PRIMA – Procedures for Interpreting Multimodal Argumentation

This project looks at how we can interpret arguments when they are not expressed only in words, but rather in pictures, sounds, films, or any combination of these. In order to classify and evaluate such arguments, we must first be able to identify them and extract from the material those elements which are important in understanding what point the author is trying to make and how they are trying to persuade us that it is true. The aim of the project is to develop step-by-step procedures which can be followed by anyone to make this kind of analysis.

The materials used for this study are internet memes. Whilst many memes are purely for fun, increasingly they are being used to spread political messages, as in the examples below. This makes it particularly important to understand how they may affect the democratic process.

Figure 1: Harris and Reeves

Figure 1 contrasts the Democratic Party presidential candidate, Kamala Harris, with the UK Chancellor, Rachel Reeves. The pictures are adaptations of a well-known image, and are combined with words, both common features of memes. The point made by the contrast is rather clear, that Harris offers hope to the US, but Reeves offers none to the UK, but is there an argument here? If so, how can we interpret it?

A second meme, figure 2, which was published the day after the Labour party won the general election in the UK is more obviously an argument. It shows that the situation will not improve because the new government will be no better than the last one. This is done through the use of a fire metaphor – how we can take such rhetorical features into account when evaluating the argument?

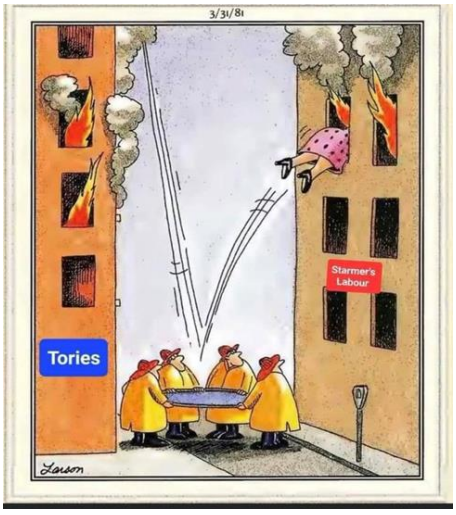

Figure 2: Burning buildings

By considering the way memes work as multimodal arguments, the PRIMA team will develop a theoretical framework for the role of memes as arguments and for non-verbal arguments more generally. This framework will be used to design systematic procedures for interpreting such arguments, which will be tested and improved over the course of the project.