

Meaning Construction in Iraqi Memes on Social Media

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Abstract

Meanings expressed in social media memes are usually featured with unexpectedness, exceptional novelty and even oddity; however, they have an increasing impact on social, political, and cultural spheres. This paper aimed at exploring meaning construction in Iraqi memes on Facebook. Following the conceptual integration model, the study tried to reveal how far understanding Iraqi memes depends essentially on the selective projection from the two input spaces, without any particular reference to extra world knowledge/experiences. Twenty Iraqi professors and students were recruited in this study — precisely speaking, ten professors and ten students. They were shown and interviewed about meaning potential in five selected popular memes. To this end, the study used a qualitative method research design associated with a non-experimental observational methodology. The study concluded that memetic art is a soft attention-getting process that Iraqi creators use when they want to criticize or speak the unspeakable, especially when it comes to politics and religion. In addition, the study showed that understanding meanings indulged in social media memes depends on multi (rather than two) input spaces through a dynamic process of analogies. In fact, the findings provided that the participants who lacked the necessary contextual related meanings frequently failed to grasp the intended meaning — a fact which indicates that literal meanings provided by input mental spaces are in need of related pragmatic enrichments in order to be fully grasped.

Keywords: *Iraqi Memes; Social Media; Conceptual Integration Networks; Pragmatic Enrichment.*

1. Introduction

Internet memes have become a valuable activity, deploying various references, cultures, and symbols. Memes from different nations can serve as a reflection of daily life, the emotions of people, or the public consciousness of a nation or culture to the outside world. In this research, the conceptual integration model (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998) was used to analyze some popular Iraqi memes on social media platforms that represent facts or events in Iraq. Rather than the content itself, the intended meaning or script — or how the conceptual integration between the source and target domains of the memes is integrated with the additional reference or social meaning — was analyzed. Other issues related to the conceptual integration theory, including the significance of these variables (i.e., the social meaning of particular elements in the memes and their critical role, such as the inferencing process of understanding the meme between the source and target domains, and the falseness or underestimated relationship between this inferencing and the understanding of the script of the meme), were discussed.

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It could be argued that each internet meme represents a mini-story within the larger metanarrative provided by the discussion board, as in the conceptual integration model. This model was used to study jokes and cartoons, which displayed conceptual integration between three entities involving regions, social roles, and plants. It was argued that the nature of jokes, the triadic schema of this kind, is extended to integrate the two target spheres within the hierarchical containment structure of the model (Coulson, 2022). The present research aims to increase our understanding of internet memes by applying these theoretical perspectives to another form of humorous and brief narratives.

2. Memes and Social Media

The age of memes is not just an occurrence; it is an inevitable phenomenon that has emerged primarily because social media has fostered a viral culture where ideas can rapidly proliferate. In the beginning, concepts and thoughts served merely as essential tools for communication in the intricate network of human beings' daily lives. However, as time progresses and society evolves, these initial ideas undergo transformations through the rich expression of visuals and text. They are disseminated and amplified with the invaluable assistance of various media and their tools: radio, television, the internet, and social media platforms that dominate our interactions today. These visuals and texts morph into captivating imagery and distinctive marks designed to entice individuals or to be shared widely among audiences, a phenomenon we refer to as "memes" (Morales, 2021).

On a deeper level, memes serve as the cultural equivalent of DNA or genes, fundamentally encoding aspects of cultural knowledge and human behavior. The term "meme" is laden with significance; they function as "self-replicators," akin to living entities in the biological realm. Yet, they exist on a broader spectrum: traditions, social norms, and even scientific ideas can all be encapsulated as forms of memes. This inherent transmissibility is what allows them to spread dynamically through communication, interactions, and the processes of learning within communities. The element of variance is critical to this entire process. If every individual acted precisely the same, devoid of diversity or variation, the rich tapestry of culture and innovation would be stifled, leading to a stagnant existence devoid of the very creativity and evolution that defines human progress (Dennett, 2021).

In today's modern landscape, social media plays a crucial role in fostering a unique connection among individuals, effectively bridging gaps through advanced methods of communication that reflect and interact with our complex psychological natures. As a direct consequence of this evolution, the various mediums of communication that we now rely on have undergone both qualitative and quantitative transformations that reshape how we engage with one another. One of the primary catalysts driving these changes is undoubtedly the rapid advancement of technology. It enables people who belong to various groups to not only maintain contact and discover their global connections through innovative technologies designed to significantly reduce intra-group wiring costs, but it also allows them to experience a sense of individuality within these larger collectives, especially during more advanced interactions (Shifman, 2013).

The ability of social media users to store and access an extensive array of detailed and specific resources has led to a remarkable transformation in the global communicative environment. This change elevates the interaction levels among people from what was previously understood in recent history to something that feels completely distinct and unprecedented. The swift nature of interactions — often fewer in number but encompassing a broader spectrum of participants — facilitates a kind of dispersed coordination that was not possible before. Consequently, social media has witnessed an explosive growth in the efficiency of transmitting both visual and textual content, which in turn has greatly accelerated the processes through which memes are generated and disseminated across diverse platforms. As a result of this ongoing development, memes have evolved into a significant and viral aspect of culture, experiencing extensive sharing on social media channels that boosts their visibility and impact in our day-to-day interactions (Lessig, 2009).

3. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the complexities of language and thought is one of the most interesting fields within conceptual integration theory — a cognitive framework founded by Fauconnier and Turner (1998) that elucidates how individuals combine disparate concepts to generate new meanings. This theoretical approach posits that human cognition operates through the integration of mental spaces, enabling individuals to form innovative ideas and solve problems creatively. Conceptual integration theory is particularly useful in examining how language, culture, and context work together to shape our understanding of reality. It serves as a lens through which one can investigate various phenomena, ranging from metaphorical language use to creative storytelling. As we embark on this exploration of conceptual integration theory, it is essential to mention its implications across disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, and cognitive science. By delving into the nuances of this theory, we can appreciate the intricate processes that underpin human creativity and the ways in which meaning is constructed and perceived.

Conceptual integration is seen as a remarkable ability to effectively merge cognitive information deriving from one unique concept with relevant information from another distinct concept through the intricate relationships established by one or more cross-space networks. The utilization of conceptual integration networks has proven to be invaluable in explaining the complex cognitive processes through which humans leverage their experiential knowledge to effectively comprehend and make sense of vast amounts of intricate information spread across diverse fields and disciplines such as rhetoric, word formation, semantic innovation, and the emergence of new aesthetic forms. By harnessing the capabilities of conceptual integration networks, we discover a powerful and versatile creative tool that enables us to effortlessly bridge different conceptual structures, thereby allowing for a wide range of new meaning potentials to be generated. This sophisticated type of blending structure can also be applied to the comprehensive study of various forms of creative thinking and expression.

When we delve deeper into conceptual integration networks, we observe that they involve intricate cross-domain mappings where two or more discrete domains of knowledge are harmoniously blended together, resulting in one cohesive integrated network. This structuring operation is not limited solely to the material found within the input domains, but it also extends to the operation of formulating correspondence and connections between these concepts, allowing for a richer understanding and innovative insights to emerge (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002).

Not all of the blends we create dynamically intertwine in the creative structuring process. Blend dynamics involve the accessory relationships that form, hold, and sometimes weaken structured blends. Studying these dynamics requires a rich, detailed account of how complex structures are interwoven and held together by adventurous participant interpreters blending elements on the basis of portmanteau elements or cognitive models in discourse. Much of the aspect of creating dynamic, complex blends is the setting up of special-purpose cognitive models within blended spaces. A central argument of this work has been that conceptual structure actively guides such modeling, playing a definable role in the search for structure, guiding consequences being accessible in blended mental spaces. Mappings between input spaces and blended spaces make special use of loosely interconnected networks within the global structure. That special use can be in part analyzed through systematic examination of the dynamic model-building conduits that constitute conceptual integration (Oakley & Hougaard, 2008).

At its core, conceptual integration theory holds that:

In our model, the input structures, generic structures, and blend structures in the network are mental spaces. Mental spaces are small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action. Mental spaces are very partial assemblies containing elements, and structured by frames and cognitive models. They are interconnected, and can be modified as thought and discourse unfold. Mental spaces can be used generally to model dynamical mappings in thought and language. (Fauconnier & Sweetser, 1996)

Furthermore, Fauconnier and Turner (1998) added that, in constructing the blended structure, three main operations are involved, namely, composition, completion, and elaboration. Composition shows how blending composes elements from the input spaces, providing relations that do not exist in the separate inputs. Fusion is one kind of composition. Counterparts may be brought into the blend as separate elements or as a fused element. Completion indicates how blends recruit a great range of background conceptual structure and knowledge without our recognizing it consciously. In this way, composed structure is completed with other structure. The fundamental subtype of recruitment is pattern completion. Elaboration develops the blend through imaginative mental simulation according to principles and logic in the blend. Some of these principles will have been brought to the blend by completion. Continued dynamic completion can recruit new principles and logic during elaboration. But new principles and logic may also arise through elaboration itself. Finally, composition, completion, and elaboration lead to emergent structure in the blend; the blend contains structure that is not copied from the inputs, since the projection from the inputs to the blend is typically partial.

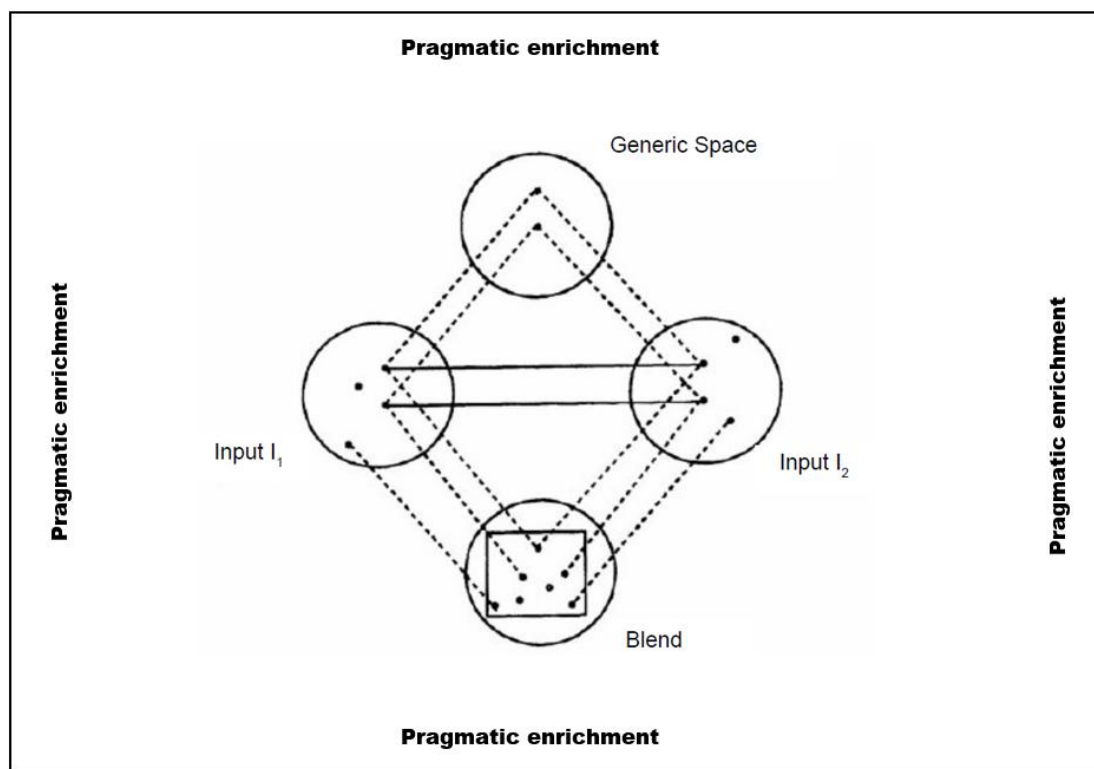


Figure 1. Conceptual blending schema (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, p. 46).

Figure 1 above is presented by Fauconnier and Turner (2002) as an illustration for the construction of the blended space fed by the two input spaces selectively. Nevertheless, it has been noticed that the participants who lack the necessary contextual enrichment frequently fail to grasp the intended meaning. For that reason, Fauconnier and Turner's original two-dimensional feeder had to be extended to include participants' world knowledge, which is necessary for a complete reading for any message.

4. Methods

Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that qualitative research "begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or

groups ascribe to a social or human problem." To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The fact that the current study is interested in understanding a particular social phenomenon urges the need for the qualitative method.

The sample of this study involves five posts of social media memes. These memes were collected at different times from a Facebook page called "Top Iraqi Comics". They were chosen because they went viral. The structure of these memes involves pictures (mostly from Arabic movies) and Arabic texts. It is worth mentioning that each of these memes has a particular related political, social, or religious occasion. Thus, the study intentionally includes participants from two different age groups: those who have lived through the related occasions and those who have not. Below are the five selected memes and their settings:



Figure 2. The Asian Cup.

In this meme, the designer tried to depict a turning point that happened in the modern history of Iraq, specifically in 2007. At that time, armed groups from both sects were wreaking havoc in the country. The governments were unable to save the country from the deadly monster of sectarianism. Only the men of the Iraqi national football team were able to bring the country to a safe haven by winning the Asian Football Cup. They proved to everyone that unity is the only solution to face difficulties. That cup was a powerful magic which helped people see the truth. Especially when Iraqi people came out with all their diversity to celebrate that occasion; at that moment they realized how deceived they were.



Figure 3. The Bomb Detector.

This meme was created in reaction to a bomb detector which the Iraqi government bought in 2007. The device was notorious for detecting nothing. At that time, bombed cars were going everywhere. The device was similar to TV aerials. Therefore, the designer was mocking the detector as an aerial getting TV channels rather than detecting bombed cars. Policemen at that time were carrying the detector helplessly.



Figure 4. The Social Titles.

Since 2010, social titles have played a terrifying role in social interactions in Iraq. Important figures in Islamic political parties used these titles to influence people. Most of these titles had a religious dimension. For example, the title "Sayyid" means that the bearer of this title was a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). People were convinced by such titles. However, the title "Mirza" seems to be of little effect. "Mirza" means that the

bearer of this title has a mother who traces back to the family of Prophet Muhammad. It was one of the weakest titles, not just because Iraqi society does not attribute individuals to their mothers rather than their fathers, but also because influential figures never use that title.



Figure 5. Sindbad Land.

Through this meme, the designer criticized the cancellation of the Moroccan artist Saad Lamjarred's concert in Baghdad (2022) after religious parties' supporters tried to break into Sindbad Land amusement park in order to cancel the concert. That happened under the pretext that the concert coincided with religious celebrations and violated prevailing customs. The designer pointed out that the supporters cancelled the concert on this pretext, despite their knowledge of the existence of wine bars and gambling halls in the vicinity of the same place.



Figure 6. The Low-level Content.

This meme was created in an attempt to mock the owners of low-level content social media pages, after a wide campaign launched by the Iraqi government to reduce this phenomenon in 2023. The government prosecuted all influencers of low-level content. Some of them were sentenced to three months and others were released on bail.

Below are the translations of the textual parts involved in the sample:

1. Sunni's gangs, Shia's gangs, sectarianism.
2. A bombed car is going to enter Baghdad's checkpoint in 2009; a policeman has an aerial which could get Al-Nehrian Channel.
3. Pasha, Sayyid, Haji, Mirza, Sheikh (these are personal titles with high social values which are used by influential figures in political parties).
4. We shall close Sindbad Land and prevent debauchery? But beware of closing the bars and gambling halls. God forbid, Pasha.
5. Do you see that police-van? Take your content and get into it.

The participants in the study were ten Iraqi professors in the translation department at Al-Iraqia University in Baghdad, Iraq, and ten fourth-stage students from the same department. The groups were very uniform in terms of age: the professors were 45–50 years old and the students were 21–22 years old. They did not receive any theoretical preparation connected with the study of conceptual integration or memes. Their familiarity with memes was entirely a matter of their life experience. The participants were placed in a laboratory and had the memes displayed on a data show and then asked about their own way of understanding meaning indulged in those memes. The instrument used in the investigation was a guided interview, in which the responses were noted down by the interviewer and consulted with the participants for any necessary corrections. On the basis of the responses, certain recurring patterns in interpretation have been identified and described in the section below. It is worth mentioning that the two groups were interviewed separately.

5. Findings and Discussion

At first sight, both groups knew that these posts are social media memes because they were popular and the participants were familiar with them. For the first meme, the professors' results were much more accurate than the students' results. The professors agreed that the intended meaning was to be read by relating, on the one hand, the bad behaviors of Tom and its cat-friend from the pictorial input space, with what the armed groups did in Iraq during the mid-2000s from the textual input space. On the other hand, by associating Jerry's winning and cup from the pictorial input space with the flag of Iraq, bearing in mind what the Iraqi national football team achieved in 2007. The professors were able to easily connect the evil actions of Tom and its friend to the evil actions of the armed groups during that period. In fact, all the professors confirmed that the cup symbolizes the Asian Football Cup which Iraq won in 2007 and Jerry is a symbol of the national football team. In addition, the professors added: "We all saw how the winning of the cup contributed to solving the sectarian problem."

In contrast, all the students failed to interpret the lower picture, despite their understanding of the upper picture. All the students confirmed that the upper image of Tom and its friend refers to the sectarian crises that Iraq went through during that period, but when it came to the lower image, none of them indicated anything about the Iraqi national football team and the Asian Cup. They all said that Jerry symbolizes Iraq (as a country) and that the cup refers to the end of sectarianism. Except for one student, whose answer was similar to the professors', although he was the same age as the rest of the students. After discussing the matter with him, it became clear that he is an athlete and

loves the Iraqi national football team and is familiar with all its achievements. He added that he once heard from one of his relatives how the Asian Cup had contributed to solving the problem of sectarianism.

With reference to the second meme, the professors' reaction, at first sight, was clear evidence of their understanding of the meme. All the professors laughed when they saw the meme. They all confirmed that the meaning was clear, as the disastrous sinking of the ship in the pictorial input space is to be contrasted with the horror of the arrival of the bombed car at Baghdad's checkpoint in the textual input space. As well, the indifference of the musicians from the pictorial input space is to be contrasted with the absurdity of the use of the bomb detector by the policeman in the textual input space. All the professors explained how the utilization of that device at the checkpoints was useless. In contrast, no student understood the intended meaning of the lower image. Although they easily linked the sinking disaster to the terrifying arrival of the bombed car, they believed that the lower image could mean that the policeman was busy watching a football match on one of the channels while the bombed car was going through Baghdad's gate. However, one girl student interrupted the others and said: "My father used to work in the military and he trained people to use a device similar to a car antenna; he showed it to me once, it was meant to detect explosives. Perhaps this meme indicates the inefficiency of that device." Clearly, one out of ten students got the correct meaning.

Furthermore, the professors found the third meme very amusing. They stated that the meaning is crystal clear. It can be seen by comparing the properties of the characters in the given scene with the power of the social titles within Iraqi society. The leading characters in the film have been chosen to represent the powerful titles such as "Sheikh, Sayyid, and Haji". On the contrary, the title "Mirza", which has almost no influence and is never used by those powerful people, has been depicted by a flat character. For the professors, the pictorial and the textual domains fit perfectly. The students, however, had no clue about the actual meaning of this meme. Although they all know "Sheikh, Sayyid, Haji, and Pasha", none of them knew what "Mirza" means. This fact misled them to think that the meme was meant to describe exclusively the scene in the film rather than the social reality. They thought that the titles given in the picture were distributed according to the virility of the characters in this film compared to the effeminacy of the other character within the given scene. In other words, they failed to understand the analogy because they could not access the required properties in the textual input space.

Surprisingly, the results of the fourth meme were completely different from the results of the previous ones. Both groups showed their full understanding of the meaning indulged in this meme. The professors and the students said that they had watched this film before, and that they were fully aware of what happened at Al-Sindbad amusement park in 2022. They confirmed that the meaning can be reached by linking the properties of the character "the business manager" in the film with the character of the Islamic parties' supporters. The character of the business manager does not hesitate to do anything to please his boss, no matter how good or bad that action was; he would do it only to flatter his employer, and this is what the designer focused on. The designers believed that the Islamic parties' supporters have the same properties as the business manager: they also do whatever their parties order them to do, without any considerations. This in turn causes them to contradict their actions from time to time. The professors and the students agreed upon the above explanation, except for one professor who did not understand the meaning at all. Later, it turned out that she was not aware of what happened at Al-Sindbad amusement park. She said: "I know the film but I have no clue about the texts written in the meme."

Regarding the last meme, the reaction of the professors and the students was almost identical, even in recalling some names of low-level influencers who were arrested by the Iraqi police. Both groups made it clear that the intention is obvious. They believed that the designer merged the rhythm of events within the scene with the technical term used by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior Affairs — "low content" — to depict the recent government's campaign against bad social media influencers. Everyone confirmed that the designer was trying to criticize this group of people through the given scene, which shows the arrest of the Egyptian Minister of Sports for wearing inappropriate clothing. The professors and the students agreed that this sends a clear message to the influencers that "no matter who you are and how many connections you have, you cannot escape justice." It seems that both the professors and the

students adopted the above explanation because of the recency of the occasion in question. Both groups have enough knowledge about the scene and the campaign — all that they need for mapping or projecting the intended meaning.

As we reached this point, the findings show that even if the meme designer wishes to replicate some properties from particular input spaces to the blended one, these properties cannot be read properly by the recipient unless he or she has some knowledge about their decompressed nature before they have been compressed. In other words, in any combination of two or more input spaces there is a need for an extra hidden input space (pragmatic enrichment) fed by prior individual experiences in order for the blended space to be properly interpreted.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems that Iraqi internet-users seek to achieve goals by using memes to spread their ideas or speak the truth while at the same time entertaining themselves and their audience. As a result, memes have transformed from both everyday internet-users and meme creators into somewhat politically and socially meaningful symbols. Iraqi memes support creative views that challenge existing social and cultural systems, and often intelligent and innovative memes provide us with lessons on the meanings of social and cultural issues.

Nevertheless, in order to fully understand these memes, the fundamental principle of connection between the counterparts (access principle) alone does not suffice. It seems that the principle cannot work either directly or indirectly if the recipient is not fully aware of the properties and background knowledge of each component in its own space. As was shown through The Asian Cup, The Bomb Detector and The Social Titles memes, it was hard for the students to connect the textual properties with the pictorial properties required for understanding the meaning indulged in the blended space, since the students were too young and did not live the details of the time which the memes refer to. Whereas the professors could easily connect them and get the meaning because they had already lived the details of that period and were fully aware of the properties of each domain.

On the other hand, both students and professors found it very easy to get the meanings of The Sindbad Land and The Low-level Content memes because they already knew everything about the counterparts in each space; therefore, they could relate easily. In other words, they are familiar with the properties of the scenes because they already watched the films and are familiar with the textual properties because they lived the events. This is why we can say that blending networks are relatively constrained from one person to another depending on how much he or she knows about each space in order for the mapping process to take place and for meaning in the blended space to be fully grasped.

To put it differently, the blended spaces need a great deal of pragmatic enrichment before they could properly be interpreted. Pragmatic enrichment is not to be misunderstood as necessarily living simultaneously in the same period of time for the details of the backstage of the input space in question. But it does mean that the recipient should somehow have prior knowledge about it — whether they saw, heard, or even read about it.

Impacts and Implications

Iraq before, during, and after the Gulf Wars provides a suitable medium to examine the impact and implications of online public communities and their dialogue exchanges in real time regarding internal thought. The Conceptual Integration framework presented within provides a structure to foster thought and obtain commentary attainable in no other way. The presentation on Iraq's conceptual domain reveals areas of potential polarization and disagreement. Iraqi dialogue reflects that such situations may not have arisen without online interactivity. Despite the heightened emotions of perennial conflict and the adverse impact on self-image that may have resulted, analyzing memes — which reflect their home cognitive schemas — assists people in organizing their internal thoughts. Those

memes may also provide valuable attributes that minimize the scarring impact of frequent severe traumatic stressors, developing mechanisms to logic and reasoning aimed at reestablishing common ground among Iraqi people in their online interaction. This conduit to inward thought could be a real "outward" virtue for a life-loving people.

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