

A Pragmatic Approach of Memes Created in Relation to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract : Internet memes are an element of computer mediated communication and an important part of online culture that combines text and image in order to generate meaning. This term coined by Richard Dawkins refers to more than a mere way to briefly communicate ideas or emotions, thus naming a complex and an intensely perpetuated phenomenon in the virtual environment. This paper approaches memes as a cultural artefact and a virtual trope that mirrors societal concerns and issues, and analyses the pragmatics of their use. Memes have to be analysed in series, usually relating to some image macros, which is proof of the interplay between imitation and creativity in the memes' writing process. We believe that their potential to become viral relates to three key elements: adaptation to context, reference to a successful meme series, and humour (jokes, irony, sarcasm), with various pragmatic functions. The study also uses the concept of multimodality and stresses how the memes' text interacts with the image, discussing three types of relations: symmetry, amplification, and contradiction. Moreover, the paper proves that memes could be employed as speech acts with illocutionary force, when the interaction between text and image is enriched through the connection to a specific situation. The features mentioned above are analysed in a corpus that consists of memes related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This corpus shows them to be highly adaptable to context, which helps build the feeling of connection and belonging in an otherwise tremendously fragmented world. Some of them are created based on well-known image macros, and their humour results from an intricate dialogue between texts and contexts. Memes created in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic can be considered speech acts and are often used as such, as proven in the paper. Consequently, this paper tackles the key features of memes, makes a thorough analysis of the memes sociocultural, linguistic, and situational context, and emphasizes their intertextuality, with special accent on their illocutionary potential.

Keywords : context, memes, multimodality, speech acts

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