

Quotation in the Wild

Abstract: The New Yorker ran a cartoon that featured two mice talking to one another. One talking mouse appears to be rejecting the entreaties of the second mouse by quoting parts of a line from a Robert Burns poem. The opening line from the poem is "Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie," which the talking mouse [un]quotes as "wee, tim'rous beastie." Now, it's doubtful that the second mouse was wooing the first mouse by quoting Robert Burns poetry. Rather, the first mouse's "wee, tim'rous beastie" is not a quote of the second mouse, but a use of quotation to pick out a manner of flattery that the second mouse needs to knock off. The oddest thing about the New Yorker mice who talk, mis-quote, and use Robert Burns to refer to unwanted behavior, is that the cartoon isn't difficult to understand at all.

This talk will be about the range of quotational phenomena across written, verbal, and signed modalities. I will claim that we can work toward a single account of these phenomenon by starting from the central case: a depictive act in a verbal conversational context involving story-telling. From there we treat acts of quotation and reporting as demonstrations. Since this requires embracing quotation as semantically ambiguous I end by explaining why semantic ambiguities are not so bad.