

LINGUISTIC AND VISUAL MODES CONTRIBUTION TO THE HUMOR PRODUCTION OF PUNS IN INTERNET MEMES

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Abstract: This article aims to get a better understanding of the text-picture interaction and, in particular, the pragmatic consequences of 150 online memes that feature puns, one of the linguistic humor subgenres. This article will analyze a corpus of 150 memes. Using a comic taxonomy by McCloud (1994). This classification is used considering the similarities of modes that are used in comics and internet memes. The internet memes then were to be categorized. The default taxonomy of categories produced the following classification of internet memes: word specific (28), picture specific (2), additive (29), and interdependent (91). The findings show rather significant disparities among the findings. Some categories in the original taxonomy are even absent in the data set, i.e duo-specific, parallel, and montage. Internet memes lack these other categories of comics because there are distinctive features that set them apart from comics. These differences involve the fact that comic graphics are typically sequential in nature, whereas memes are not, and that comic authors have seemingly limitless opportunities to use language creatively, whereas memes rely more on visual elements.

Keywords: *pun, internet meme, multimodality, humor*

In the perspective of multimodality, internet meme has been and remains an interesting yet intricate subject of linguistic research. The multimodality of internet memes, with various perspectives, has been discussed in research projects by Procházka (2016), Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017), and Yus (2018), to name a few. Procházka (2016) sees “Countryball” meme as a multimodal modern media to express satire and humor revolving around cultural and national stereotypes. The research discusses the linguistic conventions of the Polandball community on Facebook, which are characterized by disparaging stereotypes and linguistic errors inspired by different linguistic backgrounds, and how the community members are aware of these conventions and consciously maintain them. Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017) explore the reasons for the replicability of memes, which are attributed to constructional meaning, frames, constructional compositionality, and the need to communicate emotional responses. They propose that image-macro memes be recognized as multimodal constructions that have a prototype structure because they typically consist of a combination of visual and linguistic elements that follow a consistent format. Yus (2018) used McCloud's (1994) taxonomy to organize their corpus of online memes (1994). Yus (2018) used the taxonomy, which was originally designed to categorize comics, to categorize internet memes, demonstrating how the multimodality of internet memes differs considerably from that of comics.

As a multimodal discourse, internet meme is one of the most customizable digital media. Although in the beginning of its popularity internet memes have some kind of template for the creator to edit, now it has become way more flexible in terms of its formula. The visual elements can be taken from a photo, sketch, screenshot, or other stock image that may be found online. It can be completely altered to fit the needs of the creator. The text element is also various and adjusted in a similar manner. It can be the image's caption, a dialogue, or a title. However, there is one aspect that practically all internet memes share: humor. Internet memes' sense of humor contributes to their accessibility of acceptance in society since, as Raskin (1984:2) argues, humor is a quality possessed by all humans.

Playing with words is one of the approaches taken by internet memes to produce humor. Puns are one of the many linguistic humor subgenres that can be found in internet memes. Pun is still one of the linguistic phenomena that linguists are interested in studying further. It is proven by the extensive amount of research that has been done on puns (e.g., van Mulken, 2004; Partington, 2009; Bader, 2014; Giorgadze, 2014; 2015; Gan, 2015; Hirsch, 2017 to name a few). The study by Van Mulken (2004) examined Dutch advertisements that used puns and classified them into two groups based on whether both interpretations were relevant or only one. The study also found that the presence or absence of puns significantly affected readers' appreciation of the advertisements. Partington (2008) presents a linguistic explanation of wordplay, which involves lexical priming, collocation, semantic preference, relexicalisation, and delexicalisation. The examples used in the research include written anecdotes, news, and literary works. Furthermore, the article discusses the distinction between exact and near puns. A study by Bader (2014) focuses on the analysis of pun expressions in

journalistic articles in Jordan. The data used in the study were taken from local Jordanian newspapers which are popular for their satirical tone in the writings. Giorgadze (2014,2015) conducted a research project on puns that are based on pictures. The study offers two classifications: pictorial puns and verbo-pictorial puns. Pictorial puns are created by combining images without any accompanying text elements. Gan (2015) applied Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory to investigate the role of puns in humorous dialogues and riddles. The study discovered that, based on the speaker's intention, puns can produce either a comical or sarcastic impact in a conversation. Additionally, the research suggests that puns can contribute to the complexity of riddles. And Hirsch (2017) researched puns in internet jokes, examining jokes written in English, Hebrew, and Spanish. The study analyzed the mechanisms used in the jokes, such as garden-path, crossroads, and red-light.

According to Attardo (1994:109), puns are traditionally thought of as a type of verbal comedy, indicating that the humor in puns can only be successfully delivered orally. Giorgadze's (2014) study, for instance, offers three categories of verbal puns: (1) Lexical-Semantic Pun, (2) Structural-Syntactic Pun, and (3) Structural-Semantic Pun. They go on to fully explain each category in the discussion and provide instances of verbal puns that fall into each category. Importantly, a study by Gan (2015) examined the usage of puns in light-hearted conversations and riddles using Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory. The results show that a pun's contextual impact in a conversation might vary based on the speaker's intended meaning. Additionally, the study demonstrates that puns can increase the complexity of a riddle.

Contrary to Attardo's argument, we do not think that puns are limited to verbal expression because the growth of virtual linguistic landscapes has made it possible for puns to be used in a variety of media, including writing and images. A few examples of recent academics who employed written puns as data in their studies include van Mulken (2004), Partington (2009), Bader (2014), and Hirsch (2017).

Although a multimodal discourse, including internet meme, can be assembled using a combination of various different modes of communication, for the purposes of this study, however, we focus only on the picture-text kind of internet memes, that is, memes that are made up of both picture and text components. In this research, we aim to address the gap in knowledge regarding the intersemiotic semantic linkages between verbal and visual modes in internet memes, particularly in relation to puns. Previous research in the field of multimodal humor has been limited, with only a few studies examining this specific aspect of humor. For instance, Royce (2007:63) has noted the scarcity of studies that explain how multimodal text, such as internet memes, is logically connected. While there have been some studies on comedy in cartoons and comic strips, such as those conducted by Villy (2008) and Hanada (2016), these studies do not specifically focus on puns. Therefore, our research seeks to contribute to the literature by investigating the use of puns in internet memes and their role in creating humor.

Conversely, Giorgadze (2015) offers a rather narrowly focused research study on puns that is illustrated. The study divides puns into two categories: pictorial puns, and verbo-pictorial puns. The former category refers to a certain kind of pun that is created just by combining visuals without any language support. For instance, the term "*Burger King*" will be produced if an image of a cheeseburger is placed next to a picture of a crown. The latter category is rather different because it makes a pun using both a picture and text.

Giorgadze's (2015) and Yus' (2018) studies of multimodal puns in internet memes is noteworthy because they are just now becoming common and pervasive online. We do not yet have a firm understanding of this relatively recent category of pun because it has received so little study. In order to fill the void in this minor subtopic of linguistic comedy, we would want to address the following research question in this study: How linguistic mode and visual mode in internet memes contribute to the humor production of the puns.

METHOD

In this descriptive qualitative study, I intend to investigate how two internet memes' modes work together to produce a pun. Gray et al. (2017:42) note that qualitative studies rely primarily on words rather than numbers to convey nuances of meaning and interpretation that numbers are unable to. This is particularly relevant to our study as we analyze the text-picture interaction and pragmatic consequences of 150 online memes that feature puns. As our study focuses on analyzing the use of puns in internet memes, which are multimodal texts that rely heavily on visual elements, qualitative analysis is a suitable approach to capture the nuances of meaning conveyed through the combination of verbal and visual modes. By using a comic taxonomy by McCloud (1994), we were able to categorize the memes and analyze their text-picture interaction, which allows us to gain a better understanding of how puns are used to create humor in internet memes. The qualitative approach adopted in this study enabled us to analyze the rich, complex data set of internet memes and explore the nuances of meaning conveyed through puns in these multimodal texts.

English internet memes from 9GAG make up the full data set for this study. The popular visual humor website 9GAG, which has English-speaking users from all over the world, can serve as a valuable data source for our study. Additionally, none of the content on 9GAG is supplied by the administrators; all stuff is contributed by users. Because each user is unique, it offers a greatly varying sense of humor in the picture-based pun. Additionally, 9GAG's content is updated; hundreds of new items are added every minute. These qualities allow me to access a wide range of 9GAG users' original English picture-based puns.

Despite the benefits, there are disadvantages to adopting 9GAG as a data source. First off, there is no way to filter the information to only display internet pun memes. we have to manually sort through a massive

amount of graphic information on 9GAG as a user. Furthermore, there is no method to order the content by date of publication. Only the "Hot" and "Trending" tabs, which highlight online memes that are well-liked by users, and the "Fresh" tab, which displays the most recent uploads, are available. Again, none of the tabs are just for pun-filled internet memes.

I began gathering the data in May 2022 and continued until June 2022. The memes were randomly selected from 9GAG as long as they have English puns in them. There are no more specified requirements, such as publishing date or year. I attempted to get the data by searching through 9GAG for internet memes with puns. In order to get the precise data that I need for this research, I had to scrutinize a sizable collection of visual contents from 9GAG and filter them by downloading only internet memes that have English puns. By doing this, I was able to collect the data while also completing the first step of data analysis.

Before data saturation was reached, I was able to gather over 100 internet memes. I anticipate that there would be no further variations in the theme that can be helpful for the research after 137 data were successfully obtained from 9GAG. I continue to gather more for my data set, however, to be absolutely certain that it was the case. I eventually succeeded in gathering 150 online memes to be used as the research's data after skimming through a collection of memes with a lot of similarities.

The data must then be downloaded and stored on a computer. While a smartphone is better for browsing and gathering information, a computer is better for storing it since it allows you to open numerous windows simultaneously, making it simpler to evaluate the information and make notes.

The corpus of internet memes was classified based on McCloud's (1994) proposed classifications of comics. To differentiate the memes based on the contribution made by different modes of communication, we used McCloud's classifications as a guiding principle. The seven modes of multimodal discourse proposed by McCloud include word-specific, picture-specific, duo-specific, additive, parallel, montage, and interdependent. The classification process involved carefully analyzing each meme and identifying the dominant mode(s) of communication present. This method was chosen based on its applicability to the type of data being analyzed and the theoretical framework of the study, which draws heavily from McCloud's work.

Word specific is when pictures simply illustrate a complete text that can already be understood without the presence of the visuals. Picture specific is when words hardly enhance the meaning of the image and the image takes dominance. Duo specific is when words and pictures send essentially the same message. Additive is when words amplify or elaborate on a picture or vice versa. This classification can be relevant to the concept of "anchorage" by Barthes (1997), which refers to the practice of adding linguistic meaning to an image or a text in order to direct or "anchor" the interpretation of the reader or viewer. In the context of semiotics (the study of signs and symbols), Barthes argues that images are inherently ambiguous and can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Anchorage, therefore, is a tool used to narrow down the possible interpretations of an image or text by providing a specific meaning or message. Lastly, interdependent is when pictures and words come together and express an idea that neither one could do on their own. Parallel is when the combination of picture and words seems to follow very different courses without intersecting. Lastly, montage is where words are treated as integral parts of the picture.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data set has been classified using a comic taxonomy by McCloud (1994) as the guiding concept in order to respond to the research question. Word-specific, picture-specific, additive, and interdependent are some of the classifications. The comparison is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

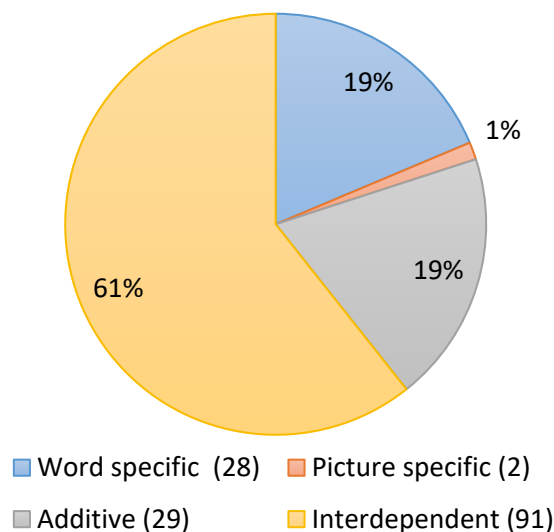


Figure 1

Figure 1 illustrates the apparent difference among several categories. One category, Interdependent, dominates the entire data set, accounting for more than half (61%, 91 data). The following classifications, Word Specific and Additive, each comprise 19% of the total data, or 28 and 29 respectively. The last category is Picture Specific, which has just 2 data, or 1%.

Word Specific

Word Specific is the first category. Internet memes that fall under this category have visuals that serve as illustrations but don't significantly advance the point being made in the text. This category is connected to Barthes' (1977) concept of illustration, which emphasizes text as the primary means of communication and minimizes the significance of images in conveying ideas.

There are 28 data, or 9% of the total set, are included in this classification, as was previously noted. The majority of the internet memes in this categorization are also (but not only) internet memes that have text as the speech spoken by the characters in the picture. Using Figure 2 as an example, this classification is shown.



Figure 2

The internet meme in Figure 2 was put together using stills from the film *The Mummy* and conversation from the characters. However, the dialogue was not directly taken from the movie whose images were used in the meme. Instead, it represents the author's own imaginative use of puns. The first line of the dialogue is "Why can't you explain jokes to kleptomaniacs?", "Idk"—I don't know—is the second line, and the last sentence, which serves as the punchline, is "They always take things literally."

The images are only significant when Rick O'Connell, the film's main character, draws his gun in the final panel and sets up to fire. The author presents a humorous potential response that might occur when someone hears the pun.

As stated in the beginning, the linguistic mode predominates in this kind of internet meme and the visual mode plays a negligible part in the process of meaning production. The content would still have been clear to the readers even if the author had omitted the images from these internet memes. This is so that the context, setup, and punchline of the joke are all totally dependent on the text. The images in this case serve just as an illustration.

Picture Specific

The second category is called Picture Specific. In contrast to the earlier classification, this is the exact opposite. In this classification, the visuals make up the majority of an internet meme's contribution to meaning-making, with the words contributing very little. This kind of meme only occasionally appears in the data set. The quantity of information I was able to gather for this kind of meme proves that. Only 2 data (1%) in the entire data set fall under this category.

Picture-specific internet memes are rare, presumably because it takes more mental effort to understand them. Memes are frequently used as quick communication tools since they pack a lot of information into a little area (a single frame) and need to be understood by a wide audience. As a result, both the makers and the viewers occasionally dislike memes that are more complex and need deeper, more thoughtful thought.

Picture specific indicates that visual modes are either combined with the text to create meanings that can only be understood through this combination, or they are utilized to demonstrate, emphasize, or magnify the meaning of the text. However, it happens much less frequently when the visual mode is the main source of information and relevance in an internet meme. One of the examples is shown in Figure 3 below.



Figure 3

Three images are included in the internet meme in Figure 3: a house, a full moon, and a warehouse. They are organized like a comic book in certain sequential panels. In addition to the pictures, Figure 3 also has a text "Oh no" placed in the third panel.

In order to create the puns for this internet meme, the creator used homophony. Not only that, but comprehension of this pun also requires some familiarity with the werewolf mythology. According to the mythology, a cursed person can only transform into a werewolf during the full moon phase of the moon. The author compares the homophone "ware" in "warehouse" to the word "were" in "werewolf." This internet meme refers to the werewolf legend and says, "When the moon is at the full moon phase, the house changes into a warehouse." Figure 3 illustrates the aforementioned message solely through images, and the exclamation "Oh no" in the third panel makes no noticeable difference from the situation in which the internet meme is text-free.

Additive

This category includes internet memes that use either words or images to emphasize or further develop one another. This categorization is relevant to Barthes' (1977) concept of anchorage, where the linguistic element, as intended by the original internet meme's author, directs the reader toward a more detailed understanding of the linked visual aspect (or vice versa). In other words, a mode acts as a tool to prevent readers from making various inferences and to guide them toward the desired meaning.

One of the most often employed meaning-making techniques in internet memes. The quantity of information that I was able to obtain proves it. In the data set, 29 internet memes, or 19%, use additive technique. The instances are shown in Figures 4 and 5 below.



Figure 4



Figure 5

There are two sets of panels in Figure 4: a visual pair and a textual pair. On the left side, the author displays an image of an ocean on the bottom, and a polar desert on top. While on the right side, the word "justice" was placed next to the image of a polar desert, while the phrase "justwater" was placed next to the image of an ocean.

In this internet meme, this could be said that the language aspect makes a bigger contribution to the meaning-making process and that the visual component amplifies or elaborates it further. The reader can immediately infer from the word "justwater" that serves as the punchline that "justice" is meant to be a phrase rather than a word because "justwater" is also not a word but a phrase. By elaborating on or demonstrating the author's thought that is presented through the linguistic element, the visual aspect in this internet meme aims to shorten the readers' time spent digesting humor. In other words, by including the visual elements, the author directs the reader to his/her intended humorous meaning.

A picture of multiple soda cans in an oven tray with the word "Baking soda" is shown in Figure 5 above. The internet meme in Figure 5 has a stronger visual element as opposed to Figure 4, which has a stronger linguistic element. Without the caption, readers can still comprehend the pun just by looking at the image of soda in the oven, but it will take them a bit longer than when there is one. Looking solely at the image, the reader may come to several different conclusions or perhaps become confused. Numerous additional interpretations, such as "hot drinks," "soda in an oven," and "soda cans in an oven," are also feasible. The author's intended pun is, however, made clear to readers by the caption "Baking soda."

Interdependent

Interdependent is the final categorization, which also happens to be the one with the most data. When two distinct modes collaborate to express a concept that neither mode could express on its own, this is known as interdependent meaning-making. Exactly 91 data, or 61% of the whole data set, are used for this categorization.

This category relates to Barthes' concept of relay (1977). He claims that a discourse's verbal and visual components express different, complimentary ideas rather than the same thing (van Leeuwen, 2011). The category is also related to what Jewitt (2016) refers to as a multimodal ensemble, which is a situation in which all modes collaborate to convey the meaning of a message. In other words, internet meme in this category cannot convey the humor with the existence of only one mode of communication, whether it is the linguistic or the visual one. The following figures 6 and 7 serve as examples.



Figure 6

The internet meme depicted in Figure 6 has two parts. The phrase "*Slip Not*" is the first component. The second part shows a picture of a person's leg on a toilet mat with a picture of the heavy metal band Slipknot on it. The word "*Slip Not*" is a homophone of "*Slipknot*", the name of the band. The reader needs to be familiar with Slipknot in order to understand the joke. It will be straightforward to understand once the reader sees that Slipknot is depicted on the bathroom mat. It's possible that this internet meme is a parody of a toilet mat commercial. The slogan "*Slip Not*" suggests that this Slipknot bathroom mat is anti-slip.

To effectively portray the comedy in this specific form of internet meme, both linguistic and visual components must be present. For instance, if we remove the word "*Slip Not*" from the context, it will merely be a pun with no meaning. Similar to the toilet mat image, if it existed by itself, it will not qualify as a pun and will only be an image.

"Excuse me waiter... there's a hare in my pancakes."



Figure 7

There are two components to Figure 7. The first is a dialogue line that reads, "Excuse me waiter... there's a hare in my pancakes.". The second is a picture of a cat and a hare sandwiched between pancakes. In this internet meme, the interdependence between the two modes may even be stronger. If left to itself, the dialogue might just be heard by the listener as a typical, non-comedic sentence when it is spoken. This is so because "hair" and "hare" are homophones, and people frequently complain to waiters when they find hair in their food. Because it is so strange to have a hare in one's food, the reader might assume that the dialogue was misspelled when it is first published. Similarly, when the visual component is used alone, the same thing will happen. An image of two adorable animals is not something humorous either. Without the juxtaposed language component, it will merely be a context-less and humorless visual.

In hindsight, there are only 4 classifications of internet memes that we were able to identify within the data set while McCloud (1994) actually provides 7 classifications to categorize picture-text contribution in comic. The first classification that is missing is duo specific, which refers to instances where the meaning of the words and the images are essentially the same. This category is compatible with the social semiotics idea of equivalence (Gill, 2002), as the image and the language that goes along with it both convey the same meaning (Chan, 2011). The overlap of text and visual meanings, which results in redundancy in meaning, is one of the fundamental properties of this type, hence it is predictable that no internet meme in the data set fits into this category. Internet memes with puns generally lack this quality in their forms of communication.

The second missing classification is parallel. It occurs when the text and the visual representation follow different, non-overlapping courses. This categorization is consistent with the social semiotics concept of exposition, in which both the image and the words are of equal generality (van Leeuwen, 2011). This category is missing from the data collection as expected. Since the ultimate interpretation of memes frequently depends on the mix of text and image, it does not make sense to have both modes in an internet meme if they are unconnected. As a result, it appears that no internet memes have this text-image relationship.

Montage, where the text is regarded as an inherent part of the image, is the final categorization by McCloud (1994) that is missing from the data set. This classification focuses on the artistic decisions the comic book creator made when "shaping" texts. Since comic book artists typically represent texts with iconic meanings, such as vertically organized words, distinctive usage of large symbols and characters, or sentences that are constructed as graphics, this genre is quite prevalent. As a result, both styles have visual and semiotic connections. Chan (2011) uses the words from the Stingray poem as an example of how words can be arranged to resemble an animal, a stingray to be precise. It also conforms to the semiotic concept of inherent proposed by Cohn (2013), according to which the structures of text and image are mutually constitutive. Since the text type in internet meme creation is determined and enforced by the current tools, it is difficult to creatively alter the text structure or shape, hence this category is missing from the data set.

In a nutshell, the sequential nature of comic graphics and the author's seemingly endless ability to creatively shape words are absent in internet memes, despite the relevance of applying McCloud's comic classifications to them. Therefore, none of the three classifications—namely, duo-specific, parallel, and montage—apply to the data set.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Internet meme is one of relatively new media to deliver humor. The humor in pun or wordplay can be expressed with internet memes. This research examines a corpus of 150 internet memes that contain puns, as one of the styles of linguistic humor, in terms of their text-picture relationship and, in particular, their pragmatic implications. Following McCloud's (1994) classifications suggestion for comics, a medium that is extremely similar to internet memes in terms of its verbal-visual semiotic character, the default taxonomy of categories has produced the following categorization of internet memes: word specific (28), picture specific (2), additive (29), and interdependent (91). The absence of other comic classifications in internet memes happens because of the difference of some characteristics that separates internet memes from comics. Those differences include the sequential nature of comic graphics and the author's seemingly endless ability to creatively shape words.

This particular scope of linguistic humor, however, still opens for future projects to explore. For example, we can use the data from internet memes in different languages. Using humor from different cultural background can possibly lead to a more various findings on text-picture relationship in internet memes, particularly the ones that contain puns in them.

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