

What do you meme?

The relevance of non-propositional effects on humour processing: A case study of internet memes

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Understanding meaning in interaction depends on much more than just 'propositional content'. Cultural assumptions, background knowledge and social relations are also critical, and humans are uniquely skilled at discerning these (Tomasello et al., 2005). Collective practices are structured by shared symbolic artifacts, such as linguistic symbols, that facilitate the transmission of culture. Studies of language in interaction should also consider cultural and social representations, as well as strict linguistic processing (Goldnadel & Oliveira, 2007; Yus 2011; 2016; 2018; 2019).

These factors are particularly relevant in the case of humour (Maraev et al., 2021; Attardo, 1994), and how these factors may or may not be available to any particular interactant is especially apparent in social media. We therefore present a study of internet memes. Specifically, we ask how interactions on social media where memes are shared demonstrate how attuned different respondents are to the 'non-propositional effects' (Relevance Theory, Sperber & Wilson, 1996) at play.

Methods: We qualitatively analysed responses to six internet memes (see examples, below), specifically looking at a) how context-dependent the meme itself was, b) how responses demonstrated that they had (or had not) 'got' the meme ('optimal inference') using tags and comments, and c) the sharing context (public versus specific).

Findings: The sharing context was found to influence optimal inference, which provides support for the hypothesis that non-propositional effects are crucial to inferential processing (see table 1). Comments on memes shared in specific contexts also sometimes failed to elicit optimal inferences; however, they had a lot of reactions, suggesting increased relatability among users in specific groups.

Conclusion: Propositional content is less crucial than non-propositional effects, especially in specific context-dependent memes. We believe that those effects should be included in the framework of linguistics studies in online interaction. These effects serve as compensators for the low informativeness of humorous texts, rendering them highly relevant, especially within specific groups.

References

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Table 1: Memes qualitative analysis

Meme's name	Category (specific context-dependent)	Number of comments (FB), (X)	Proportion of optimally inferred comments	Domain
1-Donald Duck x Donald Trump	Lower dependency	2(X), 6(FB)	Yes (0.75) No (0.25)	Public
2-Woman Yelling at a Cat	Lower dependency	5(X)	No (1)	Public
3-Hold the Door	Greater dependency	9(FB)	Yes (1)	Specific
4-Cavaleiros do Apocalipse	Lower dependency	11(FB)	Yes (0.63); No (0.36)	Specific
5-Telekinesis	Lower dependency	6(FB)	Yes (0.83); No (0.16)	Specific
6-Mean Girls	Greater dependency	14(FB)	Yes (1)	Specific

X = Twitter, FB = Facebook

Examples: memes 1 and 2 and comments:

1-Donald Duck x Donald Trump



Mind = blown

A) I don't get it

B) Donald Duck and Donald trump

A) haha a meme for the last convo

B) Looks like an adult Dexter... from Dexter's lab?

A) a Donald trump

B) Well that makes more sense.

A) Yeah lol coz he a dick

B) it's all becoming clear

2-Woman Yelling at a Cat



A) I love that the 'Woman Yelling at Cat' Meme has been re-memed into a Word Order meme.

B) I have no idea why everyone is sharing the 'Woman yelling at a cat' memes. So After googling it (yes, I googled it), I realized, it's not because I'm too old to 'get it', it's because I'm a grown man that doesn't watch 'Real Housewives Of Beverly Hills'. #GumpyOldMan

A) I still don't understand the woman yelling at a cat meme. Where did that come from?

B) Why is a white woman yelling at a cat how did this start

C) Where are these woman yelling at a cat memes from?