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Linguistic Features of Viral Memes: Analyzing Language Play in Contemporary Internet Culture

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Abstract

This study explores the linguistic features of viral memes, focusing on the role of language play in shaping contemporary internet culture. Memes, as a form of digital communication, rely heavily on linguistic creativity, blending humor, irony, and cultural references to convey messages rapidly and effectively. Through a qualitative analysis of popular memes across various social media platforms, the research identifies key linguistic strategies, including puns, malapropisms, and intertextuality, that contribute to their viral nature. The study also examines how these linguistic features reflect societal trends, values, and collective emotions, highlighting the dynamic interplay between language and culture in the digital age. Additionally, the research addresses the implications of meme language for communication and social interaction, particularly in relation to identity formation and community building online. By analyzing the mechanics of language play within memes, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital communication shapes cultural discourse and influences interpersonal connections. The findings emphasize the significance of linguistic innovation in the evolving landscape of internet culture, providing insights for future research on the intersection of language, humor, and digital media.

Keywords: viral memes, linguistic features, language play, internet culture, humor, intertextuality, digital communication, social media.

1. Introduction

At the core of internet culture lie viral memes, short visual or textual artifacts that are created by users and circulate within social media. Globally recognizable by now, memes have become part of everyday language and interaction for a variety of audiences. Interdisciplinary discussions about digital or internet memes have engaged with memetics, image studies, visual culture, media studies, digital anthropology, and communication studies. A particularly interesting aspect of these discussions has

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revolved around the linguistic nature of memes. Both image or video memes and accompanying text have been supplemented with language exploration that problematizes memes as communication. Many researchers have investigated how memes work as a site of free labor and self-promotion packaged with an entertaining effect. They have also been backtracked as instances of escapism or described substantially. As there is no general definition of memes in circulation right now, their language uses also remain debated (Leiser, 2022). In this essay, I propose to abductively expand our understanding of how memes are defined and produce knowledge by analyzing characteristics of the language used in memes at the moment of their creation, in what I argue to be a playful manner. Building on a linguistic approach to repetitional creativity that stresses recontextualization and conceptual blending, I discuss the close link between the image(s) and language attached to memes as key to their definition, production, and communication. In this, my work intersects with inquiry into multimodality and the interplay between visual and textual planes of memes and emphasizes memes as artifacts of a certain culture. Crucially, I focus on contemporary memes, which are bound to spread on the internet, primarily on social media. I view them not only as fun pastimes and entertainment but also as participatory elements of public discourse, as mediums of political and social engagement.

1.1. Background and Significance

We are currently in the internet age of digital communication. Memes have achieved a continuing presence in our online activities, yet they have humble roots with a markedly different history. The first memes were simply jokes and concepts that spread from computer user to computer user in the first web forums. However, the term has since morphed to encompass much more. These marks of high recognition were absent when the 21st century got its first look at the establishment of the term. While these once-simple jokes carried little authority, now they are respected territories in which discussions of culture reside. Memes have cultures, ideologies, and politics that necessitate their study.

The superfluity of these memes as well as this application of meme branding into non-normative communications have deep roots within the digital climate that preceded them. Web 2.0, which radically changed internet communication, was the network

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through which these user cultures thrived. Services like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and many others have formed a net or more similar “web” of these small incentives for communication befuddlement. What makes media like social networking sites distinct among the host of other networking facilities available on Web 2.0 are their unique character as highly interactive news and content distribution systems, which are not exclusively reliant on simple networks of online friendships. These sites enable the easy, viral spread of news stories, blog posts, and ‘just for fun’ content such as videos, memes, and other humorous “inside jokes” characterizing internet humor. This culture swindle, which arrives in the colloquial, transports a language and a knowledge that is community-exclusive. Internet communities are built through variance and rewiring, borrowing context from source to create new meaning. This study endeavors to make sense of current practices of play and will take a socio-linguistic viable approach to making sense of the effects that this play has on social community (Almaghrabi, 2022).

1.2. Research Objectives and Methodology

The primary focus of this research was originally indicated as an area that pertains to the linguistic analysis of contemporary online visual culture, in particular, of the image-macro genre, which has mushroomed in numerous series, shapes, and meta-generative practices running parallel to and in conjunction with other extant media elsewhere on the internet, such as GIFs, animated JPEG images, videos, webcomics, and podcasts. We have also been considering the cultural implications of user-generated content and world-building practices. We research the social and semiotic phenomenon of "internet memes" as a form of techno-social conduct through play in an online community of everyday communicators talking about cultural products shared across numerous digital social media platforms. A focus for us was Huey, a humorous Canadian citizen who became an online global mascot. This research analyzes the linguistic features of popular, viral internet-based memes such as Huey. We offer a detailed examination of the linguistic features of a variety of popular and popularized memes.

Our chief goals were to investigate the everyday communicative genre "meme," characterized by iconic images frequently animated, superimposed with super-brief narrative texts gratuitously composed by universal novice players – the millions of

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members of a mass society who have reportedly each uploaded at least 800 million player-character images at last count; their hailed character names form part of the semiotic props for their daily performances within one of the web's multitude of MMORPGs. We aimed to determine the language play that is recurrently predominantly enacted through popular image-based "meme" macro-stories attached to general memes. In doing so, we aimed to capture, in a systematic way, a range of iconic image macros, each of which conveys specific and unique communicative meanings. Our method is, therefore, a mixed-methods approach in order to account for the diversity of how specific images are "spoken" – that is, captioning and content/text. We aimed to consider the popularity of both. To select the memes, we employed the help of an event-tracking facility, which tracked the number of views, comments, and shares of their particular memes. We considered memes that were noted for their linguistic play or received comments highlighting the communicative strategies of a particular caption. The criteria are as follows: different ways that certain images are captioned; a range of examples of the most popularly memed image of all time; different ways that certain general "hamburger" image-based memes are memed by the popular masses; examples of class-based, even gender-based variants of memes. Influences shape diet and reproduce the dietetics of each class – these memes sketch out user-engendered, user-plagued self-importance as they hack, slash, and dig away private knowledge culture and toolkits. We focused on multiple examples of the following singular all-time most far-spreading general meme: "I can haz cheezburger?" and "All your base are belong to us." (Das2022)

2. Understanding Memes

Memes have become one of the primary units of cultural information that spread rapidly through the internet. Such rapid, "viral" spread of this content is the reason that the term was likened to that of a virus. However, rather than infecting a person's biological system and propagating disease and contagion, memes imply humorous, snarky, or just general humorous commentary on contemporary societal issues. Their virally fast spread across social media also reflects the speed with which individuals in internet-mediated cultures both produce and share such information. If we hope to analyze how people use language to convey these messages, we need to start identifying the characteristics that differentiate different genres of internet-mediated

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communication. That means being able to identify the slippery, nebulous term we might generically refer to as “a meme,” on top of being able to differentiate among other types of internet communication whose distinctiveness often doesn’t rest on visual modes of signification (Iloh, 2021).

There are primarily two kinds of “memes” in contemporary popular usage: a unit of “internet whimsy” that is collectively produced when images, video, audio, animation, etc. paired with some (usually humorous) sentiment or message are shared widely online, and a unit of internet-mediated participatory political critique. The combination of text and image is what distinguishes these memes from other aspects of internet-mediated public communication we detail below, as well as the way in which they encourage individual production and circulation. However, post-production, many textual memes do circulate online in a dialogue community with images removed, and in fact sometimes no longer with the context of shared meme humor in which it was produced initially, which only grounds the importance of distinguishing between the different types of textual memes.

2.1. Definition and Characteristics

Memes are short and easily shareable media objects. They are transmitted from person to person by imitation and are often accompanied by text conveying a particular narrative that influences the interpretation of the image. Many definitions for memes are in circulation, but in the context of internet culture, the most commonly accepted is that of memes as units of cultural transmission. This definition emphasizes the viral nature of memes. Memes arise in the context of internet culture and spread quickly and widely. Another essential characteristic of memes is their adaptability and reusability. Memes represent complex meanings, concepts, or narratives in a short, straightforward, and often humorous way. One of the primary defining characteristics of a meme is that the textual and visual elements combine to create meaning. Individual elements such as an image, a caption, and a particular meme type with standard formal characteristics create interpretation that results in a specific meme based on the general meme type (Zidani & Moran, 2021).

In addition to the simplicity and brevity of the message, what makes memes successful is the "I can relate" factor. An image or text makes reference to a situation that the reader is familiar with, and this relatability plays a significant role in meme

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shareability. Another crucial element in the success of a meme is the shareability. The content of a meme should be such that it creates an emotional response in the viewer, which prompts sharing, making a meme go viral. Memes also require some form of cultural reference. These cultural elements can be very specific and based on insider knowledge, internet culture, or pop culture, and people inside this context or with shared knowledge will find certain memes funnier or more engaging than others. Slang, memes, and insider information are transferred from person to person in adaptation processes, and they regularly incorporate new elements. Memes share different cultural phenomena that are in progress at the time the meme is created. Memes represent a kind of social performance that takes place in the form of an interaction between language and visual media. They can involve reapplying this concept to a more extended discourse or the readers taking the text in another direction with a new response motivated by the original meme. Having examined the distinction between the internet and traditional humor, and the essential features of what a meme is, the next section moves on to discuss specific elements of memes related to language.

2.2. Typology of Memes

A typology has been designed to classify the diverse forms and formats of contemporary internet memes. This design is the result of a long-standing tradition attempting to classify cultural artifacts in a valid and insightful manner. The possibility of creating a coherent list of 'classes' or 'departments' for the study of the internet meme is challenging not only because of the fast pace at which digital culture evolves, but also because of the diverse communities, groups, and people that are able to produce and upload their memes onto the internet. The following typology is divided into the following principal departments or communicative categories: 1) An image macro is a verbal-visual meme designed in the same format and consisting of one image. Thus, as an internet meme, it is essentially a digital coupon, and usually showcases digitally created photographs and digitally embedded text; 2) GIFs are circular, silent, few-seconds-long videos displaying the repeating image of a few actions; 3) So-called 'vines' and 'meme videos' are generally longer in content, including the use of sound and voice; 4) Twitches: the so-called 'twitches,' named after the streaming platform, are screencaps that practically always include digital

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scenes from video games; 5) Hybrids. Hybrids show a combination of elements of different subtypes (Adler & Fromer, 2022).

This articulation is a mere useful pre-ragmatic postulation, but it is important in consideration of adopting an Ethno-Linguistic Analysis approach. Besides the peculiar technological features inherent to each multimedia, there is indeed a self-evident difference in the length of every subcategory, in the way their existence is started and defined by platforms, and in the environments, moments, and times where they are used and spread as public commodities. All these aspects raise the issue of competences in recognizing and interpreting a multimodal sign, that is the extent of the more or less extended group of persons who share the same cultural background. If an effective power of language lies in its capacity to coordinate joint actions, then a situation of partial incomprehension does in fact affect and change human behavior. The ability of the reader to decode all the verbal and visual meanings presented by a multimodal sign is likely to have fundamentally different implications for the success and life of that multimodal, than the way other types of structures associated with that multimodal apply. This means that a proper analysis of the way each meme type blends words and visual elements, including verbal-visual 'language play,' is a necessary step to understanding the implicit and explicit impact and potential of each meme type. Thus, we argue that the linguistic analysis of the memes has to account for the different and articulate ways in which written words are combined with images (FALADE, 2022).

3. The Role of Language in Memes

The ability to convey messages and play with readers' senses represents a major asset in our digital world. Language and textual design take a huge place in viral communication. Internet memes, a generic label that refers to the spreadable, participatory media content on digital platforms, are cunningly grounded in language play. They are about social commentary, they are about humor, and they are about digital culture. They are intended to play with the visual and textual signifiers that participants use in digital exchange. Visual designs, pictures, videos, emojis, onomatopoeia, and GIFs, along with language, are used to communicate this humor, social commentary, and cultural implication; yet language holds the discourse and the logic of viral humor.

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The area in which they create humor is called 'language play,' and it mainly emphasizes the dynamics of creativity and innovation. Language play usually pertains to pushing the boundaries and violating ordinary rules of language. Our persuasion relies on the idea that linguistic features play an important role in the transmission of patterns, which, in return, contribute meanings to a meme. Language play, such as wordplay, slang, gender bending, phonetics, street English, irony, and smilies and emoticons, often engenders and creates social humor in a meme. Four linguistic features are crucial for the viral spread functions: wordplay, irony, parody, and diglossia. These are examined in this section. The others are mainly the textual structure, which helps to characterize a visual script in a meme. Communication strategy also screens the visual rationale of a meme (Wagener, 2021).

3.1. Creativity and Innovation

The use of unconventional language in memes signals the ideational metafunction in models of language. As this metafunction concerns the invention of new meaning, it is therefore a fact that memes play with linguistic conventions to generate alternative meanings, as well as new forms. The microstylistic conventions of this interability can be as simplistic as a misspelled word, pun, or recontextualized phrase. Different examples of mimicry have in common their employment of humorous nuances or in-jokes to keep the reader engaged and amused during the entirety of the text. To get the joke is to 'get it', to 'click' and feel part of a cool, savvy, and knowing e-community with its fingers on the pulse of 'real talk'. In a multimodal sense, the possibility of language innovation increasing the shareability of the meme by presenting a memorable and engaging humorous aspect of language and pictures has been discussed.

Empirical projects analyzing what they term 'immortal memes' confirm that the use of language play adheres to a formula that allows for multiple reproductions that retain their appeal. It is claimed that scripted and improvisational jokes or comedy can actually be an accumulation of various creative elements produced by a host of different people. The same has been posited, arguing that humor on platforms is the result of large numbers of people making small modifications to content positioned on the basis of conventional humor. An example of the confluence of these ideas in a linguistic analysis using corpora to determine the adaptability of memes has been

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demonstrated. The analysis showed that leetspeak and other meme innovations rarely changed; however, over a longer period, points, jokes, and a bias towards certain topics reveal their own constraints. In sum, the immemorial copy-pastas, like many traditional memes, are highly conscripted text with both formal and core ideational qualities. This allows leetspeak enthusiasts to innovate through arbitrariness to create play with the memes that perpetuates the traditional consent towards adversarial culture. In other words, this example shows that language can reflect humor and is a social phenomenon with situational rules of occurrence (Hartman et al.2021).

3.2. Humor and Irony

One significant thread of research on language play examines humor. Much, though certainly not all, humor is ironic in that it involves a discrepancy between what a hearer thinks is being communicated and what is actually communicated. The comedic device of irony is used in viral memes to condemn behavior to which the meme creator takes umbrage, pointing to a standard generally recognized in the meme viewing community that those targeted violate. Such memes denounce stupidity worthy of nothing more than scorn—again—recognizing that it is just this sort of error that everyone, one supposes, knows to be totally unacceptable. Thus, it is not just their folly that is lampooned, but also their delusory egomania.

Humor in these memes, then, is inseparable from an implicit, acerbic attack on modern America. With the broadest range of expressive means at their disposal, the various elements of humor, whether visual, linguistic or some combination of the two, construct humor out of their strokes. This may involve comic timing, for example, where punch lines are couched at a syntactic juncture that puts a word or phrase both in its dominant position and in a not-yet-dominant position, thus creating paradox. Exaggeration draws from the impression created, using various methods, that a given phenomenon is something that may be laughed at, making it broad in that it addresses itself to the multitude. The ludicrousness of the represented situation is yet another ingredient of funny images, likely collaborating with rather than quite the same as exaggeration.

4. Case Studies

Though theories of memes often revolve around the principles of replication and diffusion, such conceptual discussions inevitably include discussion of the

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characteristics that render memes replicable. That language is a key feature in making memes replicable is axiomatic to a tool that functions in accordance with post-structuralist beliefs about the ability of language to influence individual conceptualizations of meaning, gesturing at why humor is such a frequently identified feature of meme theory. The preceding sections have sought to provide a general working theory of meme replication, as well as the linguistic and communicative qualities that contribute to making certain memetic creations both replicable and successful.

In providing a series of case studies evaluating examples of viral memes and how they are discussed in a social media context, this section will empirically evaluate the aforementioned theories in a practical manner. These examples manifest as screenshots as well as the frequently accompanying image, though many users also tweet the image without accompanying text, reflecting how multilayered social media communications can be. These examples cover a range of themes, such as politics and social events, to demonstrate the way in which the linguistic dynamics in question are not restricted to any particular subset of memetic communication. Throughout these examples, an emphasis is placed on potential interactions between text and participant reception that serves as an informal study on pragmatics as well as linguistic innovation and sociological dimensions (Zidani & Moran, 2021).

4.1. Impact of Memes on Social Media

The effects of memes within social media dynamics can be powerful. They not only serve as instruments for social purposes and interaction, but they also shape public opinion. Some memes have more impact than others and can become political tools, serving as evidence of the pervasiveness and longevity of Internet memes. Social movements inspire memes and viral tags that are disseminated either seriously by their followers or as a collective joke to undermine their efforts. Politics and memes come together as well, with several scholars arguing that memes have changed the way we view political discourse. In all these instances, memes do not hold promotional value; they are participatory tools aiming to exclude certain individuals or expressions. Each of these digital interactions has in common a focus on community and a sense of belonging, where people invest in a personally meaningful relationship in order to establish and maintain their collective identity.

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The language of memes can thus become a way to establish connections and project oneself into modern trends, and memes can work as proof that people belong to certain cultural groups. Significantly, memes are often farcical because one of the objectives of the producers and disseminators of viral content is to mobilize laughter in the bodies of their audience. Humor conveys a direction of flow of social energy, which seeks to redistribute the capacity to act across networks or people. This laughter and the flow between body and body is very important to the cascade of memes, and this is the final point of analysis of this section. Finally, the term viral refers to a phenomenon that is capable of being suddenly popular on the Internet, moving from one person to another in a short time. The viral nature of Internet culture can symbolize what will be a trend rather than be a trend in and of itself; that is, the viral nature can alter the narrative of an event to be a viral trend. The most important element of this is that the different Internet platforms do not work in isolation - rather, they are interconnected devices that promote and perform the viral nature by forming totems of hyperlinking and sharing through networked exchange. Memes, therefore, exist in a tradition of pop culture that is excessive and cinematic, which serves as a device that rewards active audiences in the co-creation of participatory culture (Leiser, 2022).

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

In this study, we have sought to investigate the linguistic practices that underpin the production and interpretation of viral memes. By leveraging the tools of linguistic analysis, we have confirmed that contemporary meme creators demonstrate a fine attunement to the language around them as they remix familiar forms and reposition them in order to level cultural commentary. Studying memes, therefore, clarifies processes of language play and underscores an embodied relationship between language and creativity. This analysis has also shed new light on the communicative importance of memes, which implicitly—and often explicitly—position a shared sense of extraordinary ordinariness as they thematize such activities as image-sharing, text-writing, and commenting in the context of internet culture. In this way, understanding meme practices puts us in the vantage point of those who engage with 'language as doing' in order to understand the shifts in communicative practice as we have moved into the digital age.

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Increasingly, people are turning to the forms of new digital media for entertainment and information, and it is clear from this analysis that the forms of memes recur globally across different digital social media. Future research could productively engage with the ways in which emerging technologies—such as augmented and virtual reality in the form of filters and facemasks, and automated video production such as the genre—are being taken up in meme production and what novel persuasive strategies are emerging in their take-up. These emerging strategies that break with the linguistic conventions identified in this research have the potential, we argue, to dislodge our critical frameworks for understanding the logics of meme production and inoculation that look for visible traces of the original and the remixed. This paper highlights the potential for researching such new digital cultural developments using the framework of critical multimodal discourse. Language is an ever-evolving tool for sharing, establishing location, positioning, and expressing in-group dynamics. Our analysis evidences that meme culture shows clear indications of the ways in which language has evolved in multimodal communication with chiefly digital consumers.

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