UNVEILING NAMIBIA'S DIGITAL HUMOUR: A HUMOROUS AND STYLISTIC EXAMINATION OF MEMES IN NAMIBIAN ONLINE DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This article examined the humorous and stylistic elements of memes in Namibian online discourse. In the digital age, memes have become an integral part of online communication, offering valuable insights into contemporary language use. The concept of memes originated from Richard Dawkins, drawing parallels between genes and cultural transmission. Today, memes are widely recognised as short videos or images accompanied by humorous texts, rapidly shared on social media. The incongruity theory of humour was used to elucidate the humorous and language elements within memes. The study aimed at analysing selected memes within the Namibian socio-cultural context, shedding light on how language is used to create humorous effects and identifying stylistic qualities. This was a desktop study that analysed image macros from the Namibian socio-cultural context. Eight memes were sampled from an online platform called Namibian memes01 populated by 139 000 followers at the time of sampling these memes. The study revealed that memes serve as a form of communication, conveying emotions, thoughts, and ideas, and reflecting cultural values. They contribute to language development and have the potential to shape social interactions and shared beliefs. The study also revealed that understanding the context is crucial for interpreting memes, as they often rely on background knowledge and non-verbal cues. Humour plays a significant role in memes, fostering a sense of community, defusing tension, and promoting positive interactions. The findings highlight the importance of pragmatics and context in interpreting the intended meanings of memes.

Keywords: memes, internet memes, humour, stylistic, communication, audience, context

Introduction

Digital communication has developed in many ways with new types of means of communication emerging regularly over the past 30 years (Desjardins, 2018). After the COVID-19 pandemic that was experienced by the whole world, life became more digitised than ever. This has led to a dramatic growth in the sharing of information using social memes. The word meme was adapted from the ancient Greek 'mimeme', a term that means 'something imitated' (Dawkins, 1976). Dawkins (1976) makes an analogy between genes, as replicators of genetic information and memes, that he described to be "a unit of cultural transmission" (p. 192). Ever since, the term meme has undergone various semantic and pragmatic changes. Today, a meme popularly refers to a short video or image usually accompanied by a short, mostly humorous text that is spread rapidly by internet users on social media. Davison (2012) believes that memes are vehicles for short pieces of information, sometimes presented idiomatically or displaying creativity. Today, memes can be seen as one of the most culturally important elements of communication as they can be created and shared with ease and can be related to others in one way or the other.

The researchers have noted that there is a dearth of the exploration of memes in the Namibian context, hence this article focused on a humorous and stylistic analysis of a few selected memes developed within the Namibian society. This can give a strong insight into how language is used in the creation and spreading of humorous memes. The question that might arise is; 'What makes one meme more viral than another'? Some memes are relatable to a broader audience in terms of experiences, emotions, situations, knowledge and some that are funny tend to be shared widely as they evoke positive emotions. Shifman (2014, p. 15) has indicated that memes are not only meant for humorous

purposes, but useful for understanding cultural trends that are referred to as "(post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed".

In its endeavour to examine memes in Namibia's online discourse, the study was based on the following two research questions:

1. What are the necessary aspects to be considered in the interpretation and comprehension of memes?
2. How do the stylistic features employed in the textual components of memes contribute to the humour and engagement of the audience?

Memes as a Form of Communication

Memes take different forms of communication and expression in sending a desired message. This means that people use memes to express emotions, experiences, thoughts and ideas (Iloh, 2021). Memes are also seen as a powerful method of communication as they spread the message rapidly. Hence, they can be understood as pieces of information that can be passed from one person to another that gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon. They spread on a micro basis, but their impact is seen at the macro level as they influence the mindset, behaviours and actions of social groups (Shifman, 2014).

The prevalent nature of memes in today's electronic communication shows that they are more than pictures and texts. Iloh (2021) has observed that memes reflect cultural values due to their distinguishable, adaptable and enduring features. In doing so, they show the changing aspects in our values, communities, contexts and environments and suggest how we should adapt to these changes. Holm (2021) also agrees that memes are culturally significant, not only as digital artefacts but they share cultural values and beliefs. This is what Shifman (2014) refers to when saying that memes do not only transmit information but also construct and represent shared beliefs. Memes show the shared values, symbols and cultural sensibilities that contain what people see as their communities, which can be language, cultural practices and social behaviours.

According to Halliday (2014), the role of language is to act as a means of communication through the features of language and that meaning should be the central element. This paper has looked at how the creation of memes can send messages through the use of humour and linguistic features. Holm (2021) confirms that memes have creational, social and communicative features which contribute to sociolinguistic potential. The creation and how memes are circulated support the social interaction within the participatory cultural framework. However, the communicative features of memes depend on the meaning they create as well as how they are interpreted in the social settings.

Furthermore, the language of memes seems to be considered as another type of communication. Memes are replicated and transmitted by means of language, so they contribute to language development. Also, memes come from sources such as education, knowledge impartation, idiomatic usage of words, phrases, casual exchanges in communication (He, 2008). On the other hand, academics have criticised the language of memes and their contributions to language development. Petrova (2021) affirms this by asserting the negative side of memes language as it is sometimes hostile and promotes prejudiced attitudes towards individuals or certain groups of people, gender, beliefs, just to name but a few.

Understanding the Context of Memes

The message of a meme can be successfully understood depending on the context where it is set. According to Schiffrin (2005), context consists of three aspects. The first of these is the role of the conversational participant (the speaker, the addressee, the agent and the hearer). The second aspect of context is referred to as the assumed common ground. This term is used to describe background

information in communication (the set of background facts, assumptions and beliefs presupposed to exist in the mental model of the participants). The third aspect of context is the verbal act of making an utterance. This requires the individual's background knowledge (general, world, personal), experiences and values to be grounded on what the artist comes up with, or else the meaning of the meme may not be understood (Hartman, Berg, Fulton, Schuler, 2021). To some extent, this signifies the importance of contextual beliefs. Petrova (2021) observes that with the use of internet, the content of the memes may be understandable to every internet user irrespective of age, culture, language and nation, but Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and Shalevska (2018) and Grundling (2017) disagree by asserting that the understanding of internet memes cannot be declared as a global issue. In all the corners of the world, there are certain specific characteristics, traditions, customs, cuisine, morals and ethical norms. These features are specific and different around the world. Hence, the choice of resources and social context in which the meme is interpreted may not make sense to someone not living in the country or region where the meme is set. For example, some memes selected for this study are contextualised to social issues that happened in Namibia, so the specific references within the memes add to the general incomprehensibility for the rest.

The context within a country's borders does not seem to be the only factor that leads to the understanding of a meme. "Different meme genres involve different levels of literacy: some can be understood by almost everyone; whereas others require detailed knowledge about a digital meme subculture" (Shifman, 2014, p. 100). Interpreting the meaning of a meme can be compared to the interpretation of a speech act; it is very important that the hearer is aware of the background information that predates the communication. In addition to the background information, the non-verbal features of communication can also be used by the hearer to interpret the intent of a speaker. In the case of memes, a photo usually provides either the non-verbal aspect of the context, or the background information needed in order to interpret the meme correctly (Grundling, 2017). Verbal and nonverbal characteristics influence how the memes are interpreted. Hence, the background information, interests and experiences of everyone exposed to a meme are all crucial in interpreting the meaning of the meme.

Humour in Internet Memes

The concept of humour has been extensively studied in various disciplinary fields including psychology, philosophy, literature and linguistics. Humour aims at causing laughter that reduces tension and creates a sense of unity amongst the groups engaged in the act. Memes are considered to have a humorous point of view which is used to express an opinion (Holm, 2021). Humour plays a significant role in establishing a sense of community, defusing tension, promoting positive interactions and building connections. According to Kilpelainen (2021), humour can be seen as memetic as it is a human made product of imagination and can reflect on the culture and society in which it is produced. Sometimes one may find that the joke is not funny to everyone which underlines people's preferences and their sense of subjectivity when it comes to humour. So, whether the internet meme is humorous and relatable depends on individuals, but not the meme itself. The memes examined for this study may or may not be humorous to everyone, thus, the interpretations made by the researchers are not definitive; they can further be discussed and interpreted differently. This again emphasises that the reader must have the background information of the memes for the interpretation to be found valid.

The use of humorous aspects in memes has prompted this study in an attempt to examine how it is used and to identify the elements that make the memes humorous. Blakes (2007) discerns two methods used in internet memes to convey humour: the linguistic features and variation in orthography. Blakes further emphasises that when the language is the object of humour in internet memes, the audience should have a certain level of linguistic competence to find a meme humorous.

Theoretical Framework

To show the humorous aspects of the chosen internet memes, the examination of the study used the incongruity theory of humour. Incongruous refers to a dissonance, a combination of two unexpected and contradictory "elements". The incongruity theory views humour as the perception of "something that violates our mental patterns and expectations" (Zalta, 2020). Mathews (2011) states that the incongruity theory is based on the linguistic perspective in which people find something funny when they find a text absurd, for example if people expect seriousness, but the text appears to be different from their expectations. Mwetulundila (2014) adds that sometimes readers expect the illustrator to say something serious, but they get a twist of what they expected instead, for example with the use figurative representation that portrays a close relationship with incongruity theory of humour. Figures of speech put the audience's mind into active thinking because the words used literally mean something else. The incongruity theory is relevant to this study as memes rely on incongruities to generate humour. Memes juxtapose familiar images, ideas, and texts in unexpected ways creating humorous contrast that triggers laughter or amusement. Studying these incongruities may assist the audience in understanding the dynamics of memes and the role humour plays in an online space.

Methodology

This was a desktop study where sources already published were used for the purpose of the examination of the selected internet memes. Milner (2012) identifies 13 types of memes which are divided into two categories: remixed images and stable images. This article was only limited to image macros which are classified under remixed images. Image macros are the commonly used memes and also "one of the clearest examples of inter-play of imitation and transformation in the process that guides the construction of memes" (Milner, 2012, p. 89). An image macro consists of a picture and a catchphrase above or below the image in the macro. The catchphrases employed in memes are useful in stylistic analysis. In selecting the internet memes for this article, the researchers paid attention to eight memes that were sampled from an online platform called Namibian memes01 populated by 139 000 followers at the time of sampling these memes. The memes chosen were posted between the period of December 2021 and May 2022. This period was considered because the researchers wanted to get a variation of each meme to see how it reflected on the temporal and socio-historical context in which they were used and to examine how they survive for a period of time. The memes were purposively selected as they comment on social issues and draw on the context known by the researchers.

Findings and Discussions

The Intended Meaning of Memes and Pragmatics

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Interpreting the meanings of the memes can be associated with what Yule (2009, p.113) considers in pragmatics as a study of "invisible meaning, or how we recognize what is meant even when it isn't actually said or written". In communication, there are assumptions and expectations to be understood

for the meaning of what is written or said to be fully interpreted. When it comes to memes, their ambiguity in different meanings gives them substance. What is said in the catchphrase and portrayed in the image can be in disagreement with one another; they can also be in disagreement with the original context of the image in which the meme is drawn. However, the context, which is a psychological construct, plays an important role in getting the meaning of the memes. According to Sperber and Wilson (1995), a context is not limited to the physical environment or immediately preceding utterances, but something that is created in the mind of the hearers as they try to interpret what is said or written. There are many factors in the mind of the hearers for example beliefs, assumptions, expectations that can aid in the analysis of the message. Figure 1's interpretation can, for example, depend on a number of other factors, not only the meaning of individual words mentioned in the catchphrase. One has to be well versed with the history of the fools' day celebrated on the first day of the month of April to really comprehend why the month has to start with a joke or else the audience might not find it humorous at all. The Macmillan Dictionary labels the expression "full of shit" as impolite, meaning "always saying things that are impolite or untrue". One can be offended by the vulgar use of the word "shit", but the intention is not to offend; rather to amuse because it is said with a sense of humour. This is an expression commonly used among friends and in very colloquial contexts. This figure can be comprehended by using the written words and the existing knowledge about what is referred to by the creator of the meme. Hence, when interpreting the meaning of the meme, it is very important that the audience has the background information preceding the communication (Grundling, 2017).

Another example showing the importance of existing knowledge in memes' interpretation is shown in Figure 2. The image portraying someone laughing creates a humorous context acting as a background for the interpretation of the memetic text accompanying it. The image induces humour before the catchphrase is even read. The words used can attest that the meaning of the image cannot be based exclusively on the catchphrase, but there should be assumptions of what the writer intends to communicate. This meme follows a very common pattern of meme creation where a general situation is presented by the use of the word "everyone" and then an exception can be "me" or another specific group of people. It is always the case that the exception presents a humorous situation. The audience has to infer the meaning of the text, in the absence of a full sentence. "An inference is additional information used by the listener to create a connection between what is said and what must be meant" (Yule, 2009, p.116). Bach and Harnish (1980, as cited in Grundlingh, 2017) argue that inference is one of the most important aspects of successful communication. Bach and Harnish believe that an utterance can have more than one inference based on mutual contextual beliefs. They call them contextual beliefs because they are relevant to the context of the utterance.

In addition to the need to infer, Figure 2 presents a Namibian "inside joke" that can be better understood by those exposed to an audio clip widely shared on Namibian social media platforms. In the audio clip, a Herero man describes or calls pizza 'oshipetsa' in his native language. Thus, humour comes from three elements: the image presenting the lady laughing, the background knowledge of the audio clip and the prior exposure to the "inferring" type of meme.

Furthermore, Figure 3 also shows how the writer and audience need cooperation in the act of communication to reach common understanding. The choice of words and mainstream link made in relation to what is said help in the decoding of the message. The caption "On Facebook when you die, they will tag you and ask why you doing this" uses linguistic references that need to be understood by the audience to interpret the message correctly. The pronoun 'they' is used with an impersonal function, referring to no one in particular but could represent any person that would act as presented in the meme. The reference to Facebook leads to the interpretation that 'they' refers to Facebook users. The word 'they' refers to a noun which is not mentioned in the context, so it is up to the audience to make the correct inference to have a common understanding with the reader. The word 'they' can be inferred to as Facebook users based on the collaborative understanding of both the

writer and audience community.

Yule (2009) indicates that if the speaker/writer's goal is to make a reference, the listener/reader's responsibility is to make an inference to discover the relationship between expressed entities with the words. The use of 'you' does not explicitly refer to any particular person, but the assertion can be applied to 'you' in a plural form, which means it can happen to all of the audience members. The writer assumes that the audience already knows what she/he is referring to hence no further explanation was given in reference to 'you' usage. The use of the word 'this' may refer to 'die' even though there is no correct grammatical relationship between the two words. There is a link between 'die' and 'this' because the question "why you doing this" seems to provoke someone to answer why she/he died. The sense made by these two words is based on pragmatism whereby the writer does not pay attention to grammatical rules, but to the interpretation the audience will make. In addition, the choice of words (the verb with a pronoun referent) is made so that the inference can have humorous effect to those in social closeness, sharing knowledge with the writer. The absurdity of the situation also brings humour, as one that died cannot be asked questions. This is also based on the common practice of tagging other users in one's post, when the post is addressed to or directed at the person in question.

Where is the Humour?

| Figure 4 | Figure 5 | Figure 6 |

As postulated earlier, background knowledge between the interlocutors can help in interpreting the message as well as determining the humorous part of the memes. For Figure 4 to make sense, one is required to have knowledge of how the thunder sounds (gugugu) and that this sound is usually accompanied by lightning. This may help the possibility to conclude what 'gugugu' refers to. The use of the word 'gugugu' that resonates with the sound of thunder is incongruous because the audience expected the use of the word 'thunder' in a normal circumstance. The question is meant to find out the truth about what really comes first between the lighting and gugugu (thunder). This is not only meant to be humorous, but educational too. Once the audience answers the question and the truth is deducted, it can be applied in new situations for the benefit of knowledge impartation. The punchline is found in the question part where the salient aim of the meme is: to find out the information. According to Goatly (2012), a punchline is crucial to a joke structure since it forces the mind to switch from the schema that is made noticeable from the set up. The readers should connect the schema and meme to properly get the joke. That is, in order to understand the joke, one has to make a reference to the sound of thunder. The set up and the punchline are found in one sentence that functions as a statement and question. This seems to be comic because it is presented with a sense of humour.

Figure 5 shows that memes do not only draw chuckles from the interlocutors, but they can also serve as a medium of discussions. A joke can provoke a point of discussion through information giving and questioning. In other words, it can be said that memes are used as a new channel of communication. The interlocutors give feedback and comments once the message is presented to them through the medium of memes. In Figure 5, the realisation of humour might be slower and cannot be understood without its context. "A joke loses any potential for humorous value the moment the listener or viewer

is forced to put intellectual effort to understand what is happening" (Fredid, 1905, as cited in Kumar & Varier, 2020). The first line functions as the introduction (set up) of the topic that the writer wants to bring to the attention of the readers. The quote without quotation marks is extracted from the song by Westlife titled *My Love* and is meant to fit and support the previous statement. The humour is situated in the quotation that functions as a punchline. This punchline can be funny to those that possess the background information of what the writer wants to be discussed. The interlocutors should connect their schema to the meme to properly get the joke. The joke lies in incongruity of the quotation because the interlocutors might have expected something else not the quotation to be used in this context. In order to get the humour of Figure 5, one must know where the lines are quoted from.

In Figure 6, the meme asks the audience to ponder about their action of killing mosquitoes. One can be angered by this statement as mosquitoes are considered as one of the most dangerous insects to the wellbeing of humans. The set up is ambiguous that may trick the interlocutor into arriving at different emotional interpretations. To some, it might be difficult to think about a mosquito's family before killing it because mosquitoes annoy them and spread malaria. The set up statement seems to sound unreasonable, considering the deplorable conditions caused by mosquito bites. In other words, the interlocutors would portray the set-up statement as insensitive to the plight of people. Yus (2021) indicates that sometimes the ambiguity may be found in the set up that deceives the interlocutors into arriving in wrong interpretations that is then cancelled out by the incongruous punchline which brings out the covert ambiguity. In Figure 6, the incongruity is delayed to the punchline "What if he is the only son and a final year student at uniquito?", which adds amazing information that is in some way conflicting with what has been said in the set up. Humour originates in finding out that the mosquito that is referred to is the male one. Male mosquitoes are considered to be harmless and are essential parts of the ecosystem, just like other living organisms. This is to say that the male mosquitoes need to be preserved because of their potential contributions to the wellbeing in the entire ecosystem. According to Holm (2021), memes are considered to have a humorous point of view which is used to express an opinion. The interlocutors may not only find Figure 6 humorous, but the incongruous punchline as educative using humour. He (2008) emphasises that memes come from sources such as education and knowledge impartation. Thus, Figure 6 educates the interlocutors the importance of the survival of a male mosquito and that it needs to be revered as 'the only son and a final year student at uniquito' who has a bright future ahead of him.

Stylistic Features of Memes

Figure 7   Figure 8

The last group of memes is the image that was taken in the Kuisebmond location, in the Namibian town of Walvis Bay. The context in which the photo was taken is essential to the interpretation of the meme. A cell phone thief was caught and beaten by a few members of the local community, after he snatched a lady's device in the streets of Kuisebmond, Walvis Bay. The incident was reported in several

newspapers as an example of bravery on the side of the community, showing little to no compassion to the thief (Paavo, 2022). The online community responded to this with humour, joining the crowd that had ever lost a cell phone at the hands of a "phone grabber". It leads the interlocutors to use the image to express different sentiments by using figures of speech.

The role of the language is a means of communication using different features of language. This includes the use of stylistic features to make memes more engaging and attention grabbing. The textual part of the memes discussed in this paper have unique stylistic features that may be captivating for the memes' audiences. These features are derived from the textual part of the meme that is needed to understand the meaning of the meme. People are likely to share the content that makes them laugh; for example in Figure 7, the catchphrase "Me coming out of a relationship i was warned about" describes the experience of the writer in a humorous and memorable manner. In combining the catchphrase with the pictorial representation, it can be seen that the relationship that ended was a problematic one though the writer expected it to work out. There is a situational irony of the relationship that would have turned out to be better or worse; the intention was for the relationship to work out accordingly despite the warning. There is situational irony when "an outcome is incongruous with what was expected" or a situation wherein "contradictions or sharp contrast" are included (Kumar & Varier, 2020, p.3). The phrase "coming out" suggests the outcome of the relationship that did not turn out to be as intended. It was rather like someone was in a closet where he/she was coming out from.

Figure 8's humour is shown through satire in which the situation is exaggerated. Taecharunroj and Nueangjamnong (2015) state that there are memes that magnify something out of proportion and the meme becomes humorous because of the overstatement of some elements. The humour is on someone being sent to check in the future '2023' as if it is some kind of physical place that can be visited. "The person we sent to go check how 2023 just came back guys" seems to indicate that the person who was sent is back with the account or information necessary to describe how 2023 is. The absurdity of the situation in the year 2023 can be understood by looking at the picture of the dusty person who just came back from the future. The use of the word 'just' emphasises the satirical tone and the seriousness of the situation. One might see that the situation in the future is unbearable and it is not worth going to the year 2023.

Conclusions

This article examined the nature of memes in the Namibian online discourse by focusing on their stylistic qualities and humorous effects. Memes serve as a form of communication expressing emotions, experiences, thoughts, and ideas, while also reflecting and shaping cultural values. They contribute to language development and can be viewed as a means of sociolinguistic potential within participatory cultural frameworks. Understanding the context of memes is essential for their interpretation. Context encompasses the roles of conversational participants, assumed common ground, and the verbal act of making an utterance. Memes require background knowledge, experiences, and values to be correctly interpreted, and different meme genres involve varying levels of literacy. Humour is the key aspect of memes, serving to create unity, and establish a sense of community. Memes can reflect cultural and societal aspects, but the perception of humour can vary among individuals due to subjectivity and personal preferences. The incongruity theory of humour highlights the perception of something that violates mental patterns and expectations; additionally, linguistic features and variations in orthography can support the humorous aspect of memes. The study shed light on the linguistic and stylistic aspects of memes in the Namibian online discourse. Memes serve as cultural artefacts, offering valuable insights into language use, cultural values, and the current sociocultural context. Understanding memes contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving digital culture and its impact on language and communication.

Recommendations

This paper explored the humorous and stylistic elements of memes in Namibian online discourse. Future research needs to focus on how audiences think about online memes and the effects of humour on them. The studies on audience reception will enhance the understanding of how different groups of people interpret and engage with memes. This can shed light on the varied ways in which humour is perceived within Namibian online communities. Furthermore, future studies should also investigate the use and impact of indigenous languages in Namibian memes to see how linguistic diversity contributes to the richness of humour and whether certain languages are more prevalent in online discourse. These recommendations aim to enhance the depth and breadth of research on Namibian online humour, fostering an understanding of the cultural and stylistic dynamics at play in meme reception.

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