INTERNET MEMES AND THEIR SOCIO-LINGUISTIC FEATURES

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Abstract

Social networks' users as well as Internet portals, forums, web-pages, blogs etc. have developed their own unique communicational system that might seem incomprehensible to people above a certain age, with little to no internet presence. These systems enables them to communicate freely their ideas, thoughts, jokes, funny anecdotes as well as their critiques towards their societies and political leaders in a much more creative way than the traditional. This Internet-communicational system mostly relies on the usage of emoticons, GIFs and memes. This paper will focus on the memes as one of the internet communication phenomena and their specific socio-linguistic features that make them vastly interesting to both linguists and sociologists. Memes, as defined, are part of the online culture; mostly jokes, that are presented through mediums such as image+text or GIF+text combinations or just plain text and are spread virally on all Internet-based platforms, changing along the way. This paper will only focus on memes that are a blend of a certain image and a piece of written text, as they are the most popular category. Apart from the references, they contain and the age-group they usually target, in their textual part, memes contain many features that are extremely interesting from linguistics' point of view. Memes use vernacular English, phrases from specific English dialects, puns and punning riddles, jargon, slang, shortenings and neologisms as well as patterned way of incorrect spelling and multiple, intentional or unintentional grammar and syntax mistakes. Nowadays, memes are also created in Macedonian. Memes in Macedonian, for the most part, share the linguistic and sociological skills as the memes originally created in English, though they contain other language features characteristic for the Macedonian language only. All of these features make memes a very complex, yet very useful and creative internet communicational tool that, in the recent years, has grabbed the intention of many scholars.

Keywords: memes, language, socio-linguistic features, English and Macedonian

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1. Introduction

In times such as these, when the Internet is the place people spend the most time on, it is only natural for a special kind of communication to develop – communication based on the Internet as a medium; a one that has its own specific features.

Social networks' users as well as Internet portals, forums, web-pages, blogs etc. have developed their own unique communicational system that might seem incomprehensible to people above a certain age, with little to no internet presence. Said system enables them to communicate freely their ideas, thoughts, jokes, funny anecdotes as well as their critiques towards their societies and political leaders in a much more creative way than the traditional. The said internet-communicational system mostly relies on the usage of emoticons, GIFs and memes.

Memes, as defined, are part of the online culture; mostly jokes, that are presented through mediums such as image+text or GIF+text combinations or just plain text and are spread virally on all Internet-based platforms, changing along the way. This paper will only focus on memes that are a blend of a certain image and a piece of written text, as they are the most popular category.

These memes contain many references and require an impressive amount of knowledge in order to be understood. They contain references from the popular culture, political and religious references, references specific to a region or a country and references to do with certain profession or field. Decoding and understanding said references both in the written part of the meme, as well as in the image used as a basis, is crucial in understanding and later, re-creating memes. Understanding these references is mostly linked to a certain age group, the so called *millenials*, who, due to the amount of time spent on the internet, understand, create, use and share memes most.

Apart from the references, they contain and the age-group they usually target, in their textual part, memes contain many features that are extremely interesting from a linguistics' point of view. Memes use vernacular English, phrases from specific English dialects, puns and punning riddles, jargon, slang, shortenings and neologisms as well as patterned way of incorrect spelling and multiple, intentional or unintentional grammar and syntax mistakes.

Nowadays, memes are also created in Macedonian. Memes in Macedonian, for the most part, share the linguistic and sociological skills as the memes originally created in English, though they contain other language features characteristic for the Macedonian language only.

All of these features make memes a very complex, yet very useful and creative internet communicational tool that, in the recent years, has grabbed the intention of many scholars.

The term meme was coined by English evolutionary biologist and author Richard Dokins in 1976. In his book, *The Selfish Gene*, Dokins used the term meme in order to denote all non-genetic behavior and cultural ideas that are passed on from person to person, spanning from language to the conventions of football (Davison). The term itself is based on the one Ancient Greek word „mīmēma" which can roughly be translated as "something that is imitated".

Years later, the same term was used to name a totally different thing -- something crucial to the ultimate understanding of the digital culture nowadays; a cultural digital artifact of a sort, that is gaining new meanings and functions as it is breaking rapidly into the mainstream, more and more with each passing day.

Similar to the original meme, the Internet meme of today also spreads from user to user throughout different Internet-based platforms. What is considered to be the first internet meme appeared in 1982. What we know as "the smiley face" emoticon nowadays, is regarded as the very first Internet meme created by Scott E. Fahlman[ii]. The meme ":-)" made of punctuation marks only was primarily created to mark sarcasm and jokes in official, formal internet e-mail correspondence. The idea pleased many and the smiley-emoticon became vastly popular in a matter of weeks. From one emoticon, to many more in just a few months, the memes evolved rapidly.

Though emoticons were popular long before the new millennium, memes in the format that is discussed in this paper, appeared much later. And although the memes in biology have been defined as early as in 1976, the definition, or at least the "academically riotous" definition of Internet memes appeared much later, in 2009. The said definition was proposed by Patrick Davison in his essay *The Language of Internet Memes*:

"An Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission." (122)

Nowadays, memes are seen as a virtual, online entertainment tool that is meant to be shared and creatively re-created.

Although memes can manifest in many different formats such as animated GIFs, plain text, videos, or a combination of a sill image and text, this paper will only focus on memes as still images with some sort of written text on them.

These memes are generally simplistic and are often with low quality. This is due to the fact that these still-image memes are not meant to be praised for their particular visual features. They can be single or multimodal, often containing additional texts or even other images that are to enhance the meme's popularity, understandability and spreading-potential. The image itself can be literally anything; from movies, tv-shows, political debates, drawings to photos of celebrities, pets, or animals in general – there is almost nothing that cannot serve as a basis for a meme.

In their textual part, these memes can contain fixed phrases, phrases created in a specific, expected style, or non-fixed text. The text can be as short or as long as the creator of the meme intends and sometimes, it can only be one single word like "Me". The text can be as a caption, of a sort or an imaginary dialogue.

It is important to note that memes encourage participation by "inviting" online users to create their own meme, inspired by a previous one, and contribute to the general entertaining or criticizing purposes of the original meme.

[ii] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scott_Fahlman

Another thing to note is that in the majority of cases, the original content and/or context of a specific still-image used in a meme, is vastly different than the one in the memes though it has at least one linking segment that makes the original context important for the overall understanding.

For instance, this meme built on an image originally cut from one of the scenes in Lord of the Rings movie franchise, in which Gandalf, one of the protagonists, proclaims "You shall not pass!", takes the original context and blends it with the ever-popular Donald Trump immigration campaign and the supposed "wall building".

If one compares some of the earliest memes and with ones created nowadays, one can easily see how memes of today are much more complex both in language and style, and how they contain many references and require comprehensive background knowledge.

2. The Internet as the perfect environment for creating and sharing memes

The internet-communication in recent years tends to lean towards ultimate efficiency, simplified content and as much information as possible in as little words as possible. Hence, the internet users, in their day-to-day communication, use many abbreviations, words with double meaning, fixed phrases that are flexible to be used in many different scenarios and many visual representations of their feelings and reactions.

The internet memes have been gloriously ruling this online setting that tends to prefer simple, relatively fast communication and content and information that require only a few seconds of attention in order to be understood. Their basic principles align perfectly with the ones dictated by the internet society.

In addition to being simple, yet complex and interesting enough for the audience, the memes are also highly customizable to individual needs, which is another reason why they are so very popular.

Apart from being used for entertaining purposes only, memes are used more and more in marketing campaigns. Memes nowadays are quite well-known, which makes them are a perfect online tool for creating a successful online campaign that would be eye-catching. One of the first companies that recognized the marketing potential in memes was Gucci. Gucci's creating marketing team has taken advantage of memes' popularity in multiple

occasions. And every time, the result was a well-received Instagram post with tens of thousands of likes.

3. Issues with Macedonian terminology

For the longest time, memes were only created in English. Every popular meme, regardless of where it originated from, was in English.

While this made it so very convenient for comprehension purposes, it also brought a lot of terminological issuer for other, especially smaller languages.

The term "meme/s" itself, unfortunately, has no official translation in Macedonian. Even though Macedonian internet users see, share and create memes on a daily basis, in the official dictionary of the Macedonian language, there is no term that corresponds to the English "meme/s"

Lacking a proper solution to this terminological issue, the Macedonian users of Twitter have spontaneously started to use the terms „меме/мемиња", which are now considered right, at least on that particular network.

On Facebook, on the other hand, there is no unitary terminological solution. Facebook users, alongside „меме/мемиња"utilize different terms such as „мим(с)"; „меме(с)" and „мимови".

A final solution to this issue is yet to be found. Until then, internet users from Macedonia are left to wonder for a proper term for what they see every day online.

4. Research

For the aim of the paper, the research is divided into two parts: the sociological features of the memes and the linguistic features of the memes.

4.1 Sociological features of memes
In the past decade, memes have turned into a complex internet-communication phenomenon that has since caught the attention of many world renowned scholars who study their sociological and linguistic aspects. What makes memes especially interesting for sociologists is the profile of internet users who (re)create them, share them and engage with them through commenting; the age-group these users belong to; their profession and country of residence; and the references that make the memes one group's "inside jokes". According to these parameters, the linguistic analysis was made and the results that follow and their discussion will be divided and explained for each parameter individually.

4.2 Who uses memes: age-group of users
Numerous studies conducted in recent years show that memes are generally used by one specific age-group: teenagers to 20-something millennials.

This is mostly due to the sole fact that young people belonging to the aforementioned age-group spend much more time on the internet than their older society members. They have had Internet access since they were quite young so they are used to the new

communicational rules that internet correspondence has established. They also have no problems in understanding the context behind memes and the references from the pop-culture.

The youth worldwide shares interests, hobbies, problems, everyday-life similarities etc. They, in a way, speak the same language. They generally listen to a certain type of music, watch the same popular TV-shows, reality shows and movies, read much of the same types of books, and follow similar artists, politicians, photographers, Instagram influencers and celebrities. Thus, they understand each other and they understand each other's memes.

Memes are a reflection of societal diversity, best described by confused parents trying to understand what their kids find so funny in a comic-like post that makes no sense to them.

4.3 The pop-culture and its influence on memes

As mentioned earlier, memes contain a great deal of references from the popular culture. Everything from popular movie references, to music, artists, celebrities, to tv and reality shows can and is included in memes.

Understanding these references is crucial in the deriving-meaning process of deconstructing a meme, which adds additionally to memes being considered an "inside joke" of a certain group.

For the ones that lack the background knowledge needed in order to understand the content and implication of a certain meme, there are web-pages such as KnowYourMeme, that offer a detailed explanation of the meme itself, the context, the reference and subtleties needed in order to derive proper meaning. Such explanations make memes more understandable and thus, more approachable to every age group. Still, although the explanation can be found quite easily, it is though that having the joke explained makes it less funny. Decoding the meme and its content and trying to come up with a similar meme is part of the fun and one of the reasons why memes are so vastly popular.

4.4 Memes with references from certain professions

As established earlier, the context is extremely important when it comes to understanding a meme. Regardless of what the context is, i.e. if the context is to do with the popular-culture or a certain profession or a field, understanding the context guarantees full content comprehension.

Just like people from a certain field or profession would use jargon and specific phrases and words in their day-to-day communication, memes made by people from a certain field include words and phrases characteristic to it. Thus, people who have no knowledge about the specific point of interest to do with certain professional field would not understand the memes created by one "member" of the field, which again goes to show that memes are in fact "inside jokes". The example bellow shows this perfectly: People who have little or no knowledge about Artificial Intelligence, would not understand, let alone find funny this particular meme.

4.5 Memes around the globe: Understanding the context to do with specific country and/or region

Understanding the context and the background information to do with a specific meme leads to yet another important division: memes to do with a specific country and/or region.

Memes are created all around the globe. On each corner, in each and every country, in every region, city, town there are certain specific characteristics, traditions, cuisine, customs, moral and ethical norms as well as political and religious background. These features are unique and quite different around the world. Hence, sometimes, a meme that contains a reference specific to a certain country or region will make no sense to someone not living there.

All the different aspects of people's everyday living in a certain part of the world, included in a meme, add to the general content incomprehensibility for the rest.

This is easily noticeable in the, so called, Slavic memes. These memes are full of references that might seem queer to someone living in a non-Slavic country. The example bellow goes to show that sometimes, when you understand the correct context and you have all the needed background information, you do not even need words in order to derive meaning.

4.6 Memes that contain political and religious references

Politics is yet another source of inspiration for meme-creating. Nowadays, every great political meeting is followed by hundreds of memes. Current elections, faulty party policies, questionable decisions, and new laws are also included in memes around the globe.

For instance, after the recent meeting of two of this world's greatest leaders – the USA president Donald Trump and North Korea's president Kim Yung Un, literally hundreds of memes appeared online.

5. The linguistic features of Memes

The textual part of the memes discussed in the paper bears unique linguistic features that make it so very compelling for modern linguists around the world who study the language used in memes, the mistakes that are made, the sentence structure and their (in)correctness, the orthography, the abbreviations, the linguistic patterns etc.

As an important part of the meme, the textual part, that is ever so needed in order to derive meaning from memes, as well as to continue the thread by creating a new meme, must be studied thoroughly.

5.1 Linguistic creativity

The language is creative by itself. By using the language on a daily basis, we, as speakers, employ language creativity regularly. This creativity is also reflected in memes, since memes generally reflect the language used on a daily basis.

The creators of memes oftentimes create their own words, i.e. neologisms; they use clever metaphors, slogans and fixed phrasal expressions; they make intentional swaps between lexical items; they employ associative techniques etc.

All of these elements show how much of a linguistic creativity is employed in the textual part of memes.

The linguistic creativity is especially prominent is the memes that have their own rules for word order and spelling – rules that do not correspond to the rules of the Standard English. This is evident in the so called LOLspeak. This sort of internet dialect has its own rules that are to be obliged.

LOLspeak, defined by Urban Dictionary as *Misspelling on purpose; writing words with different letters than the original spelling.* [iii]

What's interesting to note about LOLspeak is that although the words are spelt differently, when read aloud, they sound the same as the original ones:

Dat wood bee awsoem, srsly dued!
*That would be awesome, seriously dude!*

[iii] Sourse: https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=LolSpeak on 23.6.18.

Other than the deliberate misspellings (teh, ennyfing) LOLspeak also includes unique verb forms (gotted, can haz), and queer word reduplication (fastfastfast).

5.2 Everyday English in Memes

Memes in English are created by a huge number of internet users that come from many English-speaking and not-English-speaking countries around the world. In their day-to-day communication, these users use informal, everyday English; a dialect of it; language filled with neologisms, obscene words, abbreviations, slang etc. Their everyday language is reflected in the memes they create.

Textual patterns in memes rarely follow Standard English rules, which is especially helpful for non-native speakers and learners of English, who, through these memes, can see the dialects of English and English in real-life scenarios in all its glory. This could potentially help them increase their understandings of English and extend their vocabulary.
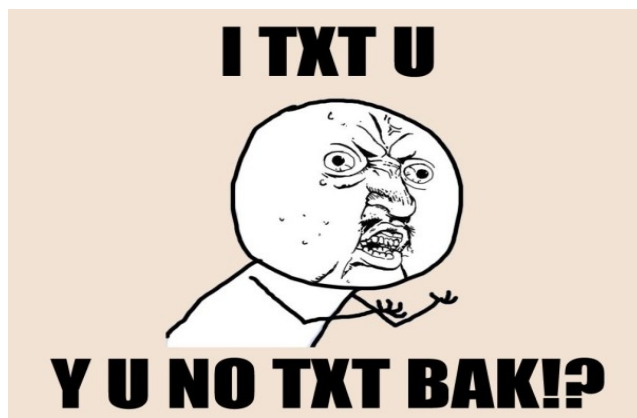
5.3 Abbreviations

Abbreviations, as part of the informal language used in memes, are another important linguistic feature. Many a time, abbreviations are used in memes in order to convey meaning in as little words/symbols as possible.

The abbreviations used in memes come in a few types:
A. Acronyms, such as:
   ASAP – As Soon As Possible
   FYI – For Your Information
   LOL – Laughing Out Loud
B. Shortenings that can stand on their own as a separate word
   Flu – Influenza
   App – Application
   Ad -- Advertisement
C. Shortenings that cannot stand on their own as a separate word
   Feb. – February

5.4 Intentional and unintentional mistakes

One of the most prominent linguistic features of memes is the multitude of language mistakes occurring in the textual part. These mistakes can be intentional or unintentional. The former are deliberately made by the author in order to retain the original meme's integrity and format. This is the case with the meme "One X boi" shown below, where the word "boy" is deliberately misspelled in order to add to the mocking, joke factor. The latter, on the other hand, are made unintentionally.

The latter are due to the limited linguistic competences of the author/creator of the meme or are simple typos.

The unintentional mistakes are most commonly made by non-native speakers of English who make similar mistakes in their oral production of the language as well. Such mistakes include:

- Using *do* instead of *does* for third person singular in Present Simple (He go to work.);
- Using a verb in Past Simple after *did* or *didn't* (Did you ate?);
- Using *have* instead of *has* for third person singular;
- Mistaking *they're* for *their*, *he's* for *his*, *your* for *you're* and vice versa;
- Using double negatives (I didn't eat nothing);
- Counting the uncountable nouns;
- Using *who* instead of *whom*.

6. Conclusion

Memes, as internet based, entertainment entities that are shared virally through social media and other internet platforms and invite participation and contribution by their audience, are an important part of the modern internet communication. They are used by the 20-somethings, so called millenials, and teenagers who generate and share memes and engage with them through commenting, critiquing and re-creating.

Memes can be divided and studied in separate categories, according to their content and the pop-cultural, regional or professional-field references they include.

They are mostly created in English, although in recent years, memes in other languages are growing more popular. The memes in English have numerous linguistic characteristics such as the usage of informal variety of language, abbreviations, puns, intentional and unintentional mistakes and (mis)spelling patterns. Due to these features, they are sometimes difficult to be understood, especially by non-native speakers and English learners.

Non-native speakers who create memes in English oftentimes make mistakes. These unintentional mistakes due to the limited linguistic competence are very similar to the mistakes said speakers make in their oral use of English in their day-to-day communication. Native speakers also make mistakes, though their mistakes are usually deliberate (in order to maintain the original format and pattern of the meme) or typos.

Mistakes and similar language features are also present in the memes created in Macedonian. Growing in popularity in recent years, these memes have very similar socio-linguistic features as the English ones.

With all things considered, one can most certainly claim that memes and all of their unique socio-linguistic features are something that is worth further academic research, both in the linguistic as well as in sociological field.

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