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Animated Animals as Conceptual Blends

Zwierzęta animowane jako amalgamaty pojęciowe

The present article analyses a number of cartoon animal characters using the theory of conceptual blending to demonstrate how varying degrees of complexity in their naming, structure and overall design are aimed at the target audience.

Słowa kluczowe: językoznawstwo kognitywne, teoria amalgamatów, metafora
Key words: cognitive linguistic, blending theory, metaphor

The concept of Conceptual Blending is the brainchild of Giles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, who previously worked on the Mental Space Theory and the meaning construction from the perspective of metaphor in literary language respectively. They combined their efforts in 1996 in order to explain certain observations they had regarding both of their work. (Fauconnier and Turner 1996)

Fauconnier and Turner developed an integration network theory, which consists of inputs that can be mapped together. This mapping might be reminiscent of the two-domain model known from Conceptual Metaphor Theory, however, this variation is more dynamic and is based on Mental Spaces, that are temporary structures that develop during the process of their creation. The two (or more) inputs must establish a generic space, which then will provide us with meaning that will be shared by all of them. Finally, there is a fourth and final structure called blended space or blend, which consists of counter-part connectors transferring to the blend, a process which is called selective projection, because only a few elements are 'projected' into the final space, ones which are required for the purpose of comprehension. This space creates an emergent structure – a meaning that is not present in either of the input spaces (Fauconnier and Turner 1996).

To be considered successful, a blend has to achieve various objectives, which can be divided by means of their importance. One of the overarching goals of blending is the provision of global insight. This function allows a person

to understand a concept in a new and understandable way. It realizes it by compressing one, more complex and possibly less comprehensible structure into another, one that is hopefully more compact and understandable or easy to visualize, thus it reduces complexity to human scale (Fauconnier and Turner 2002). Compression is a very important factor in this process as it compresses vital relations, which are various types of connectors that match two counterpart elements or properties. The concept of human scale also involves a number of subgoals that a blend must achieve, such as strengthening those vital relations or coming up with a story (Evans and Green 2001:419). All of them should help human beings understand one concept by means of simplifying, clarifying or making sense of the scale of that concept, thus it assists us in grasping what is abstract in terms of what is concrete (Libura 2010).

Before discussing different examples of modern blends of animals, it should be noted that there is a long and globally universal tradition of using a large number of different organisms on this planet in myths and legends, often celebrating their various attributes or even cherishing them in religion. Animals may be used as substitutes for people and our various traits – they can be portrayed as evil or as tricksters but sometimes also as a symbol for something positive. More often than not they have these dualistic features, which origin might be rooted in the lifestyles of early civilizations where animals would be both a source of food and energy, as they are today, and a source of danger and a threat to life. Furthermore, they were also mediators for humans, they guided people through the unknown – space or afterlife. That is when some representatives of the animal kingdom started to receive extraordinary qualities, while some other examples never really existed in the first place, such as the fantastical dragons and unicorns of many a legend. As the strengths and weaknesses of different animals began to influence the cultures, they began to possess many roles – from god-like creatures in the Egyptian mythology to the symbols of Satan in Christianity – and serve as guidelines to life itself. Much like cartoons that we know today, the animals were used to obtain a global insight, to help figure out the world that was so overwhelming in its mysteries. A method we use nowadays to educate and teach our children.

In order to introduce this concept in modern animation it would be best to start with a simple character that is an extremely popular animated animal, which began its rise to fame in children's books – its name is Winnie the Pooh. In December 24, 1925, author A. A. Milne produced his first publication that featured the protagonist in question and it became almost instantaneously popular. However, it wasn't until 1961, that an animation titan, Walt Disney Productions, acquired the rights to Winnie the Pooh, thus beginning the character's longstanding relationship with professional animators (Leonard 2003).

In terms of creating the appearance and characterization for Winnie, the studio artists, much like Milne, were influenced by wildlife, which made this fictional bear still very strongly connected to his animalistic nature and the perception of what people, or more specifically children, might think of small bears based on their appearance. Interestingly, Winnie’s awkward and unconventional name was based not only of that of a bear but also of another animal – a swan. The bear, named Winnie, was an attraction at the London Zoo, which the son of A.A. Milne was very fond of, as he even named his teddy-bear after it. The name Pooh came from a swan which Milne’s family had seen and named during one of their holidays (Thwaite 1990).

The finished character is basically a rather lazy, not particularly bright character reminiscent of bears’ hibernation qualities and big fat built. These design decisions give rise to the creation of the blended space, which as mentioned previously is not complicated in its structure and which plays with the perception of what an animal’s personality would be like if it could express itself – if it had human features and abilities. This establishes the two main inputs – the bear mental space and the human mental space, which create a simple two-input structure.

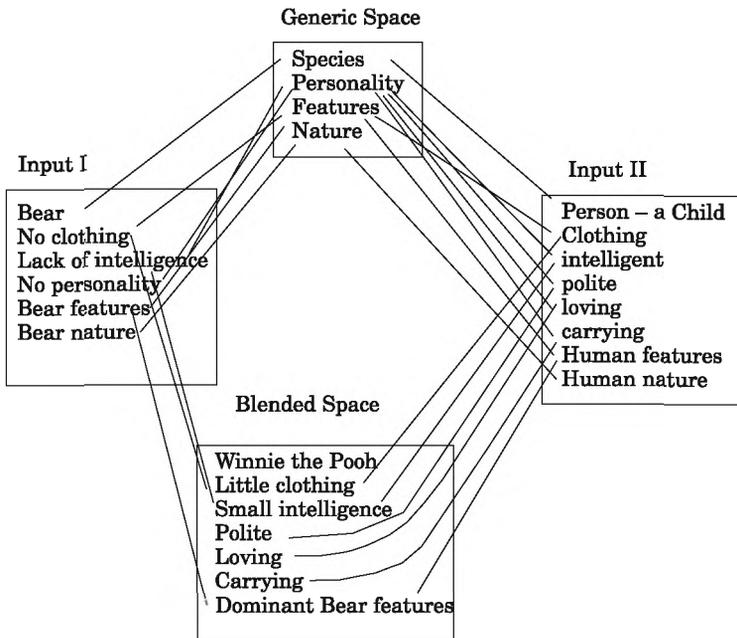


Figure (1) The Emergent structure of Winnie the Pooh

Aimed at small children, this blend does not provide many difficulties for the target viewer. The name of the character is rather generic and there is no reason to translate it or to further explain it. Much like the story behind his creation is simple, the name itself is not complicated and sounds like a pet or imaginary creature. What makes this emergent structure specifically clear is the usage of the general perception people have regarding small bears. We tend to think of them as harmless, funny or endearing, while their physical features create an immediate positive reaction in the viewer. The human input is also a key element here as it adds a sense of child-like innocence and our upbeat perception. Both inputs influence the structure equally and almost simultaneously in most cases. They mix elements connected with the same issue into one, distinctive new feature in the fictional character, for instance his appearance or the habitat he lives in. This character is then an animal with which young viewers can identify, because they see that he has feelings, he does think and he is capable of emotions.

There are a number of similar characters that were created on the formula of Winnie the Pooh, easily assimilable and constructed in a simple fashion. A couple examples might be found even in Winnie the Pooh cartoons, as many of the inhabitants of Pooh's forest share similarities with him, like Winnie's best friend, Piglet, an anthropomorphic version of a little pig. Much like his faithful companion, Piglet also wears a piece of wardrobe, a pink jumper. Unlike most of the residents of the forest, his personality is not influenced by the animal input but it is rather a funny juxtaposition to people's expectations. Even though the character's species would suggest rude behavior and lack of manners, he is a protagonist that keeps his friends in check, he is soft-spoken and logical.

An almost exact copy of the structures present in Winnie the Pooh might be found in another Disney production, *The Lion King*. Just like the forest influenced personalities in the bear stories, the background of the actions in the 1994 Disney feature was also of grave importance to the development of the characters. The jungle was a place of different social classes, where the strongest survive and control their grounds, and the main protagonist's place in this hierarchy is already suggested in the title of the movie. This title is, in fact, a blend in itself because there is no real royalty within a jungle, as animals are incapable of creating complex social classes. However, due to the importance of the lion in that habitat and his ferocious nature, he is treated as the alpha predator, capable of physically dominating any animal in its way, thus the human idea of "ruling" over them in the kingdom – a jungle, where each and every character has a role that mimics the ones on a royal court. There are jesters, kings, wizards and princesses (Neuwirth 2003). The terminology used in the animation is simple and creates a certain sense of both, familiarity and reality, wherein the characters can be inserted and it feels believable and relatable to human beings, even to children.

After that goal is achieved, the animators can introduce children to new life lessons by means of these fictional characters, teaching them the importance of love and friendship. In the case of Winnie the Pooh and Lion King the aim is achieved because the structure of the blends is extremely simple, and thus the children can grasp the essence of the characters and stories without much problem. The only knowledge that they must possess is connected with the basic concepts of animal and human life. The combination of simple names and animal characters is a common method to garner attention of young viewers, while the simple plot and structures keep the audience engaged. The adult viewer will have a bigger problem in maintaining interest in this model, because of its simplicity and therefore lack of captivating and interesting material that would force the viewer to think and make them gain new experiences.

A character that might be more suited for adults than children is a modern comedy classic Duck Dodgers. The biggest difference between this emergent structure and the more child-friendly models is the increased number of references to more adult material. It spoofs not only the B-movie character of Buck Rogers, but also many other genre classics, mainly connected to science-fiction but not only, as the episodes address also a few horror movies such as *Predator* or *Alien*. There are still elements left for children to enjoy but they are attached from only one of the inputs – the Daffy Duck input, a blend in itself, which makes the final product of the animators and writers creativity a highly complex conceptual structure. Most of the new material, however, makes the blend more difficult to be enjoyed in its entirety by an average viewer. This model is undoubtedly not applicable to all animated characters because it needs a particularly well known protagonists from popular culture in order for the second emergent structure to work – such character is definitely Daffy Duck.

This character belongs to the most popular protagonists of a series of short films entitled *Looney Tunes*, which dates back to 1929, when the Warner Brothers' studio decided to have animated shorts as promotional materials in the cinemas (Schneider 1990). He is the one with whom the artists liked to experiment with, changing his appearance and character over the course of time. When he was introduced, he was depicted as less anthropomorphic than today, as he resembled a normal duck or a drake (Solomon 1994). With time the writers have finally found a distinctive personality for Daffy as well, one that would separate him from other animated animals of the series, which as mentioned before is a clear sign of a human input space. Daffy would play the misunderstood and constantly tricked anti-hero in the sketches and his selfishness would land him in heaps of trouble (Adamson 1990). This is the point where we can observe the creation of first two inputs. Input I is a typical representative of drakes and Input II is a representation of a crazy and selfish person.

However, this division raises our first issue – the name itself. Even though the first Input uses a drake as a representative of the species, the male form of

duck, the character is enigmatically called Daffy Duck. First of all, one must understand that animators are not biology majors nor are they required to possess any extensive knowledge about animals. Thus we should treat their preciseness in this department as similar to the awareness of common population, or even less so, as some of their intended audience are children. It is then logical to name a character by focusing on the assimilation of sounds rather than biological correctness. Daffy and Duck are sounds that both start with the same consonant and are followed immediately by a vowel. We learn from English phonetics that words that carry this exact pattern tend to flow out easier than words which have more than one consonant next to each other. That is why Daffy Duck flows verbally better than Daffy Drake. This decision is also enhanced by the fact that the selected cluster is less harsh sounding on the ear than its alternative. Therefore the brain picks up on these sounds with greater ease and tends to remember them better¹. Other famous examples of such name giving are Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse or Bugs Bunny.

When it comes to all of the elements of the two Inputs, they are connected by features such as species, features, clothing and personality.

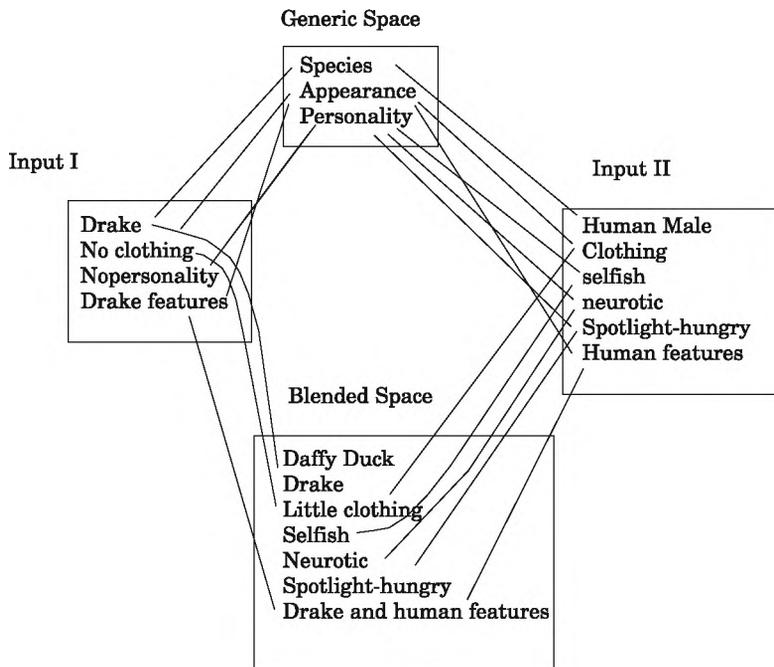


Figure (2) The Emergent structure of Daffy Duck

¹ Anna Drogosz, Grzegorz Skwierawski, personal Communications.

The emergent structure does not differ much from what we were able to see with Winnie the Pooh. The character itself might be a mash-up of various different characteristics, one that has evolved with time, one that changes frequently, but not possessing many Inputs. His name is deeply connected to an animal name and it easy arguably very easy to remember. What makes Daffy special is the number of character traits that he has received in Input II that were added into the blended space in the process of composition. He represents the dark comedy in animation because he is willing to express all the things that people are normally afraid to express (Schneider 1990). This makes Daffy Duck cartoons interesting and funny in equal proportions but overall still suitable for children.

However, during the 1950's, Daffy would begin to appear in new roles, often lampooning various films of the time, yet he would always retain his personal traits the he was known for to mass audiences. One might say, he was merely replacing a protagonist of a well established fictional universe and thus causing havoc within the world and the plot due to this change. One main protagonist he would substitute extremely successfully in terms of reviews and network ratings was a classic sci-fi hero Buck Rogers. Daffy first appeared as this particular character in 1953 in a short entitled *Duck Dodgers in the 24 Sth Century*. It featured Duck Dodgers as a revered hero on future Earth, who had to be cryogenically revived after five centuries to save the world (Internet 1). However, the viewer quickly realizes that he is in fact completely incompetent and the bulk of the duties lie on the shoulders of his sidekick, the Eager Young Space Cadet, while Dodgers receives all the praise. The short would spawn a number of sequels and spin-offs, most notably in 2003, when an entire TV-show dedicated to this premise was created (Internet 1).

The source material upon which it was based was the many appearances of the character of Buck Rogers in American media. The character was first introduced in August 1928 in a pulp magazine *Amazing Stories*' issue entitled *Armageddon 2419 AD* by a writer named Phillip Francis Nowlan (Strickler 1995). The story was a tale of a veteran of the Great War (World War I), who after being exposed to the radioactive gas, falls into "a state of suspended animation, free from the ravages of catabolic processes (...)." (Nowlan 1928: 9) Rogers remains in this state of suspended animation for 492 years only to be awakened in the year 2419, when he is taken to a camp of one of the gangs in control of the world. Due to his experience in combat during the First World War, they see a potential hero and a leader in him, who could save them from a rival gang, the Hans, who are in control of North America (Nowlan 1928). The story and its numerous comic, radio and TV sequels raised the awareness of the outer space and were one of the very first to dwell into the idea of space exploration, before it was even reality (Luciano and Coville 2002).

This addition of the mental space of Buck Rogers, which shall be called input III, creates an all new blend out of the previously discussed Daffy Duck blended space, making a new character out of the two already existing fictional protagonists. However, unlike before, this blend will have a clearly dominant input and will rarely mix the connectors in the blend. In the end the viewer is left with an all new character, which is a combination of Daffy's personality and circumstances of input III. On the one hand, the viewer is left with the crazy character that pushes the story forward with his peculiar antics, on the other we are presented with a universe larger than life, where technology allows people to literally reach for the stars. Another element that mixes the Daffy Duck and Buck Rogers' inputs very clearly is the final name of the new protagonist. The Buck Rogers input is, however, more visible because the suffixes and roots of both words are left intact, and the difference between the completed name and the third input's name is only two letters out of ten, which leaves us with an 80% similarity. The correspondence between Daffy and the blend is not as high in this department, but it does keep an entire word intact from the original version of the cartoon – Duck. Similarly, the physical attributes of Duck Dodgers have undergone changes as well. He is still drawn as a drake with a number of human features, but what changed is his clothing. Daffy is given a spaceman's apparel, very reminiscent of old science-fiction movies and TV-series.

The information gathered during this analysis establishes a new blended space out of the previously discussed Daffy Duck blend:

The main difference between this emergent structure and the former is how much more it is geared towards an older audience. The show has the elements that are intended to be funny for the young audience, like the slapstick comedy, but it is enriched by the lone notion of science-fiction elements and references to this genre classics that only a handful of children would be able to understand and not that many adults. Dodgers is for the most part connected only with the Buck Rogers input, whose name nowadays is an obscure reference to even the oldest of viewers. All of this makes the blend that much more difficult to be enjoyed in its entirety by the average viewer, especially a child. What is more, the emergent structure introduces the audience to a whole new concept, a concept where a popular animated character becomes a living and breeding entity in the minds of viewers. It is evident in the title scenes of Duck Dodgers, where the main protagonist is credited to be "played by" Daffy Duck (Internet 1), a fictional character in his own right, but one that is so deeply rooted in the consciences of audiences of all ages that his personality became firmly attached to the idea of the character. This concept is not applicable to all animated characters, but it is clear in the case of the most established protagonists in popular culture, to whom Daffy Duck and his alter ego Duck Dodgers undoubtedly apply.

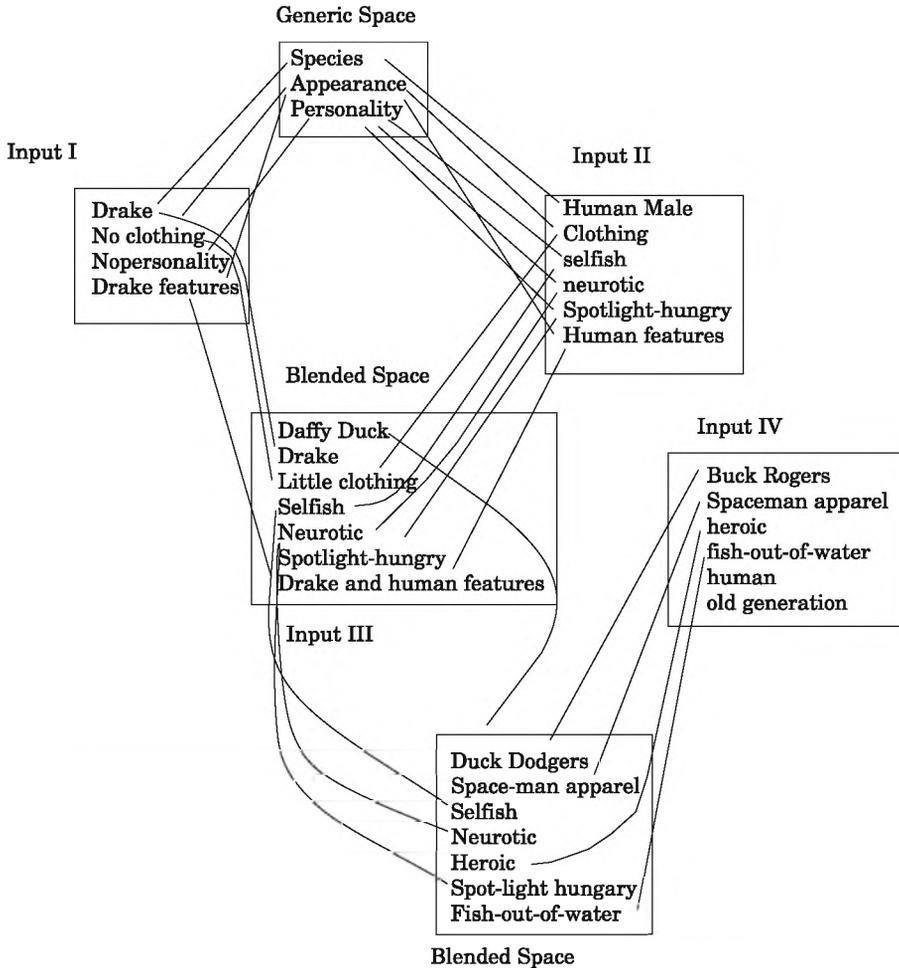


Figure (3) Dodgers' emergent structure

If one were to find similar structure models, only popular and well ingrained characters should be taken into consideration because then we need a known personality that would contrast with a new setting or approach. Such protagonists are thankfully present in the Duck Dodgers show like the Young Eager Space Cadet who is a futuristic version of Porky Pig, Warner Brothers' first big star (Barrier 1999). As one can immediately see, Porky's name has a similar structure of a constant followed by a vowel, which makes him fit stylistically as a partner to Duffy's hero, even though before Duck Dodgers, Porky was known as one of the most normal characters in the whole Looney Tunes franchise and a leading character. In the new show it is clear that Porky, like Daffy, retained his personality in the process of the projection into the

blended space. He is still calm and competent, and he grounds and slows the action on the show allowing a more sophisticated comedy. However, as the Space Cadet he has not received the same cultural blend when it comes to his new moniker, which is definitely more generic and it only describes his role on the show, very literally. This however still is consistent with the creators' approach because he is not an amalgam of any character in the original Buck Rogers comic.

Some animated animals did not require any previous incarnation but they were however immediately introduced as a form of parody of famous American cinematic landmarks. One of the best examples might be a TV-show called *Animaniacs*, one that featured a *Goodfeather* segment, where characters like the Godpigeon appeared and spoofed both the Martin Scorsese movie, *Goodfellas*, and Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* (Internet 1). The aforementioned Godpigeon, for example is a parody of a character portrayed by Marlon Brando – Vito Corleone. Vito was the fictional head of an organized mob in America and he is referred to as the Godfather – the head of the crime family. The Godpigeon serves as a corresponding character to that of Vito as he is the boss of a flock of birds. Even his appearance is very strongly reminiscent of the original protagonist. He is rotund, his facial expressions and mannerisms are also very familiar.

Another similarly modeled character makes a cameo appearance in one of the episodes, his name is Steven Seagull. For fans of action movies this is an immediately understood reference because it is connected with a famous actor and martial arts master, Steven Seagal. Seagull's appearance is also reminiscent of the actor: he is muscular, he has a characteristic ponytail and is far taller than any of the other pigeons, but it is his moniker that is the crux of the joke, since the actor's original name already is phonetically similar to that of a bird. And yet to small children, he might still be only a silly sounding character, while the adults might be the only ones to be able to pick up on the additional layers of this character and the comedic baggage that it holds.

The article proves that two vastly different conceptual models, based on various levels of complexity, can be considered successful, if they can achieve necessary objectives to become relatable and understandable. As the target audience are usually children, the choice of animals is justified by creating a sense of familiarity. Young audiences can relate to their limited life experiences with various house animals, or their fundamental knowledge about common wild animals. As it is evident in the article these combinations are often followed by very stylistically distinct choices in the naming of the characters, which very often refer to the animals true nature and use a catchy nickname to entertain the young audience members and make, even the most vicious and violent animals, feel more friendly. This also helps their developing audience in

understanding a multitude of basic but important concepts. By doing so, young viewers are able to understand sociological and psychological implications made by adult filmmakers – they obtain global insight, an important objective of a blend. In the adult viewers' case, the purpose of a blend would be different, as it would not be connected with cognition but rather with entertainment values. The comedy nature of the show is deeply connected with anthropomorphism, thanks to which many outlandish scenarios can be created. It allows the makers of a cartoon, like *Duck Dodgers* or *The Goodfeathers*, to introduce mature content, sometimes horrifying and gory in the source material, to the world of animation and making a parody of it, adding slapstick elements, situational humor and a multitude of puns connected to the animal life and cultural knowledge. This humorous approach to complex themes not only raises the interest of adults, but also allows them to share their fascinations with their children, for whom this content would otherwise be deemed as inappropriate.

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Summary

This article discusses the use of the conceptual theory of blending in the creation of various animated animals known from pop culture. It concerns a central mental ability, one that blends two different frames of thought in order to create an original emergent structure. The examples chosen for the analysis differ greatly in terms of their structural complexity, their time of creation and popularity and their overall goals and target audiences. This working paper acknowledges the difficulties which arise when trying to comprehend the aims of these cartoon characters or, if applicable, the comedic nature of their names and the names of the animated shows they represent.