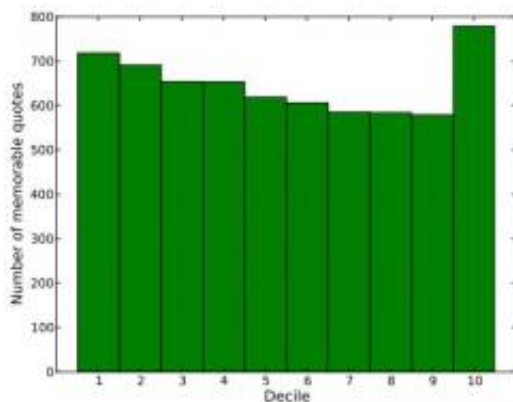# Cornell researchers striving to understand memorable movie quotes

April 4 2012, by Bob Yirka

Location of memorable quotes in each decile of movie scripts. Image from arXiv:1203.6360v1

(PhysOrg.com) -- Why do some movie quotes stand out and stick not just in our minds, but in the minds of many? "I'll be back," spoken by Arnold Schwarzenegger in the original *Terminator* movie, for example, or "Make my day," whispered by Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry*. Such phrases become part of our collective culture, used by many long after the movie itself has become old news. But why, that's what Cristian Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil and colleagues at Cornell want to know, so much so that they've undertaken a serious study of the matter, and have, oddly enough, come up with some interesting ideas, as they describe in their paper pre-published on arXiv, to help explain in a general sense, what happens when say, Renée Zellweger offers the line "You had me at

hello," in the otherwise forgettable movie *Jerry Maguire*.

To get to the bottom of this important social phenomenon, the research team looked at a thousand movies and extracted short "memorable" lines from each. They then compared those against other lines in the same movie spoken by the same character to see if they could spot any differences. To help in this endeavor, they asked volunteers who had not seen the movie to choose between two lines to see if they could figure out which was more memorable. They found that people guessed right (as defined by the IMDB online database) about seventy five percent of the time. And just for kicks, they have also posted the test online for anybody else that wishes to give it a try.

The team next compared the quotes with a large sample of common quotes from 1967, hoping that the popular phrase would not appear in them to help in analyzing their grammatical structure. As a result, they found that memorable quotes tend to be unique in that they don't turn up in such texts, but they do generally lean towards pronouns, indefinite articles and verbs used in the past tense. Such constructs, they say, tend to make for generalized statements, which make them easily transferable to varied circumstances. "You had me at hello," for example, could be used by both men and women in all manner of different social settings to get a point across quickly and easily, making it an ideal quote.

Once they had some idea of what they were looking for, the team looked at advertising to see if professional quote makers were using the same techniques. Unsurprisingly, they found that advertising catch phrases held many of the same properties as memorable lines in movies.

After all their research, it seems the team might be on to something, though their results are murky at best, which makes sense, because as we all intuitively know, memorable movie lines are thus, because they cut through the blather of general dialogue to make a deeper point.

Understanding how it's done, would require understanding art itself, which thus far, luckily, remains a mystery.

More information: You had me at hello: How phrasing affects memorability, arXiv:1203.6360v1 [cs.CL] arxiv.org/abs/1203.6360

Abstract

Understanding the ways in which information achieves widespread public awareness is a research question of significant interest. We consider whether, and how, the way in which the information is phrased --- the choice of words and sentence structure --- can affect this process. To this end, we develop an analysis framework and build a corpus of movie quotes, annotated with memorability information, in which we are able to control for both the speaker and the setting of the quotes. We find significant differences between memorable and non-memorable quotes in several key dimensions. One is lexical distinctiveness: in aggregate, memorable quotes use less common word choices, but at the same time are built upon a scaffolding of common syntactic patterns; another is that memorable quotes tend to be more general in ways that make them easy to apply in new contexts. We also show how the concept of "memorable language" can be extended across domains.

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