

Speech Balloons

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1. Strange Devices



Figure 1: “Temptations of a Car-Hop!” from *Young Romance* #35 (Feature, 1949) Art and story: Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. Lettering: Ben Oda.

It might be the strangest things about comics: they can’t see them. Despite hanging there, directly in front of characters’ faces and sometimes poking squarely into their mouths, speech balloons remain unseen. Although they often look like wordy protest signs or sandwich boards, they remain entirely unmentioned. And, despite the fact that they’re usually stark white and in apparent violation of the laws of physics, characters seem entirely unconcerned with their presence. Now for the *really* weird part: although characters can’t see them, whenever *we* as readers see them, we know that characters are talking to one another. So, regardless of how speech balloons might look to us as comics readers, they can’t possibly look that way to the characters within comics.

The puzzling nature of speech balloons is easy to ignore. But that’s because we’re remarkably well trained at interpreting them. Doing so is an essential element of *picture-reading*, the interpretive practice we use to make sense of comics. (On picture-reading, see Cowling and Cray (2022: 56-60).) Picture-reading is importantly different from merely *looking* at comics. For example, if you merely look without picture-reading (or perhaps picture-read incompetently), you’ll only see white blobs emblazoned with text and be tempted to conclude that characters are standing next to strange ghost-like entities. But, when we are guided by the interpretive conventions of the medium, speech balloons disappear from the world of the story. They aren’t floating beside characters; they’re not *there* at all. In their place, characters are doing something perfectly ordinary: speaking. (On convention-defying speech balloons in metacomics, see Cook (2012).)

Alongside panels and pages, speech balloons are the formal building blocks of the comics medium. In fact, their prevalence has led some to argue that they are essential features

of comics. On such a view, nothing can be a comic without including them. (See Carrier (2000) and Harvey (1996).) Although speech balloons are perhaps the most recognizable part of the “visual technology” of comics, this essentialist view of speech balloons is difficult to defend. That’s because there is no compelling motivation for denying that “silent” or “pantomime” comics like Eric Drooker’s *Flood!* (1992) are, in fact, comics. Conversely, speech balloons often appear outside of comics—e.g., on coffee mugs featuring speech balloons. So, while speech balloons are a standard feature of comics, their presence does little to settle the question of what is or isn’t a comic.

As strange as they are, we know where a philosophical account of speech balloons should begin: with the conventions of comics production and consumption. Given our experiences with comics, it is evident that readers can coherently integrate speech balloons with images and other text and that creators can convey speech acts using them. Our central challenge is therefore to uncover and articulate these subtle conventions surrounding speech balloons.

2. Speech Balloon Anatomy



Figure 2: “The Clooney Nooney Caper” in *Beanbags* #2 (Ziff-Davis, 1952). Art and story: Ben Brown and David Gantz. Letterer unknown.

In comics, linguistic representation (“text” for short) functions in myriad ways. (See Pratt (2009) and Wartenberg (2014) on text in comics.) For example, in the above panel, names are scrawled on door placards, which are visible to the characters, and the onomatopoeic text “CHOMP” conveys sounds that are audible to these same characters. In contrast, narrative text appears at the bottom of the panel, relating a story that goes unheard by the characters in the panel. Additional kinds of comics text include titles, page numbers, and indicia, which mark the dates of publication, copyright information, and credits. Much less frequently, text actually constitutes the panels of a comic—e.g., when panels are shaped as letters. A comprehensive taxonomy of the functions of text in comics isn’t our concern here, however. And, given the

boundless creativity of comics creators, it might not even be possible. Our present focus is, instead, with speech balloons as bearers of text in comics.

The general function of speech balloons is to present communicative acts, but, given the limitless variety of speech acts, speech balloons can serve this function only because they also admit of correspondingly unlimited variation. To appreciate how speech balloons might be manipulated, we'll need a rough understanding of their structure. Consider the following comics excerpt:



Figure 3: “Serpent of Doom” *Adventures into Darkness* #12 (Standard Comics, 1953). Art: John Celardo. Writer: unknown. Letterer: unknown,

This brief exchange is, in certain respects, straightforward. In each of the three panels, Grant speaks to Lydia and then Lydia speaks to Grant. But the ease with which this strange conversation is conveyed owes to careful manipulation of the parts of the speech balloons, which we can distinguish as follows.

The *tail* of a speech balloon, typically consisting of a narrow and pointed wedge, indicates the agent of the speech act. Since our speakers take turns, the tails of the speech balloons alternate back and forth. Typically, each speech balloon has a single tail, which serves to mark the speaker. As with other elements of speech balloons, variations on this standard behavior are possible. For instance, when multiple characters speak in unison, a single balloon might have several tails (e.g., characters yelling “BIZNESS” in Figure 2). Alternatively, if the speaker is somehow obscured or “off-panel” — e.g., hidden around a corner or through a door — an elongated or bent tail might be used to mark the apparent distance between the focal action and the relevant speech act. (See, for example, the speech coming through a radio in Figure 11.)

The *content* of a speech balloon, typically consisting of text in a uniform typeface, conveys the linguistic content and the manner of the speech act. In the exchange above, the content obviously varies, presenting different sentences of spoken English. In addition, the use of bold text serves to further characterize the presented speech acts. (See Piekos (2021: 71-72) on conventions regarding italics, hyphenation, and other effects.) For example, unlike much of their exchange, Lydia’s “I MUST GO!” is to be interpreted as something like shouting.

The content of speech balloons can also vary with regard to the style in which linguistic items are presented. The historically dominant convention for presenting text in speech balloons is to use upper case letters in a *san serif* typeface with slight modifications. Most notably, the bars on a capital 'T' are almost always omitted in comics except in the pronoun 'I'. (See Piekos (2021: 46, 66) on this convention.) As we'll see shortly, however, letterers creatively depart from this convention to achieve a range of aesthetic effects. And, while comics creators sometimes include pictograms or pictures in speech balloons, our focus here will be on less exotic uses of the speech balloon. (See Cohn (2013: 48-53) on images in speech balloons.)

The *body* of a speech balloon, typically consisting of a smooth ovoid shape, encapsulates text and conveys the nature of the speech act. In the conversation above, the comparable speech balloons suggest that the characters, Lydia and Grant, are speaking to each other in a fairly similar fashion. In the example below, Handy Pandy speaks more or less normally, but Dillingsworth Q. Porker's utterance is exceptional: the puckered, bursting shape of the balloon's body conveys that he is urgently yelling rather than speaking. Other manipulations of the speech balloon body hinge upon subtle cross-modal associations between sight and sound. A wobbly and wavering balloon shape might, for example, invite the reader to interpret the speaker as slurring or speaking softly. (See Forceville et al (2010) on variation in bodies, especially across comics traditions.)

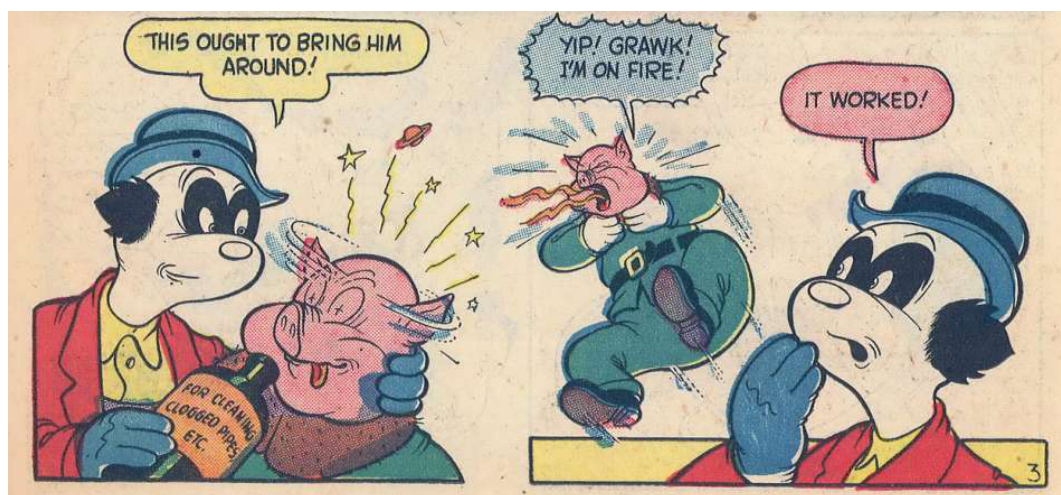


Figure 4: *All Humor Comics* #7 (Quality, 1947) Art and story credits unavailable.

For all their subtlety, we can read the speech balloons in comics swiftly and easily. And, we are highly sensitive to their variations, especially when their anatomy is manipulated in systematic ways. Consider the diversity of speech balloon styles on display in “A Lettering Sampler” by renowned letterer, Todd Klein:



Figure 5: Todd Klein’s “A Lettering Sampler”(1993) Copyright Todd Klein.

Klein’s piece makes clear the enormous space of visual options open to *letterers*—comics creators specifically responsible for designing and placing text. Compare the experience of interpreting the “average speech balloon,” presented at the top-middle, with the experience of interpreting the guttural, vocal depth of the ragged balloons near the top-right. And, while limited variations—e.g., changes limited solely to the tail, content, or body of a balloon—are familiar, artistic achievement in lettering requires careful, holistic manipulation of all of these elements.

Perhaps the most lauded work of comics lettering is Klein’s contribution to *The Sandman* (1989-1996), written by Neil Gaiman and drawn by artists including Sam Kieth, P. Craig Russell, and Colleen Doran. In *The Sandman*, the dialogue of each of the Endless, a group of supernatural

beings, is presented using unique styles of speech balloon. The central protagonist, Dream, speaks in a dour, low manner, conveyed via a white lower-case typeface over a splatter-shaped, black body. In contrast, the flighty and mellifluous dialogue of the character, Delirium, is presented in a wobbly hand-lettered script within an irregular, softly colored body. Strikingly, the more pragmatic member of the Endless, Death, receives what is effectively a standard lettering treatment. (The keen-eyed reader will note that each of these speech balloon styles can be found in Figure 5.)

In these and other cases, holistic variation in speech balloons is a tool for deepening specific characterization. Despite this, the most familiar holistic transformation of speech balloons is a perfectly general one: it converts the audible speech acts of characters into private mental events. By changing the smooth ovoid body of a speech balloon into a round, fluffy perimeter and by replacing a standard tail with a series of discrete clouds, speech balloons are transformed into *thought bubbles*—devices that exploit apparent analogies between thought and speech to represent characters' inner mental lives.

As we've seen, the canny comics reader encounters speech balloons and interprets them using a complex network of conventions. Suitably understood, these conventions also suggest that, despite appearing within the pictorial medium of comics, speech balloons are not mere pictures of sounds. To see why, notice, first, that the content of speech balloons includes the full breadth of any given written language. In turn, written languages like English permit us to distinguish between indiscernible sound events—e.g., by differentiating homophones like “heroin” and “heroine.” For this reason, two speech balloons including “Heroin chic!” and “Heroine, sheikh!”, respectively, would present different speech acts and thereby represent different intentions on the behalf of a speaker. So, while speech balloons do convey sonic information—namely, about when and how sounds are occurring—they are semantically and syntactically richer than pictures: they present semantic and syntactic information that outstrips purely sonic information.

Rather than serving merely as pictures of sounds, speech balloons are hybrid representations of speech acts. (On the history of the speech balloon, see Smolderen (2013).) And, while hard and fast distinctions are rarities within any taxonomy of comics, this difference is useful for tracking the divide between speech balloons and onomatopoeia. While the former present sounds with semantic and syntactic properties, the latter use linguistic resources to present information about what are typically non-linguistic sounds—e.g., the much-loved “ZOK” and “POW” of comics fisticuffs. Somewhere between speech balloons and onomatopoeia, we also encounter interstitial cases—for example, a scream exploding out of a speech balloon as if to convey speech transforming into raw, sub-linguistic vocalization.



Figure 6: “Fred Fox Hound” *Barnyard Animals* #8 (Better Comics, 1946) Pencils and Inks: Lynn Karp. Lettering: Tubby Millar

The porous nature of this distinction should be acknowledged, however. In Figure 6 above, the onomatopoeic “ROAR” trails the motion of the dog even while non-linguistic breath sounds like “Puff- Puff-” occur within speech balloons. The pliable conventions for distinguishing sound from speech are made clear by such cases. At the same time, a reader’s uptake of the events remains straightforward. This is because the only non-negotiable comics conventions seem to concern readers’ overall comprehension—namely, whether or not the reader can make sense of what’s happening with relative ease. The priority of coherence and legibility are reflected in the priorities and practices of letterers. As Klein (2004: 97) advises aspiring letterers in the *DC Comics Guide to Coloring and Lettering Comics*, “simplicity is always best, and above all, strive to keep your work readable.”

In addition to their primary function of presenting speech, speech balloons play subtle but potent roles in shaping our attention and temporal experience when reading comics. To see how, consider Figure 7 below:



Figure 7: Altered version of “Postponed Honeymoon” *Boy Loves Girl* #47 (Lev Gleason, 1954). Artist: Alex Toth.

Picture-reading this series of panels is an odd experience. Your attention likely wavered back and forth across the panels, briefly oscillated upwards to the empty spaces above, and then searched the faces for cues about what exactly is happening. While doing so, it likely felt unclear, not only how long your eyes ought to linger on the panels, but also how to interpret the duration of the depicted events. Are they separated by mere seconds, minutes, or even days?

In the absence of speech balloons, cartoonists’ careful management of visual attention proves to be of critical importance. This is because speech balloons are often used to guide the reader’s eye across pages and panels with the reader actively seeking to interpret and connect the presented speech acts. (On speech balloons and visual attention, see Piekos (2021: 28-30).) Moreover, readers are well aware that humans do not speak instantaneously: talking takes time and therefore any panel featuring a speech balloon likely depicts an event a period of time long enough for the speech act to unfold. Our interpretive act of picture-reading speech balloons also takes time and usually runs in parallel to the diegetic speech of characters. Consequently, how long characters are talking corresponds with the time the reader requires to interpret the speech balloon. The complexity of these effects is, like so much about speech balloons, an easy thing to ignore, but contrast the experience of picture-reading Figure 7 with the original, unaltered version in Figure 8:



Figure 8: “Postponed Honeymoon” *Boy Loves Girl* #47 (Lev Gleason, 1954). Artist: Alex Toth. Letterer unknown.

Although Figure 7 is an ordered sequence of panels, it provides no cues regarding the time elapsing in the story. Without speech balloons, the above events might just as well happen in a split-second or present a montage of events unfolding weeks apart. With the speech balloons restored in Figure 8, the sequence presents a conversation built out of speech acts whose narrative duration approximates the time required to read them. In this way, speech balloons

work in unison with panels to structure, not just the temporal flow of the story, but our temporal experience of reading.

3. The Art of Lettering

As Klein (2004: 83) describes the work of the comics letterer, it “consists of creating everything on the comics page that’s made of words: the balloons, captions, sound effects, display lettering, titles, signs, and sometimes the logos.” So defined, any comic with speech balloons, onomatopoeia, or narrative captions is lettered, but only some comics have *designated* letterers. This is due to a division of labor in the production of certain comics that separates the work of lettering from other writing and art contributions. (For a popular history of the comics studios and “shops” in which this developed, see Hajdu (2008).)

This compartmentalized creative practice typically begins with a writer who composes a story, complete with dialogue and narration, which is then drawn and prepared for reproduction (e.g., by a team consisting of a penciller, an inker, and a colorist). In a comparatively late stage, the letterer is tasked with placing the dialogue or narration onto the comics page. Since the practice of crediting letters for their contribution began only in the 1960s, the recognition of letterers’ role was a slow development within the broader comics industry. In turn, the emergence of critically lauded letterers like Gaspar Saladino, Tom Orzechowski, Stan Sakai, and John Workman happened only after an earlier generation of letterers like Ira Schapp, Ben Oda, and Artie Simek were acknowledged for their contributions.

The art of lettering within comics requires both specialized text-based skills and a keen sense of the comics form. In part, this is because good lettering must be sensitive to dispositions of readers as well as operative conventions that readers encounter elsewhere. It is also a highly *dependent* form of comics art precisely because its aesthetic success hinges on being responsive and complementary to the drawn comics art and the written comics story. As letterer Nate Piekos (2021: 30) says, “The choice of balloon and sound effect placement should harmoniously reinforce the path [of the reader’s eye] set forth by the art.” This squares with a familiar observation that the best lettering in comics is often, in some sense, invisible. On this front, Piekos (2021: 81) remarks “When they’re done right, they eye glides over balloons with hardly a second thought. When they’re wrong, they pull the reader out of the reading experience can ruin an otherwise wonderfully drawn page.”

While the general aesthetic aims of lettering might seem straightforward—e.g., accentuating rather than obscuring the art, promoting easy and orderly reading—the specific ways in which lettering might go awry are interesting and often quite striking. At the level of content, speech balloons with oddly placed and difficult to read text can detract from a reader’s engagement with a comic. Consider, for instance, the cramped lettering one finds in cartoonist Winsor McCay’s masterpiece *Little Nemo in Slumberland*:

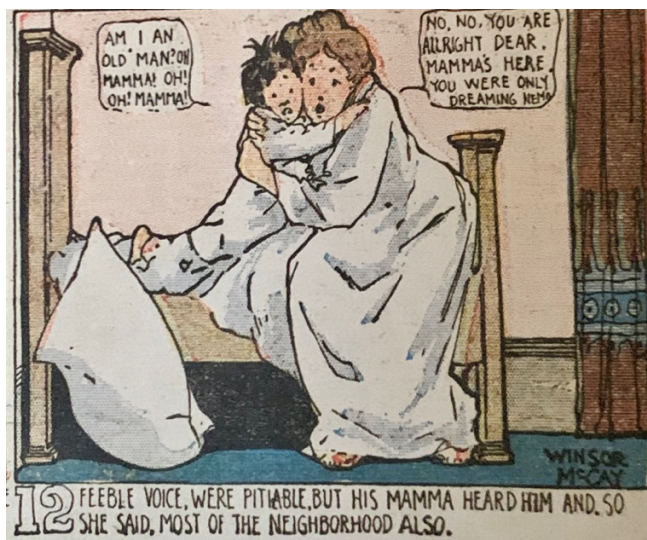


Figure 9: *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, December 1905, Art and lettering: Winsor McCay

Problems regarding speech balloon bodies are no less serious. A perennial worry of the professional letterer is the introduction of tangents—roughly, speech balloons placed in such a way as to disrupt the picture-reading of an image. (See, e.g., the speech balloon abutting the man’s head in Figure 11.) An even more serious concern is conspicuously obstructing figures with oddly placed body as in the excerpt below, where a soldier appears to be awkwardly hiding behind a balloon that, if properly sized and placed, should fit to the left of the king:



Figure 10: “The Little Captive Maid” *Tales from the Great Book #4* (Eastern Color, 1956). Artist: John Lehti. Letterer unknown.

A controversial issue among letterers and comics creators is the role of hand-lettering in comics. Some comics creators have bemoaned the shift to computer-based lettering and the use of digital typefaces, often claiming that an organic and aesthetically rich element of lettering is lost using such technology. This debate has, as one might expect, changed with the improvement in

available digital tools. So, while much lettering is currently done digitally, it is often an active concern to avoid the flat or stiff feel that mechanical or digital lettering has historically produced. For example, lettering done with a mechanical Leroy lettering system is regularly derided for its inflexible and stilted feel. Compare, for instance, the single hand-lettered “WHAT?” with the mechanical lettering used elsewhere in Figure 11.



Figure 11: “Dark o’ the Moon” *Captain Science* #2 (Youthful Magazines, 1951) Artist: Walter Johnson. Letterer unknown.

Bad comics lettering has many causes, but there is a vice of some comics that readers should be careful not to place at the feet of the letterer. Recall that letterers are regularly tasked with solving (or at least concealing) bad writing or drawing—e.g., breaking up didactic monologues into readable chunks. (An abiding problem for letterers occurs when a drawn panel places the first speaker to the right of the second speaker, which would lead to speech balloons with unsightly crossed tails.) Importantly, letterers are dutybound to render the scripted dialogue they receive from writers. This means that when readers encounter a page suffused with text, this is unlikely to be a clueless letterer gone rogue, but, instead, a letterer obliged to execute impractical directions from a writer or editor. The result, as seen in panels like Figure 12, are speech balloons and narrative captions that seem to physically bear down upon character in the story:



Figure 12: "The Hidden Doors" *Black Magic* #34 (Prize Comics, 1957). Artists unknown.

The art of comics lettering requires being properly responsive to the pre-existing pages and panels as well as narrative and thematic elements. So understood, comics lettering resists "detachable" appreciation. Indeed, it is perhaps the elements of comics art whose proper appreciation requires the greatest sensitivity to the nature and history of comics production. In contrast to Will Eisner's memorable description of speech balloons as "desperation devices" which cartoonists should ideally avoid, speech balloons afford comics a depth of dramatic art that invites comparisons between letterers in comics and directors, vocal coaches, sound editors, and actors in film. A complete theory of the speech balloons therefore requires building upon formal analysis of comics as in McCloud (1993), the history of speech balloons like Smolderen (2007), and the philosophical aesthetics of comics pioneered in papers like Meskin (2013) and Cook (2016).

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