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How Do the Absurd and the Realistic Blend in Comic Strips?

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How Do the Absurd and the Realistic Blend in Comic Strips?

One of my favorite webcomics is *Wondermark* (<http://wondermark.com/>), by David Malki !. What fascinates me about the strip is how mundane, ordinary elements get combined with unexpected elements to create a strong sense of the absurd, the fantastic(al), and the unreal. Generally, the physical setting of the strip is Dickensian, often involving not much more than two or three characters in a library, parlor, or dining room. Occasionally, the characters will interact in a scientific laboratory or public place, like on a street corner. Often it's the language of the strip that creates the absurd. The characters broach topics that make little sense or, more accurately, stretch the very fabric of logic and sense to highly skewed proportions.

In strip #682, "Monkey Box and its ilk," two characters are involved in what seems to be an ordinary conversation.



In panel 1, the man is seated and reading a newspaper article about a murder, the woman standing nearby. The man makes a comment about the story, but he doesn't focus on the murder itself. Instead, he remarks in an understated disbelief that the name of the town is Monkey Box. The woman responds, seeming to explain away his concern by contextualizing the process of naturalization: the residents of Monkey Box may not even pay attention to the name of the town — it's such a constant part of their world that it has become natural (naturalized) to them. As far as ordinary conversations go, so far so good.

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In panel 2, the characters shift their focus from "Monkey Box" proper to other examples of place names. By the woman's second turn, they are focused squarely on toponymy and the cognitive processes that speakers use (or fail to use) when they speak of a place.

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It is in panel 3, however, when the strip begins to become so speculative as to be absurd. The man stays on topic, as all good conversationalists do, and the woman answers his questions. This tripartite question-and-answer exchange demonstrates turn-taking strategies that are universally available in everyday conversational discourse. But the content of the questions and, especially, the answers is bewildering.

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I imagine that there are any number of explanations regarding Malki !'s choices here and why he tells the story the way he does. Is he making commentary on willful ignorance? On the creativity involved in language play? On the art of conversation? In any case, Malki ! uses the concept of

folk etymology as a way of constructing the absurd in this strip, providing readers our own opportunities to reflect on our surroundings and the names of places we've lived in and have called home.

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Posted by [Frank Bramlett](#) on [January 11, 2012](#) in [Conversation/Dialogue](#), [Etymology](#), [Toponymy](#) and tagged [Malki](#), [Monkey Box](#), [Ordinary Conversation](#), [Toponymy](#).

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About Frank Bramlett

Until June 2014, I am a visiting lecturer in the English Department at Stockholm University, where I offer seminars in Sociolinguistics; Language and Gender; and Language and Comics; among others. For Fall 2014, I will return to the English Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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