

Multimodal interaction and viewpoint in internet memes

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Internet memes have become a pervasive form in on-line communication (Shifman 2013, Wiggins and Bowers 2014). Given their increasing role in structuring interaction, it is time to consider the way they function in communication as multimodal artifacts. While existing descriptions have focused mainly on issues of definition, genre and spread, we show how their use of linguistic forms and images creates viewpoint dimensions of interaction.

What distinguishes memes from many other forms of creative expression is their interactive character. Typically, a meme starts with a popular artifact (e.g., an ad, a quote or a song), which becomes recognizable to a group of users and thus carries a frame (Fillmore 1982) that can then be built on. The frame is then reused through adding text, rephrasing, substitution, extension, etc. We show how such edits are driven by new viewpoints and how the resulting emergent viewpoint blends constitute a form of ongoing interaction among users who only share an internet medium – an interactive website, a form of social media, etc. Memes go ‘dormant’ for a while, but when a new interesting event attracts the users’ attention, they are quickly re-constructed to comment on the recent situation. As such, they provide a multimodal version of a long-distance conversation, specifically through proposing new (often humorous) viewpoints.

In the talk, we will closely analyze two series of memes. One emerged after the unfortunate line of Mitt Romney’s, about *binders of women*. In itself a not-too-graceful metonymy, the phrase went through a long chain of viewpoint reframings, generally addressing the social status of women, but primarily ‘viewpointing’ Romney’s words in increasingly extreme ways. The shifts included additions of new lines, old meme visuals and new visuals, songs, while evoking various strongly viewpoint frames of the roles women play in various situations.

The second meme, “said no-one ever” is mostly textual and in its very form contrasts two viewpoints – of someone who might say, for instance, *Your Facebook status really made me change my political views*, and then another person who comments with the stable *said no-one ever* line. While presenting two contrasting viewpoints in the meme itself, new iterations currently circulating on the web also start off with other viewpoints, for instance focusing on stereotypes (as in *said no student ever*, *said no TSA agent ever*) or subverting the expected format (e.g. *says everyone all of the time*; *(says) every digital language learner ever*).

Jointly, examples such as these and others we will touch on reveal many salient features of meme communication. Some of the observations we will discuss are as follows: a) the textual form of memes gradually achieves constructional status, as do some visual patterns (such as the division of labour between ‘top text’ and ‘bottom text’), and the construction is frame-metonymic (Sweetser and Fauconnier 1996) for the entire interaction and viewpoint pattern; b) subsequent steps in the reconstruction of the meme (visual or textual or both) constitute steps in a (rather lighthearted) discussion of how the current event is to be understood; and c) the formal changes and the flow of interactive reconstruction are driven entirely by viewpoint – the nature of the matter under discussion does not change. Memes thus provide a window to a better understanding of viewpoint in interaction.

References

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