BOOK REVIEW

Review of the Pragmatics of Internet Memes

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Undoubtedly, many of our communications take place online – we tweet, use emojis in our interactions via instant messaging, post comments on social networking sites, and, of course, create and share memes. While memes have been associated with internet-mediated communication for more than a decade, the term 'meme' was originally coined by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976) in his famous book *The Selfish Gene* to refer to units of cultural transmission by means of copying and imitation, such as bird songs, rumors, catchphrases, and fashion. In the digital era, internet memes are defined as "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users" (Shifman, 2014, p. 14). Among the emerging genres of digital communication, internet memes have received increasing scholarly attention as evidenced by recent publications from disciplines such as anthropology (Haynes, 2019), communication, journalism and new media (Milner, 2016) and linguistics (Vásquez & Aslan, 2021, Aslan, 2021, Dynel, 2016).

Making an important contribution to the linguistic study of internet memes, particularly in the area of pragmatics, *The Pragmatics of Internet Memes* edited by Chaoqun Xie was originally a special issue of the journal *Internet Pragmatics* in 2020 and now expands its readership in book format. Its six chapters focus on various aspects of internet memes, such as humor, implicit/explicit meaning-making practices, stylistic variation, intertextuality, and multimodality. The pragmatics premise of the volume is established in the introduction of the volume where the editor Chaoqun Xie describes internet pragmatics as a promising area of inquiry to understand language and everyday life online, highlighting the discursive and liberating power of internet memes in changing people's attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, ideologies, and actions.

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Following the introduction, Chaoqun Xie reappears in Chap. 1 with his discussion of the properties of memes from a pragmatic perspective rooted in his earlier work. He distinguishes between 'memetic messages' and 'meme outputs' – the former referring to the ideologies, beliefs and thoughts conveyed by memes, while the latter refer to the different forms and genres, such as image macros and cartoons. Focusing on two specific meme themes which appeared in mainland China during the COVID-19 pandemic – viz. 'stay home stay safe' and 'wear a mask' – Xie presents various examples of creative language use including homophony in Chinese words, public warning slogans and signs resembling the genre of advertisements (intertextuality), characters written in bold and bigger size to highlight importance. It is interesting to note that many of the examples shared in the chapter originated offline in physical public spaces but later went viral online, and therefore, they differ from typical image macro memes that originate in online platforms. Xie's distinction of memetic message and meme output is useful in understanding the deep (meaning) and surface level (form) composition of memes, revealing the complex interplay between linguistic, visual, and multimodal elements and deep social and cultural structures in which hidden ideologies, identities, and states of mind are situated.

In Chap. 2, Anna Piata presents an analysis of a classical art meme corpus. Relatively understudied from a linguistic perspective, as Piata argues, the classical art meme family consists of visual input derived from classical and medieval art and combined with colloquial textual input based on contemporary life aspects, such as relationships, beauty, and insecurity. The unique recontextualization of classical images with modern texts results in incongruity of stylistic varieties, thus creating multimodal stylistic humor (also known as register humor). Pragmatically, there is an implicit connection between the image and what is expressed or implied in the text. Humor facilitated by stylistic incongruity facilitates the interpretation of affective and critical meanings. Piata further provides two classifications of these memes based on what the image expresses – an emotional state or a situational scenario. She views classical art memes as an example of multimodal similes, noting, however, that instead of highlighting similarities between dissimilar domains, these memes foreground contrastive or incongruous relationships between the visual and textual elements.

Shifting the focus to the political sphere, Bradley Wiggins in Chap. 3 discusses how media narratives play a role in the creation and transmission of internet memes related to real-world events, issues, and people. He focuses on the former National Football League (NFL) player Colin Kaepernick, whose controversial practice of kneeling when the United States' national anthem was played at the beginning of football games received extensive criticism. The player's appearance in a Nike advertisement commemorating the 30th anniversary campaign of the *Just do It* slogan went viral; Wiggins analyzed a corpus of remixed Nike advertisements as internet memes from the player's Twitter account. The findings showed how the visual and textual components of the original advertisement were repurposed and recontextualized in memes linked to a range of media narratives such as gun rights and showing support for or criticism of politicians. In these examples, Wiggins highlights the importance of context in the recognition of a meme and in understanding its implicatures, and

how media narratives provide a broad context, conditioning and shaping the construction and dissemination of internet memes.

In Chap. 4, Elke Diedrichsen applies some sociopragmatic notions related to the communicative aspects of memes to meme interaction. One such notion is the *core common ground*, referring to mutually shared a priori knowledge that facilitates linguistic interaction between meme creators and their audience. *Emergent common ground*, on the other hand, is the knowledge that interactants privately possess but come to share in an actual communicative situation. Through this classification, Diedrichsen claims to have reached a 5-way typology of memes informed by the degree of conventionalization and communicative function, though it is not clear how these categories are "discovered". That being said, the common ground approach to memes is useful in understanding how the complex and implicit rules and conventions are created, negotiated, changed, or revoked by netizens through frequent exposure to, and usage, repetition, and variation of memes.

Localization and context-specific humor in an internet meme is examined in Chap. 5 by Yaqian Jiang and Camilla Vásquez. The authors examine a small corpus of image macros (n = 60), focusing on the productive meaning-making resources that combine visual and textual elements in a Chinese meme featuring the grinning facial expression of US wrestler D'Angelo Dinero after defeating his opponent in a match. While the image of the wrestler did not go viral in the US where it originated, the wrestler's smile was recontextualized into various images and multimodal ensembles with references to Chinese digital and popular culture, Chinese social class issues, and Chinese politics and institutions. Multilingual language play involving polysemy, homophony, or transliteration along with Chinese captions, Cantonese expressions and some English text was evident in most of the examples. The study shows how a productive global visual element is coherently and meaningfully brought together with local viewpoints, meanings and humor that may remain inaccessible to non-Chinese audiences.

In the final chapter of the volume (Chap. 6), Monika Kirner-Ludwig brings us back to political internet memes focusing on the US 2020 presidential campaigns. Quantitatively comparing corpora from two sites, Google Images (n = 249) and Reddit (n = 245), the author explores multiple levels of intertextuality in the memes which integrate (1) implicit and explicit references to individual political figures, (predominantly on Reddit), (2) telecinematic and pop-cultural references (e.g., the *Simpsons* and *SpongeBob*) to create a common ground for viewers to establish correlations between behavioral patterns of political figures and the characters from the telecinematic reference points, and (3) constructed and quoted speech elements as reference strategies playing a significant role in creating a humorous effect. While the comparative focus of the chapter on the platform analysis is not as strong or meaningful as the interplay between the various multiple levels of intertextuality effectively described and exemplified in the study, the chapter does provide useful insights for future research that explores the heterogeneity and dynamicity of political memes from cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspectives.

Clearly, this is a timely volume that enhances our understanding of the production and interpretation of internet memes as a vital and vibrant form of online communication. In it, we see various conceptualizations and classifications of memes based

on the meanings that visual and textual components convey. One prominent theme that emerges from the volume is the implicit and context-dependent nature of internet memes. The contributions focus on different topics including COVID-19, politics, and contemporary life, with a balanced inclusion of critical and humorous memes. However, the same level of diversity in the range of topics covered in the volume does not match the range of cultures and contexts presented. Other than two chapters that focus on China, the rest are focused on Western contexts, primarily the US. While this is not a weakness of the volume per se, it indicates that research on internet memes is predominantly Western-centric. In terms of research methods, analytical tools, and sites/platforms, although most chapters provide clear details on sampling/ corpus creation, some (specifically Chaps. 1 and 4) do not offer much methodological transparency. With respect to meme genres, image macros (still images with captioned texts) were central to this volume, meaning that other emerging genres such as Graphic Interchange Format (GIF) and video-based memes that involve more complex multimodal layers, such as voice over, sound, remix, and body language are yet to be explored extensively.

Presumably, readers of *Corpus Pragmatics* are likely to find this volume interesting as most chapters in it benefit from an empirical corpus of internet memes to expand and operationalize a range of pragmatic notions such as humor, common ground, implicit/explicit meanings, and shared knowledge/common ground. Additionally, scholars with an interest in the emerging genres of digital communication will find many useful suggestions for future research throughout the volume.

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