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Meme Culture and the Joy of Recognition

Abstract

The twenty-first century gave birth to a new generation of “internet natives” that are actively developing a new form of communication – the laconic semi-visual and semi-verbal tidbits of wit and wisdom known as memes. The study of memes is only just beginning to emerge, mainly in the West, and the ubiquitousness of the phenomenon requires researchers to actively classify the linguistics of meme culture according to its integral semiotic properties and its unique historicity. Memes have become the new form of sharing and togetherness, and to ignore the significance of this phenomenon is to miss the core dynamics of the new generation of communicators.

Keywords: memes, semiotics, language development, internet generation, slang

The holidays are upon us and, as is bound to happen every year, the family is gathered in the living room. Everyone is together and yet they are not – dad is watching TV while mom and the grown-up kids are all immersed in social media on their phones. This is the new reality of the twenty-first century, and it signifies a shift toward a new form of togetherness. Instead of rehashing tired old memories of family life with relatives we see at best once or twice a year, we actively, daily, seek out traces of kinship between ourselves and the rest of the world via the medium that surpassed IRL – the “real life” – in the past fifteen years or so: social networks. And the language of kinship is common for the entire globe: its name is *memes*.

What is a meme? Zoologist Richard Dawkins coined the term to signify the replicating nature of species’ survival and evolution. The word quickly became assimilated by cultural studies with the following meaning:

A unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. ‘Mimeme’ comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene’ ... it could alternatively be thought of as being related to ‘memory’ or to the

French word *même* ...

Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. (Dawkins 1989: 192)

In the social media era, this definition underwent another transformation and took on the meaning of a unit normally comprised of a visual and some verbal material, one or both of which are repetitive and recognizable. It is very hard to verbalize a succinct and all-encompassing definition of what a meme is, and yet everyone knows what it is. The best definition that *Urban Dictionary* could come up with is “an image or video that goes viral”. (Also “The (somewhat) safe alternative to crack-cocaine”, but that is another topic altogether.) This, of course, is not enough. A meme is also a message that everyone can relate to. This, and only this, is the reason for its viral nature and should lie in the basis of its definition. The simple, often caricature visualization-cum-verbalization of an experience, thought, phenomenon, or discovery that becomes instantly recognizable to anyone across the globe in spite of being served in the shape and form of maximum minimalism is the unique power of the meme and the generator behind the global influence of this internet phenomenon.

Most people born around 1980 and later – those whom Mark Prensky dubbed the digital native generation (Prensky 2005: 29–31), which, as Lynne S. McNeill explains, denotes the people who are “native speakers” of the digital language of computers, video games, and the internet – participate in the meme culture, if not as creators, then at least as consumers and replicators of the meme language within their own social media circles (McNeill 2009: 81–83). Sharing memes has become a language of kinship that touches on the simple concept of sharing and the joy of recognition of common thoughts and experiences – common points of being human, if one is more exhaustive – and allows a new form of communication between friends and strangers that have chanced upon the same digital spaces.

It is of pivotal importance for modern researchers of language and communication to begin scripting the basic thesaurus of this new lingo if they are keen on understanding the discourse of the digital generation. Bennett, Maton, and Kervin (2008) postulate that a generation is growing whose perceptions of the world – if not the very structure of their brains – differ dramatically from those of previous generations. McNeill shows that they are actively generating a whole universe of cultural products – most of

which serve either as the basis of further digital communication, or as the hubs of distinct digital social circles – which belong to a specific culture that recognizes what is native to it and what is not. The internet spews torrents of new folkloristic traditions that develop and fall into obscurity at lightning speed. Only a structured and continuous approach would be able to trail and encompass the dynamics of internet meta-communication and to map the landscape of a new, digital cultural reality that will become more crucial to supra-social communication in the fullness of time.

One of the two key structural aspects of the meme is the visual. Memes are not to be sought out in an abyss of standard text – they hit you in the face with the suddenness of light explosions. Much of this is due to the rapid increase in communication through visual images with the advent of the internet and, even more importantly, of social media, most of which are structured to boost the visual content. The production of visual content and its quality are also on the rise. Wang and Haapio-Kirk (2001: 325–339) write that seventy-nine percent of the population ups their production of photographic material once they start using social media. Sixty-four percent of these believe that a visual post is more convincing than text-only posts, and eighty-five percent have stated a preference for visual posts altogether. These new visuals have achieved ubiquitousness previously unknown in history due to the pervasiveness of smartphones and personal computers. Wang and Haapio-Kirk point out that, unlike the one-way communicativeness of printed visuals, digital visuals on social media are produced and circulated in a “two way” interaction, thus becoming an essential part of interpersonal communication.

Meme visuals, in particular, tend to capture a distinct and socially representative facial or corporal reaction of a human or animal – sometimes in photographic form, and other times in caricature – which serves as the basis of some form of statement on a general human topic of the everyday variety. Such types of visuals include, for example, the “one does not simply...” meme format with the face and hand gesture of Boromir from *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, or the “sad frog face”, which carries an ironic undertone, or characters such as the “forever alone” and “Derp” Rage comics. In order to not only understand but be fluent in the language of these typified visuals and all of their denotations and connotations, as well as their current validity and social use (e.g., “Pepe the frog” became a staple of the right-wing culture in the United States and elsewhere), one needs to permanently reside and be active in the culture of social media. Often-times it is described as a “youth culture”, but this is only for the time being – its oldest natives are already over forty, and this progression of age will only increase as time passes. Wang and Haapio-Kirk (2021) distinguish fifteen main genres of social media visuals: relationships, selfies, trivia,

compulsorily shared, chicken soup for the soul, humour, fantasy, children, travel, events, archive, political, food, anti-mainstream, and commercial. However, the genres of meme visuals proper cannot be simplified to fifteen genres, though. In order to classify them, researchers need to track their historical progression, their stylistic variations, their communicative purpose, and their regional varieties (with the United States and Russia being the main culturally productive hubs in the Northern hemisphere). The most important point to be noted is that meme visuals function as semantic units that can be *bricoléed* and repurposed for the creation of new meanings through recognizable connotations in the same way that words and phrases are used in languages proper all over the world.

The textual component of memes is no less important. It serves to complete the message and create new meanings in the space of the familiar visual format. It can tell a story or simply add a new layer to the visual component. Most textual components exhibit a characteristic *repetitiveness* of the message. A textual meme such as “Forever alone”, “Sure, Jan” or “Bitch, please” are permanently fixed to their corresponding visuals, whereas textual messages such as “This”, “Notice of meme acquisition” or “Spill the tea” are paired with various visuals that are, however, always in adherence with a particular theme (such as a person pointing upwards with the “This^” meme.) There is also a third variant of textual visual pairing: the series. In it, a visually identical or very similar backdrop may feature a wide variety of verbal statements that are always presented in the same textual format. An example of this is the “Jazzy nightclub” background featuring a variety of popular sayings such as “Men is too headache” or “The Iranian yogurt is not the issue here”. Usually, this variant displays a common theme, such as men and relationships as in the aforementioned example. In any case, what is important is that memes are a two-component format and the dynamics between the two need to be taken into account every time a meme is dissected.

Anna Wierzbicka (2008) describes cultural scripts as “common sayings and proverbs, frequent collocations, conversational routines and varieties of formulaic or semi-formulaic speech, discourse particles and interjections, and terms of address and reference – all highly ‘interactional’ aspects of language”. Roy Christopher postulates that these communicative cultural scripts have achieved a cross-group understanding ratio never before reached by either popular movies, literature, or mass media events (Christopher 2019: 31–44). By slicing and splitting narratives into their most basic units, memes have not fragmented culture, as is often believed, but have deconstructed it to functional semantic units.

All in all, memes have begun to construct a new discursive database where image and text combine in myriad ways to create communicative

meanings meant to be recognized, understood, and used by the new generations of digital natives. They have long transcended the digital space and have begun to imprint their importance onto real life as well. By studying and classifying their points of common recognition, we will begin to understand the new language that is forming before our very eyes – the language of the twenty-first century.

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