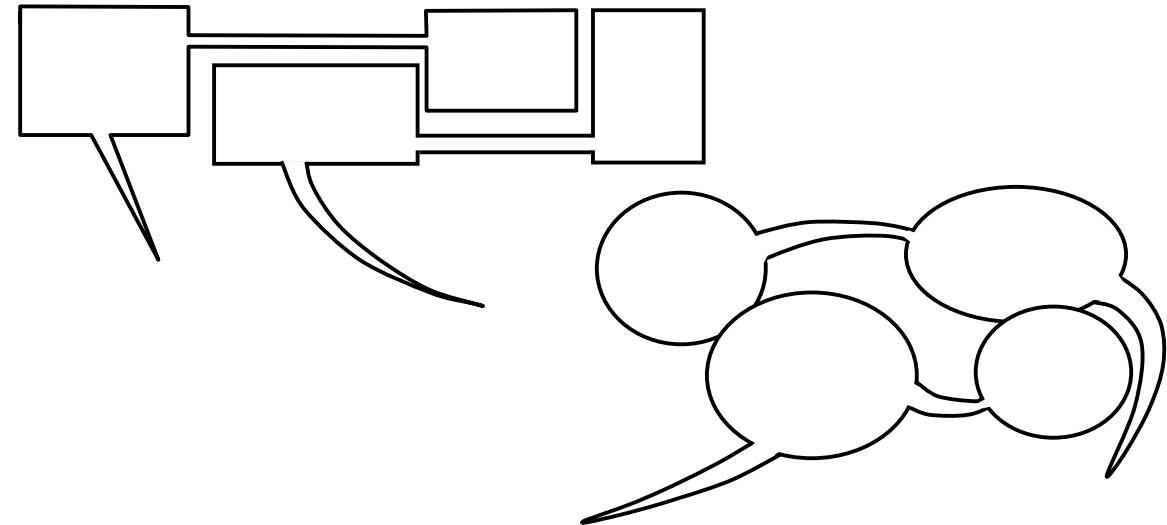

Figure 3. (a) *husband/wife exchange in MAD magazine's parody of Brokeback Mountain*
(b) *an exchange between superheroes in Marvel's New Avengers: Civil War.*

We read and understand complex balloons like these in quite a different way than we understand the basic balloon cliché. Note how in 3(a) and 3(b) we must hop between different parts of two complex balloons so as to read the utterances as they are spoken. It makes no sense to read each complex balloon in its entirety before moving onto the next. The reading order of the text in these balloons is actually given by the arrows of Figure 4.
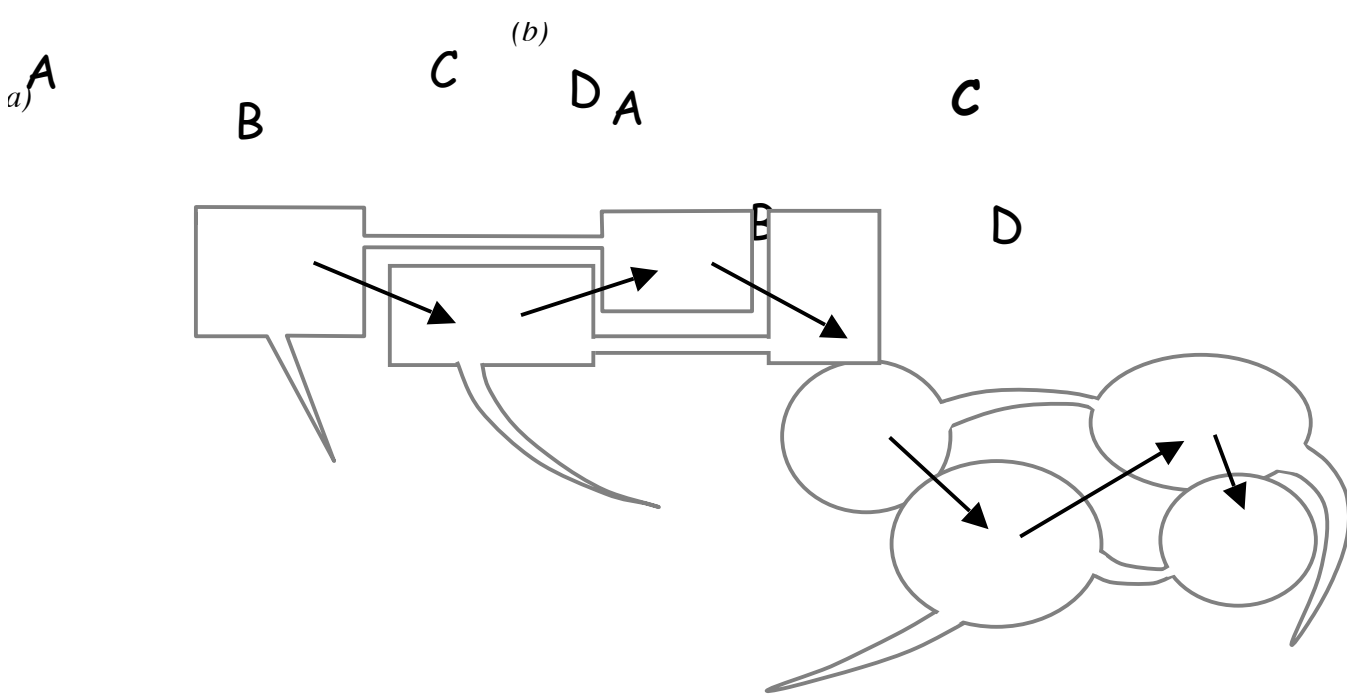
Figure 4. *The reading order of the balloons in Figure 3(a) and 3(b)* is ABCD, not AC, BD.

Unexpected meanings can emerge when we defy convention and tinker with familiar forms. Fortunately, our familiarity with the balloon cliché extends to not just how it works, but *why* it works, and our common sense quickly kicks in when we are faced with the rather atypical balloons of 3(a) and 3(b). Speech balloons may represent invisible sounds in the air, but they are very visible objects on the page, and we naturally combine our intuitions about conversational flow *and* spatial layout to arrive at the intended meaning. Once again, no one has to tell us to use the flow-chart in Figure 4 to read the complex balloons in Figure 3. Rather, we naturally adapt to the new variation with ease.

Idiom Savants

Writers of style manuals and others bent on linguistic self-improvement warn us to avoid cliché as if it were symptomatic of the worst kind of personality disorder, yet are happy to rely on cliché-clichés to get their message across. It seems that one garden's weeds are another garden's flowers, and nothing stinks as badly as another writer's clichés. Of course, a disrespect for the glib use of clichés is a desirable quality in a writer, yet the best way for writers to be vigilant against glibness is not to repudiate cliché entirely, but to engage with their own clichés in an adversarial manner. By carefully varying the way we exploit familiar forms, we can leverage their familiarity without sacrificing freshness.

In fact, when aiming for an ironic effect, the numbing familiarity of cliché is indispensable, and allows us to lull an audience into the trap of dashed expectations. It often takes just the tiniest change to leverage the familiarity of a tired phrase against an audience. Consider the cliché "*Everyone is entitled to their opinion*", which implies an openness of mind and a willingness to listen. Now substitute "*their*" with "*my*" and see what happens to this respect for other people's viewpoints.

When used intelligently, a cliché can lend our thoughts and opinions a familiar form that communicates more than the compositional sum of its parts. But, as reflected in the general disdain in which they are held, clichés are too often used lazily, as a substitute for frank, descriptive language, usually to disguise a lack of real facts or insightful analysis. In politics, for instance, when a powerful individual is tasked with an important responsibility *X*, this appointee is often designated "*the [X] Czar*" by the media; *X* can be anything from *Drugs* to *Healthcare* to *AIDS* to *Crime* and *Counterterrorism*. On the face of it, this individual is seemingly granted significant powers in pursuit of *X*-related activities, but in reality the title of "czar" means very little at all. This template of "*the [X] czar*" just happens to be a convenient, media-friendly shorthand into which we can drop almost any *X* we like, to suggest a person with responsibility for *X* without feeling obliged to describe in any detail the actual powers that go with the job. The title sounds good, and seems to suggest a great deal more than it actually says. In fact, "*the [X] czar*" is so over-used that its meaning no longer even depends on a metaphoric understanding of the Russian czars of old; rather, the phrase now loosely means "*having the same general powers and media responsibilities as the last guy to be called the czar of something*". A cliché much loved by conservatives claims that "*guns don't kill people, people do*", but we might as well recast it as a cliché-cliché of our own: "*clichés don't produce lazy writing, lazy writers do*".

Good writing makes the inherently laborious task of creative expression seem effortless and light, so perhaps we should not be surprised that cliché seduces us into taking this effortlessness at face value, to produce writing that is, as a result, largely without effort. No reader will enjoy a lumpen hodgepodge of stale phrases and over-familiar quotations, especially if the purpose of these stock ingredients is not to enlighten

on a given topic, but to impress (ironically enough) with the writer's apparent knowledge. A text that is clotted with lazy clichés and regurgitated quotations will seem heavy and uneven, but even the most familiar clichés can still be used with a surprising lightness of touch if they are concisely evoked rather than recited at length. Consider the following extract from an opinion piece in the *Irish Independent* newspaper of June 11, 2009:

> "*In Ireland's case, the economy has been wrecked twice in just 30 years. That is more than coincidence. It is Oscar Wilde's carelessness, and it will probably happen again unless the country's politics can be conducted on a very different basis.*"

Few readers need to be given the full Wilde quotation to understand the article, but it is worth quoting anyway for our own analysis. Here then, from Act I of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), is Lady Bracknell's famous line:

Lady Bracknell: *To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.*"

The reference to Wilde is concise, playful and just a tad ironic. In Wilde's original line, alluded to in the article as "*Oscar Wilde's carelessness*", Worthing is accused of negligence for losing both of his parents, yet he can hardly be held to blame since he lost them both as an infant; quite literally, it was he that was lost, not his parents. But this irony does not show through in the condensed reference to the line, and so neither does the implication that Lady Bracknell is unfair and glib in her characterization of Worthing. This is to the journalist's benefit, of course, as otherwise he would seem, by analogy, to be just as glib and unfair in his characterization of the Irish government. So the result is not a complex analogy between the plot of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the economic crisis in Ireland, but an effective and memorable shorthand for an otherwise over-quoted line. "*Oscar Wilde's carelessness*" thus becomes a compact way of saying "*the kind of incompetence that cannot be excused as simple misfortune because it has happened too often in the past to be anything else*". Compression often creates ambiguity, and here the idea that the carelessness is Wilde's own cheekily hints at two additional readings: perhaps Wilde is accusing the Irish government of carelessness from beyond

the grave, or Wilde is himself responsible for Ireland's economic woes? Though few readers would take either of these possibilities seriously, these meaning potentials do add a frisson of humorous charge to an already creative variation on a much-quoted phrase.

Clichés do not have to be old to be tired, and even recently minted creations can suffer premature aging from over-use. Indeed, such clichés can continue to have value even as their pithy generalizations cease to have any relation to current reality. In the 1990s the rapidly growing economies of East Asia, typified by Thailand and South Korea, were memorably described as "*Tiger economies*" or the "*Asian Tigers*". These labels seemed apt until the IMF was called upon in 1997 to rescue the suddenly free-falling Thai, Indonesian and South Korean economies. But by then "*Tiger*" had stuck as a catchy label for a resurgent economy, giving rise to variations such as "*Baltic Tiger*", "*Nordic Tiger*" and "*Celtic Tiger*" to name countries where tigers had only ever been found in zoos. Ireland's "*Celtic Tiger*" roared loudest in 2001, but declined precipitously in 2008 and 2009, as alluded to in the previous newspaper extract. The label seems an especially cruel cliché now, since the promise it once evoked has now become a thing of the past. Nonetheless, there is life in the old cliché yet, if used properly, as shown by the following extract from an *Irish Independent* editorial of January 19, 2009:

> "*International commentators are astonished at the fact that a creature as splendid as the Celtic Tiger should so rapidly fall into the hands of the taxidermist.*"

The cliché of the "*Celtic Tiger*" has been around long enough for commentators to seemingly exhaust its potential for variation. At its peak, pundits spoke of the "*Celtic cubs*" – young people who were to grow up knowing nothing but prosperity. The "*Celtic Tiger*" roared and purred, while commentators variously asked "*Who tamed the Celtic Tiger?*", "*Who suckled at the Celtic Tiger?*", "*Who drove the Celtic Tiger to its final stage of madness?*", and finally, at the end, "*Who killed the Celtic Tiger?*". But the most sparkling observations are often found in obituaries, and the above variation is a wonderful example of humorous compression. It seems, at first glace, like a euphemism, for rather than speak outright about killing and death, an eloquent circumlocution is used instead. To connect "*Celtic Tiger*" to the "*hands of the taxidermist*", a reader must

conclude that the animal has been hunted and killed, and is now ready to be stuffed and mounted as a sad reminder of past glory. The metaphor is especially resonant since "stuffed" is a common slang term for "finished", "ruined" or "broken". But its function is hardly euphemistic, since Irish politicians have been accusing each other of "*killing the Celtic Tiger*" for some years now, to numbing effect. No, the purpose of the juxtaposition with "*taxidermist*" is to shock, to revive in us the sense of cruelty and shame that should follow the death of so "*splendid a creature*". To the additional credit of the editorialist, the variation also seems phrased in such a way as to resist *meme*-ification. This is not a variation that will be widely copied to become clichéd itself, but a one-off original that does something interesting and ephemeral before quickly moving on.

Support Structures for Creativity

A resonant phrase can take many forms, so the clichés we have considered in this chapter seem to come in all shapes and sizes. Most can be varied in some way, allowing writers to exploit clichés as vehicles for their own peculiar interests and emphases. Too often, unfortunately, lazy writers rely wholly on the juxtaposition of their words in more familiar settings to generate the humorous or creative effect. Thus, for instance, we can see on the web a proliferation of variations on this memorable line from *The Simpsons* TV show: "*I for one welcome our new [insect] [overlords]*". The quote is now so varied that any exploitation as a snowclone simply reminds the listener of *The Simpsons* in general, and of an especially funny episode entitled *Deep Space Homer* in particular. The humour and creativity we find in snowclones is entirely borrowed, and owes little to the personal imagination of their users.

But it is not always thus, and the creativity can reside in what goes into a familiar construction just as much as it resides in the end result. Snowclones are an extreme case of reuse, where the borrowing *is* the creativity, so a borrowing should only be damned as a snowclone if it adds little to the meaning of the original phrase. By this standard, the balloon text in Figure 1, "*cliché is the opium of the masses*", is clearly a snowclone, just one of many spawned by Marx's original aphorism "*religion* is the opium of the masses". Yet there are creative variations of this phrase that engage directly with the intended

meaning of the original phrase and do not deserve to be dismissed as shallow reuse. Consider the variation "Religion is *not* the opium of the masses, it's the *placebo*" (which writers put into the mouth of the acerbic Dr. House in the TV show of the same name). If snowclones use an original phrase as a crutch for the creatively feeble, more subversive borrowings like this one want nothing more than to kick this crutch away. Ironically, even if they seem to disagree on the conceptual level – a placebo should be no substitution for a powerful narcotic like opium – House conveys much the same anti-religious message as Marx, with a subtle difference: whereas Marx views religion as a chemical addiction, House is even more damning in viewing it as a self-delusion. Not all borrowings dilute the pungency of an original phrase, and an antagonistic twist can, somewhat perversely, sharpen the message of an over-used expression.

A cliché can also be used as a simple and less visible support structure for an idea that is itself inherently creative, allowing this idea to be expressed in a concise and familiar form. Since repeated exposure trains us to quickly unpack their meanings, clichés and other stock phrases can be highly efficient support structures for linguistic creativity. A much-cited paper by linguist Paul Kay, titled *Patterns of Coining*, discusses a variety of stable linguistic forms into which speakers can insert their own insightful associations; these patterns are not snowclones because they are free of allusion and have no identifiable first usage; indeed, Kay is even reticent to describe them as grammatical constructions in the full sense of the word "construction" employed by linguists. Rather, patterns of coining occupy the middle-ground between grammatical constructions (productive parts of a language) and Pullum's "*phrases in kit form for lazy writers*" (that is, snowclones). As Kay notes, each individual instance of a pattern of coining may have a unique meaning that must be reasoned about (and then learned) on its own terms, not as an instance of a general rule of language but as an ad-hoc instance of linguistic creativity. For instance, Kay argues that the simile-forming structure "*as X as a Y*" is a pattern of coining, since there is no general rule for choosing suitable values of *X* and *Y*. That some pairings of *X* and *Y* work and others do not is a matter for pragmatic and conceptual analysis, and not a simple matter of grammar and the lexicon. A great many clichés have this structure, from "*as busy as a beaver*" to "*as strong as an ox*", yet the form can also be used creatively (as in "*I'm as hard as a diamond in an ice-storm*", from the movie

Talladega Nights), but only if the speaker can first make a creative association that can be usefully packaged in this convenient and familiar form. The creativity does not arise from the use of the pattern itself, but from the peculiar pairing of X and Y that we put into it.