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The Costs and Composition of Discontinuity in Visual Narratives

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Abstract

In discourse, entities that are discontinuous with the current storyline are seen as cues for an event boundary, as they are too irregular to be mapped to the existing scene. However, some instances of discontinuity can maintain coherency, as exemplified in Calvin & Hobbes comics, where visual discontinuities can be resolved by the understanding that they depict Calvin's imagination rather than actual events. This requires the reconciliation of the original storyworld domain with a private, mental domain (the alternative). In our first experiment, we examined whether switching between domains and/or the nature of the presented domain(s) incurred processing costs. Our second experiment examined whether physical cues such as the contours between the discontinuous entities facilitated processing. The results indicate that switching domains is indeed more costly, despite still being understood as congruous sequences. Moreover, strong similarity in contours aided readers with greater comics proficiency. Overall, our results show that the processing of visual narratives extends beyond mere event understanding and is not universally transparent.

Keywords: blending; discontinuity; rhyme; visual narratives