

A Frame-Semantic Analysis of Textual Memes Generated from Woltze's *The Letter*: A Cognitive Linguistic Perspective

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes1284>

Rana H. Al-Bahrani
University of Baghdad, Iraq

Received: 3.2.2026

Accepted: 31.8.2026

Published online: 5.9.2026

Abstract: The present paper adopts a qualitative methodology to address the various frames and scenes activated while textually memeing an image macro, specifically, Woltze's problem picture, *The Letter*. To achieve this objective, the researcher is to employ Fillmore's (1976, 1982) Frame Semantics. The data consists of a single image selected following the jurors' feedback and submitted to purposively selected female students from the Department of English-College of Education for Women-University of Baghdad, using a Google form. The study has concluded that having activated a similar frame does not necessitate sharing a similar number of elements and/or referents. There is no one-to-one correspondence between the activated frame and the scene. Identifying a similar frame does not guarantee having a similar scene. The same image macro can yield multiple construals that are semantically and visually constrained. The emotions generally lean towards the negative side, with an occasional mild sense of humor. Not all the figures in the image have been used in frame and scene construction; rather, the focus has been only on the things that pulled the participants' attention. The overarching frames share the sense of having a problem, thereby reflecting the problem picture genre.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics, frame semantics, image macro, scenes, textual meme, Woltze's problem pictures

1. Introduction

The present work investigates the process of generating textual memes from a single image using a cognitive linguistic framework. The notion of memeing, as Shifman (2014) stated, is still problematic because meme as a term lacks a universally shared definition. Accordingly, scholars have debated over the mind-body dichotomy of meme (i.e., its ontological status), prompting calls for further investigations. The point of their disagreement was whether to regard meme as a culturally transmitted mental entity, like a concept, joke, or an idea, or as an observable or physical entity like a video, picture, a caption or a catchphrase. Every meme generator infuses their own messages and cultural references, considering this process akin to construing a visual text in multiple ways. In this regard, Al-Fatlawi and Al-Bahrani (2019) cited Novak's observation (1998) that an image, rather than the sentence, can convey multiple construals. To minimize the "potential variance" (an image with multiple construals) referenced by Ostanina-Olszewska and Majdzinska-Koczorowicz (2019: 10), the researcher selected a type of image called "Problem Pictures" (The Empty Gallery n.d.). Such images are characterized

by portraying a frame of unresolved situations, thereby encouraging the viewers to construct coherent and plausible interpretations.

The present work is thus to examine the frames and scenes highlighted by the participants of the present study while textually memeing an image macro. That is, the research question to answer is: “What are the frames and scenes highlighted by the participants when memeing *The Letter* image macro?”

Within cognitive linguistics, numerous studies were conducted on image construal. For instance, Al-Bahrani, Al-Saadi, and Yousif (2016) examined the denotative plurality of textless images; Al-Fatlawi and Al-Bahrani (2019) studied how the number and types of the identified figures assist in accessing the intended meaning; Al-Bahrani and Al-Azzawi (2017) examined creativity in image construal; and finally Qasim and Al-Bahrani (2024) investigated the various visual configurations of abstract nouns. These studies collectively underscored the participants’ open-endedness in interpreting visuals and in reflecting their cultural and personal conceptualizations.

As for the previous cognitive linguistic studies on memes, they include the following: Ostanina-Olszewska and Majdzinska-Koczorowicz (2019), and Barczewska (2020), who both employed Fauconnier and Turner’s (2002) Conceptual Integration Theory in the analysis of different types of Google memes. Similarly, Lugea (2020) did a qualitative pragma-stylistic study using Shifman’s (2014) model of meme analysis and Goffman’s concepts of “keying”, “author” and “animator”. Although the present work similarly falls within the field of cognitive linguistics, its focal point is to examine the textual part of memes, specifically the various frames and scenes that the participants activate based on the same image macro. Moreover, the data analysis is grounded on Fillmore’s Frame semantics.

Beyond the structure and nature of memes, scholars called for further studies across various disciplines. For instance, Lou (2017) called for the linguistic examination of memes in various linguistic fields. Likewise, Shifman (2014) advocated the investigation of memes beyond video-based formats, specifically the image- and text-formats. Additionally, Barczewska (2020) recommended scholars to pay much more attention to internet memes. In response to these calls, the present study is to investigate the diverse frames and scenes activated by the participants while generating textual memes from the selected image macro, employing Fillmore’s (1976) Frame Semantics.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Concept of meme

Dawkins (1976) introduced the term meme based on the Greek word “mimema”, (meaning “something which is imitated”), to denote “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (as cited in Shifman 2014: 37). According to him, memes can be in the form of ideas, texts, practices, jokes, rumours, melodies, catchphrases, clothing fashions, abstract beliefs, and websites propagated from one person to another. That is, both memes and the biological genes are analogous, as they involve the cultural transmission of imitated units. The preserving nature of genes

(the replicated and transmitted segments in the DNA that are coded with instructions and information) can evolve through imitation and transmission.

Digitalization has entered into the various walks of life, playing an essential role in people's lives (Venkatesh 2023, as cited in Al-Dbow and Abbas 2025; Ammari and Al-Mahameed 2024). In the digital age, meme producers- or the "participatory culture" as Shifman (2014) referred to them- are considered "digitally literate netizens" (23). They actively imitate, adapt certain features of a specific image or a video by remixing and mimicking, and transmit any physical material, particularly a digital unit, converting predominately the nature of memes to a digital format. Online users, as Banikalef et al. (2023, as cited in Banikalef 2026) indicated, incorporate social platforms in sharing stories and comments with different audiences.

As for Solon (2013, as cited in Lankshear and Knobel 2019: 44), the fundamental meme formats are words and images. These formats are deliberately modified to catch the attention and encourage sharing. In this context, Lankshear and Knobel (2011) elaborated that these creative alterations or adaptations require processes such as editing (i.e., photoshop), image-video remixing, animation, and captioning, reframing ultimately the original content in a positive, negative, serious, or joking mode. Thus, memes have "polysemic meanings", as Barczewska (2020: 9) stated, allowing the same digital element to generate multiple construals.

2.2 Image macro as a facet of memes

An image macro is a type of meme, consisting of an image with "a pithy superimposed phrase" (Paek 2025: 65). According to Paek, the visual and verbal elements complement one another; together they produce a unified signification. However, the former is said to be processed first, undergoing remixing while largely preserving the original meaning, whereas the latter has primarily a guiding role. In other words, every image is said to potentially have "multiple overlapping significations" (66). This means different people can attach different and/or similar construals, reflecting their background knowledge, emotions, experiences, culture, etc. In the present work, the researcher adopted a textless image macro and invited the participants to generate their textual memes based on their understanding. This procedure reflects the technical definition of the term, which is derived from "macroinstruction"- a set of programs enabling their users to upload images, add texts or captions, and to post or share their products online. As indicated by Lankshear and Knobel (2019: 46), the captions usually implicate common and divergent cultural aspects accompanied by idiosyncratic syntax and conventionalized phrases.

According to Dobrzyńska (1993: 4), the communicated message of any meme is comprehensive (i.e., holistic or collective, taking both the image and the text altogether), or as he succinctly stated, "the image is co-read and the text is co-watched". This means one needs to read the image carefully and in conjunction with the text to be able to understand the highlighted message. Likewise, Dondero (2020) maintained that the verbal component encapsulates various hypothetical scenarios activated by the viewer, along with different emotions aroused based on

the visual elements. This viewpoint aligns with Fillmore's Frame Semantics in that every viewer evokes a particular mental frame from a given textual or visual stimulus. Dondero further added that memes usually address ubiquitous yet culturally sensitive taboos, personal interests, and inconsequential behaviours or topics. This reflects the fundamental principles of cognitive linguistics, particularly subjectivity, individual differences, and multiple construals, which although dynamic, remain semantically constrained.

Speaking of the visual element, Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017) explained that when the visual element is absent, the verbal element may become incomplete and unintelligible due to its condensed form or poor grammar. Generally, meme users assign various semantic roles to certain characters, reflecting personal experiences, thereby producing a network of creative constructions. That is, the visual meme, as Langacker (1987) put it, is mandatory; it serves the carrier of context, whereas the verbal element has an informative and descriptive role, articulating what is happening in the context from the conceptualizer's perspective. In the present work, *The Letter* was adopted as an unmodified ready-made textless visual stimulus. The participants were invited to generate textual memes from it based on their understanding, using diverse mental frames, scenes and frame elements.

2.3 The adopted theory

To analyse the data, the researcher employed Fillmore's (1976) Frame Semantics. This theory is, according to Fillmore (1982), empirical and ethnographic in nature because it explains the way members of a given speech community conceptualize their experiences through the linguistic choices they make. That is, there is a sense of semantic "continuities" (111) in the meaning of the linguistic choices derived. This particularly aligns with the purpose of the present work, which addresses the various frames and scenes triggered by the participants from a single visual stimulus.

A frame, in Fillmore's words, is an umbrella term, encompassing a number of cognitive structures such as "schema", "script", "scenario", etc. (111). It consists of a set of interconnected concepts that facilitates the process of understanding a word. Fillmore's (1982) popular frame of "Commercial Event" evokes core elements, such as "the buyer", "the seller", "the goods", and "the money". Each of these lexical units foregrounds a scene; for instance, "the buyer" evokes the act of buying and receiving goods, backgrounding both the money and the seller. On the other hand, the "seller" foregrounds the act of selling something in return of getting money, backgrounding both the buyer and the goods. Consequently, a scene, in Fillmore's terms (1977), encompasses "not only visual scenes but familiar kinds of interpersonal transactions, standard scenarios, familiar layouts, institutional structures, enactive experiences, body image...; any kind of coherent segment, large or small, of human beliefs, actions, experiences, or imagining" (63). According to Stössel (2019), a scene is anything that comes to the viewer's mind in response to a given stimulus, and so may vary across individuals. Kövecses' (2005) example of "Wedding Frame" best demonstrates the difference between frames and

scenes. Wedding is a universal frame; however, its ceremonies differ considerably across cultures.

Fillmore (1982) further pinpointed that a given situation can be framed differently; a person who is unwilling to give out money in a given situation might be framed as either stingy or thrifty. Likewise, in the present study, the same image is being framed differently using and/or adding different core/virtual frame elements, respectively. Some of these elements are considered core like the four elements of the commercial events, whereas others function as non-core, which only add additional meanings to a frame. Thus, Frame Semantics is considered an appropriate framework in this context. For more illustration, consider Figure 1:

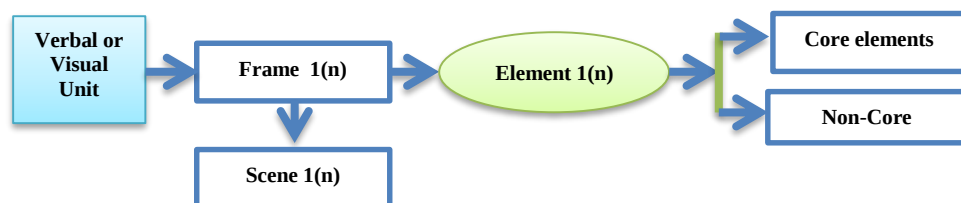


Figure 1. Fillmore's (1977, 1982) frame semantics as diagrammed by the researcher of the present work

3. Methodology of the study

The current study is qualitative in nature complemented by simple descriptive statistics. It reflects the participants' insights in response to a given visual stimulus, or as Holloway and Wheeler (2010: 6) referred to, "the subjective nature of social reality"; i.e., "the insiders' view". It prioritizes depth of analysis and interpretation over breadth of coverage, requiring as a result a limited dataset, as stated by Macnee and McCabe (2008).

To achieve the face validity of the study, three experts from different colleges at the University of Baghdad were consulted based on their interests in Cognitive linguistics and Applied linguistics. The panel comprised: Prof. Dr. Shatha K. Al-Saadi (College of Education for Women); Prof. Dr. Shaima Mahdi (College of Education-Ibn Rushd); and Prof. Dr. Nareeman Jabbar (College of Languages). A cover letter was submitted to them, outlining the objective of the study, the theoretical framework, and the three candidate images (Good Advice is Expensive, The Letter, and The Annoying Bloke) proposed by the researcher for their consideration. Given the qualitative research design of the study and the nature of the target population- first-year female students from the Department of English-College of Education for Women-University of Baghdad- the panel recommended limiting the study to one image macro that addresses aspects relevant to the participants' experiences, and unanimously selected "The Letter" to be the best candidate for the study; consider Figure 2. They further recommended administering the image to (30) purposively selected participants following the

ethical considerations. They finally confirmed the appropriateness of adopting Fillmore's Frame Semantics. The reason behind recruiting only female participants is because this is the first study of its kind. Besides, having a homogenous purposive sample helps to reduce unnecessary demographic variations, enabling ultimately a deep qualitative analysis.



Figure 2. Berthold Woltze's image, *The Letter*

During the preliminary process of data collection, the researcher identified a set of images known as "problem pictures" associated with Berthold Woltze. This genre, according to Jones (2025), was popular in Britain during the 18th C. and was characterized by its visual simplicity in depicting an unresolved situation that encourages open-ended speculations. Further, the absence of the verbal component increased the speculative aspect and demonstrated the individual differences, the main concern of cognitive linguistics. The threshold meaning of this picture is:

A young mother has just received, opened, and read a letter. She leans against the massive stone hearth, looking badly crestfallen, as her young daughter holds her arm and looks up at her mother's face. The mother has been peeling potatoes, which are now scattered on the floor, and in her apron. Her shoes are badly worn, and she is clearly not well off.

The letter's envelope lies on the floor, at the lower left corner, but gives no further clues. This is clearly bad news, and probably about her husband. Is he wounded, missing, dead, or has he left her? (Oakley 2018: 4)

A pilot study of (15) participants was conducted using the same image to estimate the time required for doing the task, assess the clarity of the image macro, evaluate the diversity of the participants' generated textual memes, and to assess the reliability of the study. Doing the preliminary analysis, the decision was made to proceed with the main test.

The main study was conducted online using a Google form one week after the participants had received the results of the conversation test. The participants were instructed to generate within 15 minutes a textual meme that best reflected their understanding of the image macro. The answers were reviewed and categorized into frames and scenes following Fillmore's Frame Semantics. To

ensure the reliability of the study, a follow-up interview session was conducted to verify and understand the participants' explanations. It is to be noted that the participants were familiar with internet memes, a contemporary feature of the digital era.

To achieve the objective of the study, the researcher adopted the following procedures:

1. Conducting a thematic analysis (i.e., examination) of the participants' responses to identify the recurring patterns and points of conceptual similarity.
2. Doing the frame semantic analysis through grouping the related responses under a common frame, specifying the scenes and core frame elements associated with each frame, inferring the participants' emotions through the linguistic choices made in response to the visual stimulus and clarified in the post-task interview, and finally pinpointing the frame core elements of each scene. To maintain consistency in presentation, frames are represented in uppercase within square brackets, whereas the sub-frames are presented in title case within curly brackets.
3. Holding semi-structured interview sessions with the participants to clarify the participants' responses, specify the rationale behind their conceptualizations, and to verify their highlighted construals. Such a step enhances the objectivity of the analysis.
4. Submitting the complete analysis to the same panel (raters) to peer validate the research instrument, the framework adopted, the categorization of the data, increasing the reliability of the study.
5. Constructing a chart to descriptively present the identified frames and their frequencies.
6. Classifying the total number of the identified frame elements and tabulating them as core elements and virtual core elements. The study excluded the non-core elements, as they do not address the objective of the study and reflect the core elements of the participants' constructed frames which revolved around mainly three principal elements, namely the mother, the daughter, and the letter.
7. The classification of the frames and core elements was based on Fillmore's (1982) definition of these concepts. The term "virtual core elements" is the researcher's contribution to the study coined inductively based on the participants' responses in the pilot study. It refers to the conceptual elements or entities inferred by the participants to develop the scene of the frame in question. These entities were not explicitly stated in the image, but were necessary for scene constructions. For ease of reference, the virtual core elements are highlighted in red in the tables.

4. Data analysis

To achieve the objective of the study- namely, "to examine the various frames and scenes triggered by the participants while generating the textual memes from the

visual component”, the procedural steps indicated in the methodology section were applied, as illustrated in Tables 1–3.

Table 1. The [EXAM RESULT] frame, its scenes, and core and virtual core elements

No.	Participants	Core Frame Elements	Scenes Mentally Activated	Frames
1.	P1	The mother and the paper	Focusing only on the mother, as being the student herself looking at the listening exam result, which is indicated by the paper	[EXAM RESULT]
	P25	You and wrong answers	When you go out from the exam feeling proud that your answers are correct, then you discovered that all your answers were wrong	
	P27	Mother, daughter, the results	My mother’s face when she sees her daughter’s results this year	
2.	P2	Mother, daughter, and the exam result	The little daughter is showing her bad exams result to her mother	
3.	P5	Mother, daughter, and exam result	The little daughter is comforting her mother about her exam results, telling her that the teacher told her that her grades are just like the winter temperature, meaning very low	
4.	P16	Mother, daughter, 0 in math	The mom is saying you have taken zero in Math? Even the rock knows that $1+1=$	
5.	P26	Mother, daughter, and failed	When the poor mother spent days teaching her daughter, and the latter failed	
6.	P29	Mother, daughter, the son, neighbour’s cock, and results	When the mother sees her little son’s results because he was not reading. She commented, “even the neighbour’s cock started knowing the multiplication table”. The little daughter, in softening the atmosphere, said in a wicked smile, at least you do not have to buy new books for him.	

Table 1 shows that eight participants assigned the frame of [EXAM RESULT] to the image macro. However, they differed in the number of the core frame elements and virtual core elements employed in frame construction, and in their activated scenes as well. Further, based on the participants’ generated textual memes and on the clarification obtained by them in the post-task interviews, several observations can be stated:

- Both P1 and P25 depict themselves as the students who obtain poor grades in the listening and speaking test, as stated in the interview. Although they share the same frame, their conceptualizations are somehow different. P1 identifies herself with the mother character, reflecting her marital status, as confirmed in the interview while P25 adopts a general reference; using a simple present tense indicates a permanent situation that could apply to anyone including herself. Moreover, P1 directly refers to the core element paper, whereas P25 metonymically uses the phrase “wrong answers” to refer to the paper. Another difference lies in the elicited emotions; P1 descriptively seems sad, whereas P25 adopts a humorous tone upon seeing her exam result. Thus, activating the same frame does not guarantee having similar scenes. Similarly, P27 focuses on her mother’s facial disapproving expression, anchoring the event on a specific temporal context through the phrase “this year”. She also uses the phrase “the results” to

metonymically refer to the letter. The use of metonymy reflects what Kövecses and Radden's (1998) describe as a contiguity- or proximity-based stand-for relationship between two names or entities within the same conceptual domain. Here, the expressions "wrong answers" and "the results" or "scores" reflect the "CONTENT FOR CONTAINER" relationship.

- Both P2 and P5 metonymically refer to the examination paper through the expression, "exam result", and both construct their scenes from the daughter perspective; however, the ultimate scenes diverge in several respects. P5 metaphorically conceptualizes a poor examination result through the expression "winter temperature". This means the participant relies on her embodied knowledge when constructing the activated scene. By contrast, P2 focuses on depicting the act of showing her grade to her mother, and on anticipating her mother's reaction.

- Likewise, P16 links the image macro to receiving a poor result in a mathematics test, focusing on her mother's shock and on the daughter's silence posture, conveying a feeling of guilt for not performing well. In addition, P16 metonymically refers to the examination paper through the expression "0 in math".

- Similarly, P29 associates the image with the frame of [EXAM RESULT], but she uses a critically humorous tone. The mother assimilates her son's exam result with her neighbor's rooster, remarking that "even the cock started knowing the multiplication table". She further introduces two virtual core elements, "the son" and "the "neighbour's cock" when constructing her imaginative scene.

- By contrast, P26 foregrounds the mother's state, who spent days teaching her daughter, but in vain. That is, the core frame elements here are the mother and the daughter, and the word "failed" metonymically refers to the examination paper. In addition, the use of the adjective "poor" underscores the emotional impact of the prolonged efforts exerted.

The second frame activated is that of the [THE LETTER], as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. The [THE LETTER] frame with its scenes, and core and virtual core elements

No.	Participants	Frame Core Elements and Virtual Core Elements	Scenes	[THE LETTER] sub-frames
1.	P4	The mother, and love letter, her husband, electricity bill	The mother was expecting a love letter from her husband, but she discovered that it was the electricity bill	{Electricity Bill}
	P5	The mother, the daughter, and the electricity bill, paper	The daughter is asking her mother not to be mad as she has drawn on the electricity bill some flowers and hearts; she thought it was just a piece of paper. The mother told her great this means we will spent the whole month under the candlelight	
	P9	The mother, burnt food, and love letter, someone, electricity bill	The mother was expecting a love letter from someone, and she was busy with it to finally discover that it was an electricity bill that they have to pay. What aggravated the situation was that she forgot the food on the stove and it was all burnt!	
	P25	The mother and the electricity bill, love letter, an amount of money	The mother feels shocked, as the amount of the electricity bill is unbelievable. The mother feels shocked, as she expected it to be a love letter. However, she discovered that it is an electricity bill which its amounts exceeded the salary of two months. She was thinking if she was able to erase these numbers and write them the way she likes.	
2.	P7	The mother, the daughter and the letter, filled bank account	The mom has received a letter from the bank, thinking first that there is something negative. The daughter is asking her not to open it, so that they will think that they have not received it. Then, they discovered that their bank account has been filled with money by mistake, and so she seemed confused.	{Bank Notification}
3.	P10	The mother, the daughter and the letter	The mother was crying because she received a letter that says the internet service has been used up, and the daughter is telling her do not worry mom, we can use our neighbour's internet	{Internet Bill}
4.	P12	The young lady and the letter	The young lady has got a letter which reads Ronaldo is better than Messi	{Postal Letter}
5.	P20	The mother, her daughter, and the letter	The daughter is asking her mother about the letter she received, and the mom is telling her that this is a complaint from your school that you broke three windows and stole the teacher's cookies.	{Complaint Letter}
6.	P21+ P22	The mother, her daughter, and the letter	The mother has received a letter from the school complaining about her naughty daughter	{Complaint Letter}
7.	P23	The mother, her daughter, and the letter	The daughter is trying to comfort her mother that this letter is not a warning; it is just an invitation for a special meeting to discuss my unique genius	{Invitation Letter}
8.	P30	The mother, her daughter, and pay	The daughter is asking her mother to pay for doing the housework; she believes that nothing is for free	{Request Letter}

The second main activated frame is [THE LETTER], which corresponds to one of the core elements in the image macro. Twelve participants activate this frame; however, their construals are divergent; a matter which results in generating the following seven sub-frames: {Electricity Bill}, {Internet Bill}, {Bank Notification}, {A Personal Postal Letter}, {A Complaint}, {An Invitation}, and {A Request Letter}. Each of these sub-frames activates a scene using different core frame elements and virtual core elements, as illustrated below:

- The participants: P4, P5, P9, and P25 construe the letter handed by the mother as an {Electricity Bill}. P4 depicts the mother in a state of expecting a love letter from her husband (a virtual core element), only to discover that the letter is an electricity bill. The humour results from the contrast between expectation and reality. Similarly, P9 portrays the mother as eagerly anticipating a love letter from someone (a virtual core element) she desired to meet. However, she later discovers

that it is an electricity bill. Her disappointment is further aggravated by another unexpected event- the food burning (a virtual core element). P25 has the same initial expectation of a love letter; however, the focus is shifted to the financial burden (a virtual core element) indicated in the bill which exceeds the value of two monthly salaries. Thus, the mother's contemplating posture implies thinking about the possibility of altering these figures to her advantage.

Within the same sub-frame of {Electricity Bill}, P5's attributes her mother's shock to the realization that her daughter had accidentally drawn on the electricity bill, thinking it was a scrap paper. This act led to have a power disconnection problem, forcing the family to spend the remaining of month by candlelight.

- By contrast, P7 activates the frame of [THE LETTER] via the sub-frame {Bank Notification}, using three core frame elements and one virtual core element represented by the unexpected crediting of a large amount of money into the mother's bank account. The linguistic choices made reflect a combination of concern, surprise, and confusion.

- P10 activates the sub-frame {Internet Bill}, using three core elements. The mother is depicted as receiving an internet bill, stating the full exhaustion of the data allowance. The daughter is trying to comfort her by suggesting that they tap into their neighbour's internet line.

- Additionally, P12 activates the sub-frame {A Personal Postal Letter}, depicting a young lady in the act of receiving a letter. The letter states, "Ronaldo is better than Messi". This construal reflects the participant's interest in sports as she clarified during the interview session.

- P20 activates the sub-frame of a school {Complaint}, notifying the mother of her daughter's mischievous behaviors, represented by breaking the window and stealing the teacher's cookies. A similar scenario is observed in the responses of P21 and P22; however, the reason behind the complaint is not explicitly stated.

- P23 triggers the sub-frame {Invitation Letter}, portraying the daughter reassuring her mother that there is no need to worry, as such a type of school correspondences addresses issues related to her daughter's exceptional abilities. The mother's anxiety connotes a negative established schema of a school letter receipt.

- P30 activates the {Request Letter} sub-frame, depicting a daughter in the act of appealing to her mother to pay for her in exchange for doing the household chores. This behavior reflects the belief that nothing is free. The letter is understood implicitly and metonymically through the word pay, meaning a request of payment.

The third basic frame is [FOOD] frame, as showcased in Table 3.

Table 3. The [FOOD] frame with its scenes, and core and virtual core elements

No.	Participants	Core Elements	Scenes Highlighted	Frames
1.	P3	The mother, the father, the cat, the food, and the daughter	The daughter is telling her mom that her father said that the food is delicious, but I saw him putting the food in his pockets. The mom said I knew it, as even the cat refused to eat it.	[FOOD]
2.	P6, P8, P11 + P13	The mother and the daughter	When I finally wanted to go to bed, and my daughter come to me and say mom I am hungry!	
3.	P14	The mother, cover of chocolate, and the daughter	The daughter is telling her mother that she ate only one bar of chocolate. The mother is saying, but you ate all of them and you left only the cover.	
4.	P15	The mother, pizza receipt, and the daughter, the rent	The mother is telling her daughter “do not tell me that you bought Pizza with the money I gave you instead of paying the rent”	
5.	P17	The mother, the daughter, and lengthy steps of cooking, burnt food	The daughter is asking her mother about her worried state, and the latter is telling her I am worried and disappointed, as I followed exactly the steps of cooking that dish and alas it is all burnt!	[FOOD]
6.	P18	The mother, her daughter, and the receipt, piece of chocolate	The mother sank in distress when she discovered that her daughter has used up all the money she has through the receipt she received of buying an expensive piece of chocolate	
7.	P19	The mother, her daughter, buying sweets, spending the money, the bill	The mother sat speechless after discovering that her daughter has spent the whole money that have been saved to buy the essential things on buying sweets, and now they do not have the money to pay the bill	
8.	P24	The mother and the daughter	The mother is busy thinking of what to cook and her daughter is asking her whether she is beautiful or not	
9.	P28	The mother, the daughter, and detailed recipe, time of breaking fasting	The mother felt tired of following a very detailed recipe, and the daughter is telling her that the time for breaking our fasting is approaching and till now you have not finished your cooking	

Table 3 shows that 11 participants activate the frame [FOOD]; five of them use two core frame elements; one uses three core frame elements, whereas the remaining five incorporate core frame elements and/or virtual core elements, as shown below:

- P3 depicts a humorous scene in which a daughter reporting to her mother the father’s reaction to the food the mother prepared. This act pushed the mother to question the father’s previous compliment with respect to the quality of the food she cooked, particularly after learning that even the cat refused to eat it. Here, P3 uses three virtual core elements, “the father”, “the cat” and “the food” to construct the scene.

- Contrastively, P6, P8, P11, and P13 rely on their experiences as being married and mothers-as confirmed in the interview session. They adopt two core frame elements to depict a recurring situation in which their children claim to be hungry the moment they (the mothers) want to go to bed.

- P14 depicts a daughter saying the opposite of what she did, consuming all the chocolate bars though admitting having only one. Once again, “the chocolate wrapper” metonymically indicates the paper figure in the image macro.

▪ P15 portrays a mother as shocked and angry after realizing her daughter's irresponsible actions of spending the rent money (a virtual core element) over purchasing pizza. In other words, the pizza receipt held by the mother metonymically implies purchasing pizza using the rent money. Similarly, P18 depicts a mother being in distress upon acknowledging that her daughter spent the money she saved on buying an expensive piece of chocolate. Here, the paper held by the mother metonymically represents the purchase receipt. A similar scenario is echoed in P19, where the mother is depicted as sitting speechless and shocked upon knowing that her daughter spent her mother's savings on buying sweets, leaving them unable to pay the bills. Here, "buying sweets" and "spending the money" represent virtual core elements. Once again, these various scenarios share to some extent certain thematic similarities despite anchoring on different core and virtual core elements.

▪ P17 constructs a scene in which a daughter tries to soothe her mother, who spent much time and effort preparing a dish, which ended up burnt (a virtual core element). An almost similar situation is constructed by P28, depicting a daughter in the act of urging her mother to expedite her cooking, as the time of breaking the fast was approaching (a virtual core element). The mother appears exhausted from the struggle between following a detailed recipe and finishing her work on schedule. The paper here is metonymically construed as a recipe. As it is observed, the idea of spending much time and effort is replicated by these participants; however, they culminate in different outcomes.

▪ With P24, the mother is depicted as being preoccupied with the idea of what to cook, a common issue faced by many women while her daughter is distracting her with questions about her appearance.

To recap, Table 4 along with Figures 3 and 4 showcases the three distinctly highlighted frames, with the total number of their corresponding scenes:

Table 4. The number of frames, sub-frames, and scenes highlighted

No.	Frames Highlighted	Number of Scenes Highlighted
1.	[EXAM RESULT]	8
2.	[FOOD]	9 (4 participants share the same scene)
3.	[THE LETTER]	9 scenes from the following 7 sub-frames (4 participants share the same scene)
4.		4 { Electricity Bill }
5.		1 { Bank Notification }
6.		1 { Internet Bill }
7.		1 { Postal Letter }
8.		2 { Complaint Letter }
9.		1 { Invitation Letter }
10.		1 { Request Letter }

Table 4 illustrates that the participants evoke three main frames: [EXAM RESULT], [THE LETTER], and [FOOD]. Of these, only [THE LETTER] is sub-

divided into sub-frames. This implies that the participants variously conceptualize the core frame element, the letter; a matter which led to activate the following seven sub-frames: {Electricity Bill}, {Bank Notification}, {Internet Bill}, {Postal Letter}, {Complaint Letter}, {Invitation Letter}, and {Request Letter}. Moreover, the three overarching frames [EXAM RESULT], [THE LETTER], and [FOOD] generated 8, 9, and 9 scenes, respectively. With respect to the sub-frames of the [THE LETTER] frame, the numbers of the scenes activated are: 4, 1, 1, 1, 2, 1, and 1 for the following sub-frames: {Electricity Bill}, {Bank Notification}, {Internet Bill}, {Postal Letter}, {Complaint Letter}, {Invitation Letter}, and {Request Letter}, respectively, as illustrated in Figures 3 and 4:

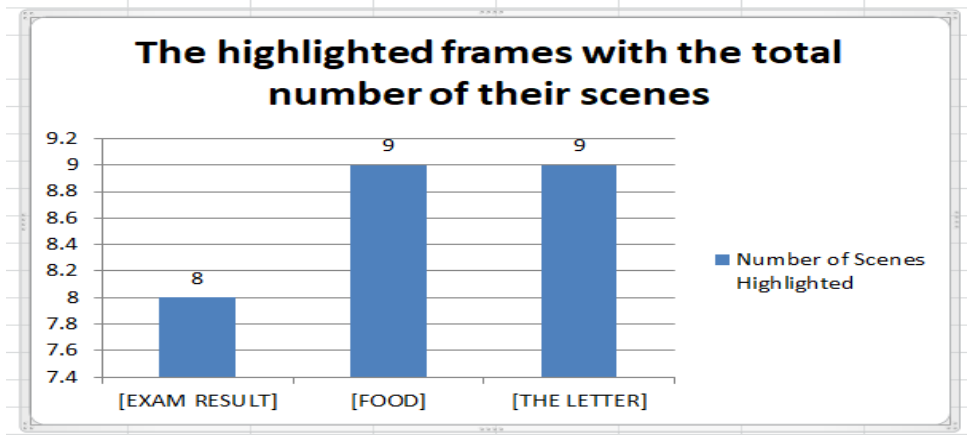


Figure 3. The highlighted frames with the total number of their scenes

Figure 3 illustrates the three overarching frames, and the number of scenes activated as per each frame. A multi-scene frame is a finding that aligns with Shifman’s (2014) observation in that the generated memes exhibit variability in their construals, points of emphasis, and in figures selection. Similarly, Barczewska (2020) described memes as being “polysemic”; a finding which the researcher of the present work partially supports. This is because the current findings showcase a spectrum of somehow similar, and totally different construals at the scenes, and core/virtual frame elements levels; reflecting thereby the individual differences, experiences, points of concern and interest, etc. However, the similar construals are clustered around the overarching frames. Generally, the diversity in the participants’ construals is semantically and visually constrained. Such a conclusion reinforces Brandt’s (2004, as cited in Al-Bahrani et al. 2016) observation in that “in cognitive linguistics, meaning is the product of thinking and mentally looking at things” (86). It also supports Al-Bahrani et al.’s (2016) finding in that when the image is textless, the participants are capable of generating various construals, reflecting by that their own schema and personal experiences.

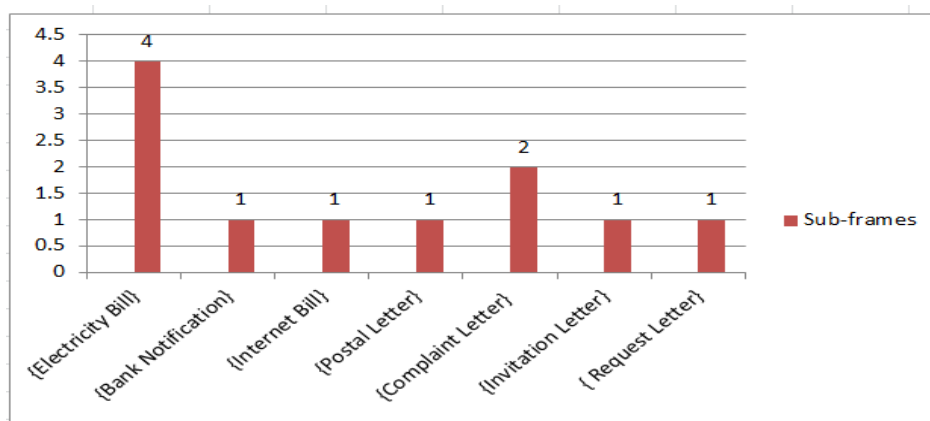


Figure 4. The sub-frames of [THE LETTER] and the number of scenes as per each sub-frame

As illustrated in Figure 4, only the [THE LETTER] frame has sub-frames, as the participants referenced it, using various lexical or metonymic realizations, such as: the letter, love letter, (electricity) bill, paper, pay, wrong answers, the (exam) results, 0 in math, failed, the chocolate wrapper, (detailed) (pizza) receipt, lengthy steps of cooking, and the bill.

Table 5 and Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the number of core and virtual core frame elements used by the participants. For ease of reference and frequency calculations, the researcher highlighted the virtual core elements in red in Tables 1–3. As it stated earlier, the image has three core elements: The mother, the daughter, and the letter. Accordingly, the frequency of each of these elements was calculated across the three main frames, and their sub-frames, taking into account the various manifestations in which they appear; consider Table 5 and Figures 5 and 6:

Table 5. The number of core and virtual core frame elements

No.	Core Frame Elements	No.	Virtual Core Frame Elements
1.	The mother/young lady/ you	28	16
2.	The daughter	22	
3.	The letter, love letter, (electricity) bill, paper, pay, wrong answers, the (exam) results, 0 in math, failed, the cover of chocolate, (detailed) (pizza) receipt, lengthy steps of cooking, and the bill	29	

Table 5 displays the frequencies of the three core elements: the mother, the daughter and the letter along with their various manifestations. These numbers were calculated manually across the three main frames and sub-frames of [THE LETTER]. As for the virtual core frame elements, they are easily identified in Tables 1–3, as they are highlighted in red.

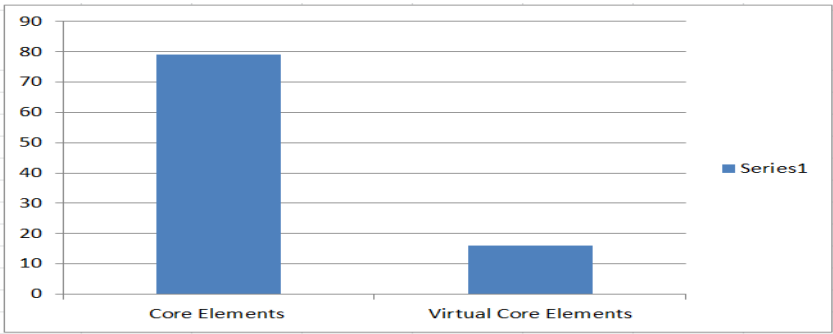


Figure 5. The total number of the core and virtual core frame elements

As showcased in Figure 5, the highest bar refers to the total frequency of the core frame elements across the participants’ responses. It was obtained by adding the frequencies of the three core frame elements - (the mother (28), the daughter (22), and the letter (29)), reaching a total of (79) occurrences. Contrastively, the participants added (16) virtual core frame elements, thereby demonstrating their ability in developing the activated scenes with additional conceptual information.

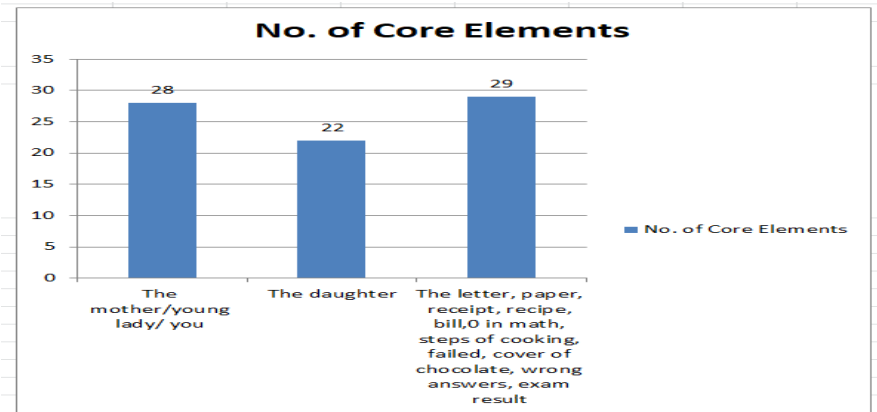


Figure 6. The core frame elements, their linguistic manifestations, and total frequencies

Figure 6 illustrates the total number of the core elements activated and/or their different manifestations.

5. Conclusions

To answer the research question, namely, “what are the various frames and scenes generated from the image macro in question?”, the study has pinpointed the following key insights:

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this is the first work that addresses textual image macro memes from the cognitive linguistic perspective using Fillmore's Frame Semantics. The findings demonstrate the feasibility of examining visual language-based conceptualizations from the cognitive linguistic viewpoint. The adopted framework successfully categorizes the textual memes generated by the participants into three main frames: [EXAM RESULT], [THE LETTER], and [FOOD]. However, it is shown that the participants incorporated not only the core frame elements pinpointed by Fillmore, but also additional virtual core frame elements (a term coined by the researcher of the present work) when constructing their own scenes. In addition, having highlighted a similar frame does not guarantee having a similar number of elements, referents, and/or scenes; a given frame still could evoke multiple scenes of specific or generic references. However, the findings show that the frames and sub-frames highlighted could be both semantically related or unrelated, owing to the individuals' different experiences, points of interest, and to the number of core and virtual core frame elements used. Besides, the diversity in the activated construals is constrained semantically and visually.

Moreover, the findings, supported by the interview session, show that the activated frames are culturally-mediated. They reflect the participants' own experiences, familiar observations, personal memories or associations, and feminine concerns. That is, the generated textual memes undergo dual contextualization, the visual context of the image macro, and the participants' conceptual backgrounds or experiences. Taking the frame of [THE LETTER] as an example, the scenes activated address topics related to a mother and her daughter, unsuccessful kitchen experiences, financial concerns, school complaints, love letter, etc. All these construals are grounded in situations that the participants have experienced similarly or in closely comparable ways. Accordingly, the similarities obtained reflect the participants' shared cultural background, whereas the differences address the individual differences.

Speaking of the emotions evoked in the three major frames based on the participants' linguistic choices, the findings reveal that the [EXAM RESULT] frame elicited negative and neutral emotions; the [FOOD] frame elicited negative emotions on the mother's part, whereas the [THE LETTER] frame evoked negative and humorous emotions.

Moreover, despite being female participants of the same age group and level of education, the generated textual memes share, to some extent, a common sense of having a problem. However, they demonstrate different yet familiar social or personal situations involving mother-daughter interactions.

Some participants incorporate a humorous sense into their generated textual memes, thereby reflecting their awareness of the characteristics of memes. Some others combine the senses of humor and hope as is the case with the [EXAM RESULT] frame. Regarding the frame of [FOOD], all the participants highlighted a lighthearted sense of humor. The humorous tone results either from the metaphorical style used or the details of the scenes depicted.

The participants basically rely on three core frame elements: (the mother, the daughter, and the letter) and add some other virtual core frame elements when elaborating their activated scenes. Despite the diversity in the scenes depicted, they all reflect the sense of having a problem, thereby matching the problem pictures genre.

Speaking of the implication of the study with respect to EFL classroom and digital communication, the findings suggest that memeing serves as an activity that encourages students to use their imagination while generating their textual memes. It further connects the participants' conceptual knowledge with the visual signs, producing ultimately coherent construals. It reflects the participants' digital literacy, enhances classroom engagement, and integrates their own experiences with the language learning process. Finally, it contributes to the development of the participants' communicative competence, speaking and writing skills, and their critical thinking as well.

Rana H. Al-Bahrani (PhD) – Corresponding Author

Associate Professor

Department of English, College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad, Iraq

ORCID Number: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5472-0722>

Email: rana.hameed@coeduw.uobaghdad.edu.iq; prof.rana.albahrani@gmail.com

References

- Al-Bahrani, Rana H. and Shifaa Mohammed Abdullah Al-Azzawi.** (2017). 'Visual language as a source of creative cognition'. *AL-Lisan International Journal for Linguistic & Literary Studies*, 1(3): 484–495.
<https://ojs.mediun.edu.my/index.php/AIJLLS/article/view/908>
(Retrieved on 30 August, 2026).
- Al-Bahrani, Rana H., Shatha Al-Saadi and Tiba Akram Yousif.** (2016). 'A detextulaized social caricature as a source of plural denotations'. *International Journal of English and Education*, 5(1): 76–91.
<https://ijee.org/ijee/article/view/595>
(Retrieved on 30 August, 2026).
- Al-Dbow, Aysar and Jasim M. Abbas.** (2025). 'The impact of technological mechanisms on literary imagination: The novel Tashari as a model'. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies (IJAES)*, 26(1): 283–300.
<https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes1047>
- Al-Fatlawi, Zuhoor A. and Rana H. Al-Bahrani.** (2019). 'Impact of number and type of figures' identification on accessing caricatures' meaning'. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 9(1): 421–436.
<https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v9n1p421>

- Ammari, Raeda Mofid George and Yazan Shaker Al-Mahameed.** (2024). 'Congratulation! A case study of social media users in Jordan'. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies (IJAES)*, 24(1): 317–340. <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes.v24i1.564>
- Banikalef, Ala'eddin, Luqman M. Rababah, Othman Khalid Al-Shboul, Maryam Alipour and Tamara Krishan.** (2026). 'Framing threats and justifying actions: A multitheoretical analysis of Avichai Adraee's Facebook discourse'. *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies (IJAES)*, 26(1): 419–440. <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes977>
- Barczewska, Shala.** (2020). 'Conceptual blends across image macro genres'. *Studies in Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric*, 61(74): 7–30. <https://doi.org/10.2478/slgr-2020-0001>
- Dancygier, Barbara and Lieven Vandelanotte.** (2017). 'Internet memes as multimodal constructions'. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 28(3): 565–598. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cog-2017-0074>
- Dobrzyńska, Teresa.** (1993). 'Tekst'. In Jerzy Bartmiński (ed.), *Encyklopedia Kultury Polskiej XX Wieku: Vol. 2. Współczesny Język Polski*, 283–304. Wrocław: Wiedza o Kulturze.
- Dondero, Maria Giulia.** (2020). *The Language of Images: The Forms and the Forces*. Liège: Springer.
- Fauconnier, Gilles and Mark Turner.** (2002). *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. New York: Basic Books.
- Fillmore, Charles J.** (1976). 'Frame semantics and the nature of language'. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 280(1): 20–32. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1976.tb25467.x>
- Fillmore, Charles J.** (1977). 'Scenes-and-frames semantics'. In Antonio Zampolli (ed.), *Linguistic Structures Processing*, 55–81. Amsterdam: North-Holland.
- Fillmore, Charles J.** (1982). 'Frame semantics'. In Linguistic Society of Korea (ed.), *Linguistics in the Morning Calm*, 111–138. Seoul: Hanshin.
- Holloway, Immy and Stephanie Wheeler.** (2010). *Qualitative Research in Nursing and Health Care* (3rd ed.). Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Jones, Christopher.** (2025). *How a Hidden Detail Changes Everything About This Unsettling Painting*. Medium: Christopher Jones article (Retrieved on 30 August, 2026).
- Kövecses, Zoltán.** (2005). *Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kövecses, Zoltán and Günter Radden.** (1998). 'Metonymy: Developing a cognitive linguistic view'. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 9(1): 37–78. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cogl.1998.9.1.37>
- Langacker, Ronald W.** (1987). *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar: Vol. 1. Theoretical Prerequisites*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lankshear, Colin and Michele Knobel.** (2011). *New Literacies: Everyday Literacies and Social Learning*. Berkshire: Open University Press.

- Lankshear, Colin and Michele Knobel.** (2019). 'Memes, macros, meaning, and menace: Some trends in internet memes'. *The Journal of Communication and Media Studies*, 4(4): 43–57.
<https://doi.org/10.18848/2470-9247/CGP/v04i04/43-57>
- Lou, Adrian.** (2017). 'Multimodal simile: The 'when' meme in social media'. *English Text Construction*, 10(1): 106–131.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/etc.10.1.06lou>
- Lugea, Jane.** (2020). 'The pragma-stylistics of 'image macro' internet memes'. In Helen Ringrow and Stephen Pihlaja (eds.), *Contemporary Media Stylistics*, 81–106. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350064119.0009>
- Macnee, Carol L. and Susan McCabe.** (2008). *Understanding Nursing Research: Using Research in Evidence-Based Practice* (2nd ed.). Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.
- Oakley, Howard.** (2018). *Berthold Woltze and His Problem Pictures*. The Eclectic Light Company: source article (Retrieved on 30 August, 2026).
- Ostanina-Olszewska, Julia and Aleksandra Majdzińska-Koczorowicz.** (2019). 'A cognitive linguistics approach to internet memes on selected Polish internet sites'. *Cognitive Studies | Études Cognitives*, 19: 1–11.
<https://doi.org/10.11649/cs.1939>
- Paek, Jemma.** (2025). 'A semiotic analysis of the canonical image macro meme'. *Semiotica*, 263: 63–87. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2024-0005>
- Qasim, Zahraa J. and Rana H. Al-Bahrani.** (2024). 'A cognitive linguistic study of visually shaping abstract words'. *Journal of College of Education, Wasit University*, 57(2): 549–566. <https://doi.org/10.31185/eduj.Vol57.Iss2.4137>
- Shifman, Limor.** (2014). *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Stössel, Tinka.** (2019). *Frame Semantics in Culturally-Specific Translations: A Study of Current American Netflix Sitcoms and Their German Translations*.
<https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23557.68325>
- The Empty Gallery.** (n.d.). *Problem Pictures*.
<https://www.emptygallery.org/problem-pictures.html>
 (Retrieved on 30 August, 2026).