The Pragma-Stylistics of Internet Memes


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Abstract

Image macros are a particular kind of internet meme which consist of patterned combinations of image and text which, through widespread (re-)production, have become an established sub-genre, cohering around a certain fixed set of features, called ‘cohesive quiddities’ (Segev et al, 2015). The stylistic features of these incredibly popular online texts have not been described until now, despite the fact that memes operate under very strict stylistic rules and are subject to great user creativity. This study provides a pragma-stylistic analysis of five of the most popular image macro families, as well as their most liked and disliked iterations. An existing framework for the analysis of internet memes (Shifman, 2014) is adopted and refined and applied in a qualitative analysis of the data. In order to account for the reasons behind their (dis)approval in the meme community, this study incorporates into the model additional concepts from humour studies and from Goffman, including ‘keying’ (1979/1981) and the distinction between ‘author’ and ‘animator’ (1974/1986). In providing a pragma-stylistic account of image macros, this chapter advances the analytical toolkit available to stylisticians dealing with digital texts and contexts.

Main Text

1 Introduction

Although the term ‘meme’ has an interesting etymology, it is most recently applied to the proliferation of replicated and re-worked multimodal digital texts. This study focuses on a particular kind of meme, the ‘image macro’, which Davison defines as “a set of stylistic rules for adding text to images” (2012, p.123), adding that, “what is replicated from instance to
instance is the set of formal characteristics” (2012, p.130). Given that image macros are defined according to their stylistic and formal properties, this study aims to ascertain what those are, by applying an analytical model (Shifman 2014) to five popular image macro memes.

While internet memes have underlying stylistic rules, new media technology allows for user adaptation across each iteration of a meme. This paradox between internet memes’ capacity for both cohesion across iterations and, at the same time, uniqueness, has been noted by several scholars (e.g. Davison, 2012; Segev et al, 2015). I argue that the tension between formal patterns and creative alterations makes internet memes prime candidates for stylistic analysis, where style is understood as a result of patterned ‘choices’ in expression (e.g. Verdonk 2002, pp.5-6). Until now, memes have not been subject to stylistic analysis despite, I argue, their fit with the core concern of stylistics: linguistic creativity, as expressed through users’ grasp of complex pragma-stylistic rules and ability to break those rules – in the ‘right’ ways – to serve rhetorical effects. Little attention has been paid to the pragmatics of internet memes (i.e. how they are used), which the present study goes some way to addressing.

By looking at the most and least like iterations of popular memes, this study gains some understanding of what constitutes a successful or unsuccessful meme as judged by discourse participants themselves, leading towards a pragma-stylistic understanding of image macros. In defining ‘pragmastylistics’, Hickey observed how, “utterances with the same, or virtually the same, meaning may differ in their linguistic form and situational appropriateness, and these differences may have either stylistic or pragmatic explanations” (1993, p.578). Shifman’s (2014) framework, enhanced with additional Goffmanian concepts such as the ‘author/animator’ distinction (1974/1986) and ‘keying’ (1979/1981), enable me to explain how and why different versions of the same meme might be deemed acceptable, and ultimately lead to an improved understanding of what a meme is or should be, as well as what kind of discursive practice is deemed (in)appropriate or praiseworthy in meme culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The meaning of ‘meme’

Although ‘memes’ now popularly refer to replicated online content, the term has an older and broader significance which is necessary to outline in order to understand its current status. The term ‘meme’ was coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in his influential book The Selfish Gene (1976), by shortening the Greek word mimema, meaning ‘something which is imitated’. The assonance with ‘gene’ served to emphasise Dawkins’ proposal that ‘meme’ describe a unit of human cultural evolution analogous to the gene. In Dawkins’ view, like genes, memes spread through human culture by imitation and a process of Darwinian selection. In the extreme form of this metaphor (UNIT OF CULTURE is a GENE) ideas, tunes, poems, fashions and behaviours replicate, mutate and exist above and beyond the human individual, who is nothing more than an infected carrier. The last two decades of the 20th Century saw the emergence of Memetics as field dedicated to understand the spread of information and culture through memes, culminating in the relatively short-lived Journal of Memetics, 1997-2005.

Taking Dawkins’ metaphor too literally can have serious implications for understanding (or misunderstanding) the transference of information and human culture. For a start, evolutionary biology is not analogous to culture and society. Viewing humans as ‘hosts’ (Blackmore, 1999) undermines the role of human agency in cultural and informational production, a point made by several critics of Memetics, including Searle (1997, p.105):

…the spread of ideas though imitation requires the whole apparatus of human consciousness and intentionality. Ideas have to be understood and interpreted. And they have to be understood and judged as desirable or undesirable, in order to be treated as candidates for imitation or rejection
The whole process normally involves language with all its variability and subtlety. In short, the transmission of ideas through imitation is totally unlike the transmission of genes through reproduction, so the analogy between genes and memes is misleading from the start.

As well as providing a sound critique of the analogy of genes and memes, Searle makes two important points pertinent to my thesis in this chapter: notwithstanding the misleading origins of the term ‘meme’, the spread of ideas is performed through a) the subtleties of language, and b) processes of interpretation and appraisal, which are vital for their transmission and further spread. Thus, it would appear that in order to fully understand memes (in their current online form), we must consider their textual features and pragmatic functions.

2.2. Internet memes

While the controversies waged around the meme in the academic field of Mimetics, the term gained fresh currency in non-academic circles, where it was adopted by internet users to describe ‘catchy’ and widely propagated ideas and phenomena” (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007, p.201). Of course, the internet is awash with texts of this sort, never more so than since the development of Web 2.0 where users began to participate more fully by liking, sharing, creating and reformulating multimodal content. As Shifman notes, “[w]hat Internet users seem to have grasped – and Richard Dawkins couldn’t have imagined back in 1976 – is that the meme is the best concept to encapsulate some of the most fundamental aspects of the Internet in general, and of the so-called Web 2.0 culture in particular” (2014, p.18). Indeed, Dawkins has since remarked that the term he coined has been subject to memetic transformation in its application to online discourse or, in his words, has ‘mutated’ (2013).

Internet memes can be distinguished from more general cultural memes by their propensity to user adaptation (a feature of new media). Knobel and Lankshear (2007) identified specific characteristics pertaining to successful internet memes: intertextuality, anomalous juxtapositions and humour. However, because they do not engage with humour studies, like most other meme researchers, they fail to recognise the correlation between humour and anomalous juxtaposition on the one hand, and humour and intertextuality on the other.

Ignored in most internet meme research is the great body of literature in humour studies which supports ‘incongruity theory’ (Dynel, 2013), the idea that anomalous juxtapositions are a fundamental feature of joke-bearing texts. One exception (Lou 2017) explores the use of humorous incongruities in internet memes which contain the text, “[That awkward moment] when…” and complete the idea using an image to create a multimodal simile (Lou 2017). The researcher found that for these image macros, their “communicative and rhetorical function […] is to make a humorous comparison between an everyday activity and a strange photo” (2017, p.121). I argue this incongruity function frequently operates in image macros in general and, in Section 4.2.3, I draw on theories of humour to demonstrate how textual incongruities are an essential precursor to the memes’ humorous potential and success.

While Knobel and Lankshear identify intertextuality as significant, the link between it and meme’s humour is not identified. Other scholars identify specific kinds of humour as prevalent in internet memes, namely absurdity and parody (Jenkins et al, 2009; Shifman, 2011). Indeed, Shifman remarks that, “[t]he singular attributes of the internet – on which copying and imitating texts have become workaday activities – turned [parody and pastiche], previously produced by the dedicated few, into a cultural logic shared and employed by the many” (2011, pp.190-1). While it is recognised as significant to internet culture, parody is discussed without recourse to a rigorous definition. Simpson (2013) advances one such account of parody, defining it as a form that involves replicating formal characteristics of an anterior discourse. This study demonstrates how image macros adapt formal features of anterior discourses to create intertextual references, which can result in the parody that is so central to meme humour.
Recognising their status as a ‘conceptual troublemaker’ (Shifman 2013), she advances a comprehensive 3-part definition of the Internet meme:

a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance, which
b) were created with an awareness of each other, and
c) were circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the internet by many users

(Shifman, 2014, p.41)

This definition captures the distinction between an individual iteration of an internet meme text and the group of texts with which it coheres; what Segev et al call a ‘meme family’ (2015). In fact, Shifman helpfully distinguishes between a viral text and a meme on the basis of – what I call – ‘iterations’: “Whereas the viral comprises a singular cultural unit (such as a video, photo or joke) that propagates in many copies, an Internet meme is always a collection of texts” (2014, p.57) which inspire “extensive creative user engagement in the form of parody, pastiche, mash-ups or other derivative work” (Shifman, 2011, p.190, author’s italics). Shifman’s definition invites a stylistic investigation of memes, as style is perceived as the result of patterned choices in language production.

Despite their popularity amongst digital communicators and their potential to offer insights to linguists ‘of all stripes’ (Lou, 2017), internet memes have received limited attention in linguistic research, with several isolated studies using a cognitive (Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2017; Lou, 2017) or social lens (Blommaert, 2015; Blommaert, 2018; Varis and Blommaert, 2015). Varis and Blommaert (2015) emphasise the ‘phatic’ function of memes and viral texts, whose meaning may matter less than their expression of group membership. Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017) and Lou (2017) analyse a range of image macros, describing the processes a reader goes through to create meaning from the multimodal texts.

While all these studies recognise the significance of memes’ interactive contexts, little attention has been paid to the reception of internet memes and what this might reveal about stylistic and pragmatic rules surrounding their use.

3.0 Methods

3.1 Analytical framework

As well as proposing a comprehensive definition of memes, Shifman (2013; 2014) also identifies three ‘mimetic dimensions’, along memes can be imitated: content, form and/or stance. She describes how content refers to the “ideas and ideologies conveyed”, form is “the physical incarnation of the message, perceived through our senses” and stance encapsulates “the ways in which addressers position themselves in relation the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees and other potential speakers” (Shifman 2014, p.40). These dimensions help delineate the ways in which memes can be reproduced in terms of how they carry and shape ideas and assert positions; as such, Shifman’s three mimetic dimensions provide the framework for the pragma-stylistic analysis in Section 4.

Recognising that ‘stance’ is a very broad category, Shifman (2014, pp.40-1) divides it into three sub-dimensions, drawing on other concepts from other scholars, many of which are already in use by scholars of pragmatics and linguistics in general:

i) participation structures, indicating who is entitled to participate and how (Philips, 1972)

ii) keying, which captures the tone and style of communication (Goffman, 1974/1986), and

iii) communicative functions, according Jakobson’s (1960) typology.

The toolkit Shifman advances has enormous analytical potential, yet her application of it is limited to a few pages (2014, pp. 42-54) and does not specify in detail the textual and stylistic
features that indicate content, form, and stance. She recognises her work as a ‘primer’ (Shifman 2014: 8) for more in-depth analyses, which this study aims to provide.

Furthermore, I propose enhancing Shifman’s framework with additional Goffmanian concepts for understanding memes in interaction. For example, Shifman’s (2014, p.40) brief description of i) participation structures can be enhanced through Goffman’s account of the “production format” of an utterance (1979/1981, p.145). Goffman notes that the terms ‘speaker’ and ‘hearer’ are not nuanced enough to capture the complex roles that participants actually enact in discourse. As such, amongst the various types of speaker, he distinguishes between an ‘animator’ as “an individual active in the role of utterance production” and an ‘author’ as “someone who has selected the sentiments that are being expressed and the words in which they are encoded” (1979/1981, p.144). These will prove useful concepts in the analysis of image macros (Section 4), where ‘author’ refers to the person who creates each iteration of an image macro (including the overlaying meme phrase), and ‘animator’ refers to the character who features in the image macro and is attributed with voicing the meme phrase.

Shifman also lists ii) keying as significant in the enactment of stance through memes, but the concept’s relevance to memes is not developed in detail, which I do so more fully here. Within Goffman’s Frame Analysis (1974/1986), frames are used to organise experiences so that participants can define situations. Keying, then, is the process by which we understand one frame in terms of another. Goffman’s primary example of keying is ‘make-believe’, at which ‘playfulness’ is at the heart; that is, “the relatively brief intrusion of unserious mimicry during interaction between one individual and others” (1974/1986, p.48). Forty years ago, he recognised “the growing use of replicative” media (1974/1986, p.68) and identified ‘technical redoings’, which include recordings, demonstrations and simulations, as additional examples of keying. Brooks points out that Goffman’s Frame Analysis “afford[s] strong potential for integrating the study of virtual action and interaction with much of what is already known about social action and interaction more generally”, while keying in particular can explain how “people interact with simulated images and processes” (2007, p.10). The concept of keying has clear significance for digital discourse and mimetic practice. Based on Goffman’s understanding of different performances of the same play, I suggest individual iterations of memes are, likewise, “keyings of a common model” (1974/1986, p.78).

The last indicator of stance in Shifman’s model is requires less elaboration but some explanation, iii) communicative functions. Jakobson proposed six fundamental functions of language and, as they will underscore the analysis of image macros, they are summarised here. The referential function is the role of language to denote something i.e. to carry referential meaning. Jakobson describes the expressive function as, “a direct expression of the speaker’s attitude towards what he is speaking about. It tends to produce the impression of a certain emotion whether true or feigned” (1960, p.354). While the expressive function is more focused towards the addressee than the referential, the conative function is fully directed towards the addressee and usually finds its form in the vocative and imperative moods (indicating an ‘addressed recipient’ in Goffmanian terms). Less relevant to the present data are “messages intended to establish, prolong or discontinue communication” (1960, p.355), which serve a phatic function (although see Varis and Blommaert [2015] on the phatic function of Internet memes and viral texts). “[S]peaking of language” serves a metalingual function (1960, p.356), whereby speakers discuss the code itself. Finally, and most importantly for stylisticians, is the poetic function which is fulfilled by focussing “on the message for its own sake” (1960, p.356) and many decades of stylistic research has demonstrated how marked choices in expression serve to foreground the message itself and to prolong the attention paid to it by addressees. The poetic function, as Jakobson and scholars in stylistics argue, is particularly prominent in literary texts, but can also be found in other communicative contexts. I argue that highly competent
authors of memes are skilled at using the genre to fulfil the poetic function and will demonstrate this in Section 4.2.3.

Incorporating Shifman’s three dimensions in their quantitative study of internet ‘meme families’, Segev et al identify ‘cohesive quiddities’; that is, “recurring features that are unique to each family and constitute its singular essence” (Segev et al, 2015, p.3). The analysis of image macros in Section 4 will use Shifman’s model to demonstrate precisely which features contribute towards a meme family’s cohesive quiddities and which features are open to user choice.

3.2 Data Selection: creating a meme pool

In order to investigate the pragma-stylistics of popular internet memes, I have sourced the top five most popular image macro families (Phase 1) and identified the most liked and the most disliked iterations of each (Phase 2), leading to a ‘meme pool’ (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007) of ten image macros, sufficient for detailed qualitative analysis. As Segev et al acknowledge, identifying the most popular meme families is an impossible task, “due to the dynamic nature of memes and the different methods for evaluating their popularity (view counts, likes/votes, number of derivations, number of mentions in search results, and so on)” (2015, p.7). Inevitably, the memes selected for analysis are indicative of their popularity during a certain time period, and by a certain measure. Unlike previous researchers, I do not believe in using offline (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007) or academic (Segev et al, 2015) sources as indicators of Internet memes’ popularity, as this can lead to circularity in the research. Despite their accessibility, it is best to refrain from using popular search engines (e.g. Google) to select data, as they provide manipulated and unreplicable results (Lew, 2009). Instead, this research employs online user-generated indicators of meme popularity, both to select the meme families (Phase 1) and then to select the individual image macros (Phase 2).

3.2.1 Phase 1. Selecting meme families

In order to identify the most popular ‘families’ of image macros, I used Memegenerator.net. Launched in March 2009, it was the first online meme generator (a website for users to create memes by selecting from established images, or uploading their own, and adding the text of their choosing). This website has a constantly-updated page dedicated to the ‘most popular’ image macro templates ‘of all time’, which at the time of research included the following top five:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Image macro family</th>
<th>No. of Likes</th>
<th>No. of Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Y U No</td>
<td>4109</td>
<td>2.5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Futurama Fry</td>
<td>8246</td>
<td>1.8 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Most Interesting Man in the World</td>
<td>6819</td>
<td>2.1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Philosoraptor</td>
<td>12104</td>
<td>837k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Condescending Wonka</td>
<td>4084</td>
<td>2.1 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The top five most popular image macro families, according to Memegenerator.net

I chose the top five most popular image macro families, as that would be enough for a detailed qualitative analysis of their properties. In being one of the original websites for creating image macros, Memegenerator.net’s all-time popularity records go back as far as is possible, which ensures that the resultant popular meme families are those that have persisted in the years since image macro creation began. As you can see from the data Memegenerator.net provide, the popularity ranking is based on the number of ‘likes’ from users for the meme family, as well
as the number of ‘posts’, meaning individual instantiations of that meme family. Unfortunately, Memegenerator.net do not make clear how these two factors are weighted in ranking the meme families.

3.2.2 Phase 2. Selecting the un/popular uses
The next phase of the data selection involved identifying most liked and disliked versions of each meme family, which would lead to a meme pool of ten image macros. This phase was carried out using Knowyourmeme.com, an extensive online database of all kinds of Internet memes, including image macros. Much like a wiki, any registered member can submit a meme to this independently-owned website. The editorial staff and moderators evaluate each submission by further researching the online presence of the meme for confirmation or invalidation. Site users vote and comment on the content, feeding back into the site’s research. Because of its comprehensiveness and the fact that its content is verified and voted on by Internet users, Knowyourmeme.com has been used as a source in several other academic studies of memes (e.g. Ryan Vickery, 2014; Segev et al, 2015; Lou, 2017).

I used Knowyourmeme.com’s search function to find the most liked and disliked version of each of the five meme families, by searching for each meme family by name and filtering for images-only, to limit the results to image macros. The results for each meme family could be ordered by highest then lowest scores, which are based, respectively, on the number of likes and dislikes that each image macro has received from the website’s users; in this way, I selected the most liked and disliked iterations of each meme family. Other researchers of digital communication have found that various online platforms’ “in-built popularity measurements” (Shifman, 2011, p.190), are useful indicators of user-informed approbation of the data (see also Blommaert, 2018). The method resulted in a meme pool of ten image macros made up of the most liked and most disliked iterations of top five image macro families (see Table 3), constituting the data analysed in Section 4.

It is worth noting that using likes and dislikes to select the specific image macros to be analysed meant that ‘middle-of-the-road’ instantiations of these meme families were overlooked. i.e. image macros that played by the rules, but did not break any rules in ways that please or displeased other users. In previous studies of memes (see Section 2.2), researchers have tended to self-select ‘typical’ examples of image macros for analysis. What this study’s method offers, in contrast, is a meme pool that – in its inclusion of approved rule-breakers and disapproved rule-breakers – gets closer to identifying what the rules that govern meme practice actually are.

4. Pragma-Stylistic Analysis

4.1. The meme families
In this section, I apply Shifman’s framework to the 5 most popular meme families, discussing their typical form, content and the kinds of stance they perform. Throughout, I refer to the meme families in the abstract, using my own ‘meme literacy’ (Shifman, 2014, p.100) and Knowyourmeme.com as sources for their descriptions. A summary analysis of each meme family’s features can be found in Table 2.

The most popular meme family in the meme pool is ‘Y U No’, which usually features a stick figure character with his hands in an open, pleading, gesture (see Figure 1 for an adapted version). The character is drawn from Japanese manga (Oku 2009) and common to a series of other ‘rage comic’ memes. In this case, the character is animator for the phrase ‘Y U No’, an abbreviation for ‘Why do/are you not…’, which is completed with an action that the meme ‘author’ wishes the ‘addressed recipient’ (Goffman, 1979/1981, p.134) would do. Therefore,
in terms of stance, this meme family performs the Jakobsonian communicative functions that are expressive (of the users’ desires towards the addressee) and conative (engaging the addressee in a negated, but desired activity). The referential function, however, is variable as the meme generator can insert the desired activity. Usefully, the abbreviated nature of the meme phrase, ‘Y U No’ means there are no auxiliary verbs that compel the author to use a specific tense or aspect. The cohesive quiddities of this meme family, then, are the stick-man character, the adaptable phrase ‘Y U No’ and the expressive and conative functions it performs, leaving the referential function open to change.

The second most popular meme family is Futurama Fry, which features a close-up still from the cartoon series Futurama, in which the character Fry has semi-closed eyes and gazes into middle distance. This image is overlaid with the phrasal template, “Not sure if X or Y”, where the alternatives in the coordinated conditional construction are the meme generator’s choice, to a certain extent; X or Y must be filled by a subject complement or a complete clause. The subject of the sentence is elided, leaving the reader to interpret Fry’s confused expression and assume the character is the subject who is ‘not sure if…’, animating the meme author’s words. The first half of a coordinated construction is usually placed at the top of the image and the second half at the bottom of the image. The use of two alternative subject complements arranged on either side of the image allows for the visual juxtaposition of incongruous elements and, therefore, has joke-bearing potential (Section 2.2). In terms of this meme’s communicative function, the epistemic uncertainty manifest in the conditional construction and replicated in the character’s squinting expression fulfils an expressive function (uncertainty), while the referential function is again up to the user to complete.

The third most popular family in the present study’s meme pool is known as ‘The Most Interesting Man in the World’. The image is always the same still from a Dos Equis beer advert featuring US actor Jonathan Goldsmith in a suit jacket, gazing directly at the camera, a beer within reach. In the original television advert, he used a phrase that inspires the phrasal template in this meme family, “I don’t always X, but when I do, I Y”. The predicates that form X and Y are chosen by the meme author, according to the referential function s/he wants to perform. Generally, the format dictates that the predicate Y is a very cool and interesting way of doing X. The implication is that the speaker ‘I’ is an alignment of the meme generator, the author, and The Most Interesting Man in the World’s identity, the animator. Thus, the propositional content should reflect this, with Y being a cool way of doing X, performing an expressive function of proclaiming the subject’s status as cool. Once again the form has textual and visual cohesive quiddities (the image, the phrasal template), and the function of the meme is expressive, with the referential variation open to change within certain parameters.

‘Philosoraptor’ is the fourth most popular family in the meme pool, and invariably features a green dinosaur head, whose talon rests on his upturned chin meditatively. His name is a portmanteau of his species, Velociraptor, and his philosophical nature. This character always co-occurs with a ‘philosophical’ conditional question of the meme author’s choosing, using the phrasal template ‘If X, [then] Y?’. The apodosis X (the condition) is placed at the top of the image, followed a protasis Y (the consequence) at the bottom of the image, expressed as a question to elicit further consideration about the logical connection between the two. Philosoraptor’s musings are usually far from philosophical, however, and simply present a logical conundrum or an incongruity between two states of affairs, such as “If actions are stronger than words, [picture of Philosoraptor] why is the pen mightier than the sword?”. Once again, the phrasal template with slots for X and Y, two alternatives placed at either side of the image, leads to a multimodal contrasting of two situations, for humourous effect. The Philosoraptor character is used as the animator to express this conundrum, which originates from the meme author. In relation to Jakobson’s communicative functions, the referential function is very malleable, while the expression of puzzlement is a constant. As the example
above demonstrates, Philosoraptor’s musings can be of the linguistic variety, and thus may also perform a meta-lingual function.

The fifth and last meme family in this study is ‘Condescending Wonka’, which always features a still of Gene Wilder in the 1971 film, *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. With his head propped on his head and his gaze directed at someone or something, half smiling, it appears the character is listening, bemused. The text of this meme is more variable, but often begins with, “So [tell me more about how]…” and is completed with a subordinate clause that contains an action that is deemed implausible by the author. In employing the imperative to ask the addressee to elaborate on a point, this meme performs the conative function. Once again, the character is an animator for the meme author’s attitude, which serves an expressive function, whereby the author expresses condescension or disalignment with Wonka’s addressee. Participant roles are particularly complex in this meme, as the author quotes the animator, who quotes the target of the condescension. Condescending Wonka is a meme that invites parody, as it always quotes an anterior discourse (see Section 2.2). In this way, it also offers a form for ‘rekeying’ (Goffman, 1974/1986, p.81) a primary frame within the mimetic frame, in order to take a critical and condescending stance.

The preceding account of the top five image macro families demonstrates that there are clear patterns in how image macros are formed and function, summarised in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meme Family</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Stance</th>
<th>Cohesive Quiddities</th>
<th>Variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Y U No</td>
<td>The idea that the addressee is obliged to do something and they have not.</td>
<td>Visual: stick man with hands outspread&lt;br&gt;Verbal: ‘Y U no…’ completed with action.</td>
<td>expressive (of the users’ perceived obligation of the addressee) and conative (engaging the addressee in a negated, but desired activity)</td>
<td>Character: stick man&lt;br&gt;Phrase: ‘Y U no…’&lt;br&gt;Functions: expressive of obligation and conative of addressee’s obliged action</td>
<td>The predicate i.e. referential function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Futurama Fry</td>
<td>The idea that a state of affairs may be perceived in two ways.</td>
<td>Visual: Still of Fry from Futurama gazing off-camer squinting&lt;br&gt;Verbal: ‘Not sure if X or Y’</td>
<td>expressive (of uncertainty, due to perceived similarity between two states of affairs)</td>
<td>Character: Fry from Futurama&lt;br&gt;Phrase: ‘Not sure if X or Y’&lt;br&gt;Function: expressive of uncertainty and perceived similarity</td>
<td>The coordinated subject complement/ clauses i.e. referential function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The Most Interesting Man in the World</td>
<td>The idea that the meme generator has a cooler way, Y, of doing X.</td>
<td>Visual: Still of man in Dos Equis advert sitting at a table with a beer&lt;br&gt;Verbal: ‘I don’t often X, but when I do, I Y’</td>
<td>expressive (of user’s cool or interesting status)</td>
<td>Character: Dos Equis&lt;br&gt;Phrase: ‘I don’t often X, but when I do, I Y’&lt;br&gt;Function: expressive of user’s cool status</td>
<td>The predicates i.e. referential function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Condescending Wonka</td>
<td>The idea that the embedded proposition is implausible.</td>
<td>Visual: Still of Willie Wonka, head resting on hand&lt;br&gt;Verbal: ‘So [tell me more about how]…’</td>
<td>expressive (of condescension or disalignment) and conative (asking the addressee to elaborate)</td>
<td>Character: Willie Wonka&lt;br&gt;Phrase: ‘So [tell me more about how]…’&lt;br&gt;Function: expressive (condescension or disalignment) towards the interlocutor i.e. conative</td>
<td>The proposition pertaining to an addressee’s stance, implausible to the Actor/Animator i.e. referential function</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Analysis of the top five families of image macros based on Shifman (2014) and Segev et al (2015).

All five of these meme families use a character as an animator for the meme author’s utterance. By employing the comprehensive framework advanced by Shifman (2014), I have identified the core characteristics of the five most popular image macro families, including the ‘cohesive quiddities’ (Segev et al, 2015) that are shared across iterations of those families, as well as the elements open to variation. The character represents a consistent stance, fulfilling a certain *expressive* function, which varies according to the character and meme family it constitutes. Sometimes, the character is used as an animator for the author to fulfil the *conative* function by appealing to an addressee; I have advanced a more precise account of these roles with recourse to additional participation concepts from Goffman. All of these popular meme families use a fixed phrasal template which, in concert with the image, reflects the *expressive* function. The *referential* function is open to variation, as semantically rich elements (such as predicates, subject complements or clauses) are those which are left open to the meme author’s choice. As such, the cohesive quiddities of popular image macros are the character and the image which serve as an animator for the meme author’s expression, structural elements of the text and the *expressive* (and sometimes *conative*) function performed. While all of these cohesive quiddities contribute to the meme families’ coherence, the *referential* element is open to the meme generators’ creative input. This confirms Jenkins et al’s observation that essential to spreadable media is the presence of a ‘gap’, which encourages “producerly engagement” (Jenkins et al, 2009, no pages).

### 4.2 The most (dis)liked image macros from each meme family

In the discussion that follows, the most liked and disliked iterations of each meme family are analysed. For reasons of space, not all ten of the image macros in the meme pool could be reproduced here. Instead, they are listed in Table 3, with numbers (1a, 1b etc) for ease of reference, the text quoted from the meme, and URLs for readers who want to see the full image macro.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meme Family</th>
<th>Most Liked</th>
<th>Most Disliked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Y U No</strong></td>
<td>1a. “You say you like it, Y U No put a ring on it”</td>
<td>1b. “Girls, Y U No date me, forever alone”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Futurama Fry</strong></td>
<td>2a. “Not sure if cop tailgating me wants me to go faster, or is just testing me” Socially awkward penguin “Walks into wrong meme”</td>
<td>2b. “Not sure if gay or just European”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. The Most Interesting Man in the World</strong></td>
<td>3a. “I don't always see, but when I do, it's what you did there”</td>
<td>3b. “I don't always march, but when I do, I march my ass to work because I'm a responsible adult with bills to pay and a family to support”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Philosoraptor</strong></td>
<td>4a. “If an illegal immigrant fought a child molester, would it be alien vs predator?”</td>
<td>4b. “If there are no girls on the internet, then what am I doing here?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Condescending Wonka

5a. "Oh I died? Please tell the internet how much of a fan you’ve always been"
http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1165082-condescending-wonka-creepy-wonka

5b. "You're in university and still believe in God? That's adorable"
http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/233313-condescending-wonka-creepy-wonka

Table 3. The most liked and most disliked iteration of each meme family.

4.2.1 Disliked: Violation of norms

As was observed at the close of Section 3.2.2, by selecting the most liked and disliked iterations of each meme family, this study’s method lends itself to better understanding the extremes of meme production and reception and therefore how norms can be broken in approved and disapproved ways. Two of the five most disliked iterations failed to uphold the basic rules of the meme family; that is, its cohesive quiddities (summarised in Table 2).

For example, although most disliked iteration of ‘Y U No’ (Table 3: 1b) uses the necessary linguistic formulation in the meme phrase, “Girls / Y U No date me. Forever alone”, the requisite stick man character is not used, losing the visual force behind the expressive and conative stance. In his place is an image featuring a character from another meme family, ‘Scumbag Steve’ who, as his name suggests, is used to represent actions that the meme author deems reprehensible (Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2017). While memes can - and often successfully do – refer to other memes (Shifman 2011; Lou 2017), using Scumbag Steve as an animator for the author’s utterance produces no additional meaning, other than perhaps to suggest that Scumbag Steve needs a date. As demonstrated later, breaking the rules of the meme family may be permitted in order to perform additional functions, but this text manages only to lose expressive and conative power. This violation of mimetic practice appears to be the main reason for its dislike within the Knowyourmeme.com community.

Likewise, the most unpopular of the ‘Philosoraptor’ memes asks, “If there are no girls on the internet / what am I doing here?” (Table 3: 4b). While the author has fulfilled the linguistic criteria for this meme, the conditional question does not require any additional resources for its resolution, lacking the logical conundrum necessary for this to cohere fully with the meme family. With the opposition of the ‘girls’ in the apodosis and ‘I’ in the protasis, the (heteronormative) implication is that the meme author is a male who wants to interact with females. However, this suggestion at a linguistic level clashes with the visual level, where the Philosoraptor, usually the animator for the author’s words, is painted female. Thus, the meme generator has failed to coherently align participation roles and to provide the logical complexity necessary to this meme family.

Interestingly, in both these cases the discourse participation roles are unsuccessfully distributed by the meme author, a failing that cannot be accurately described without the insights that Goffman’s concepts lend this analysis. Moreover, both these image macros index heterosexual masculine insecurity, suggesting that its expression in mimetic practice may be disapproved of by the community, which may contradict Shifman’s findings that ‘flawed masculinity’ is a property of successful YouTube memes. In Sections 4.2.3 and 4.2.4, I elaborate on the image macros which were deemed successful despite violating some of their family’s cohesive quiddities and explore the additional functions these highly-rated memes performed.

4.2.2 Disliked: certain ideologies

Perhaps unsurprisingly, amongst the most disliked iterations of the five meme families, three of them espoused ideologically unpopular views (Table 3: 2b, 3b and 5b). In these cases, the community disapproved not of the author’s formal rendering of the meme, but of its referential content and ideological stance, where the playful keying is deemed inappropriate.
The most unpopular ‘Condescending Wonka’ image macro depicts the character as asking, “You’re in university and still believe in God? / That’s adorable” (Table 3: 5b). Through the use of a question with the fictional interlocutor’s words embedded in the proposition, the format allows the meme author to take a stance on the proposition through the condescending attitude of Willy Wonka. Although ‘adorable’ is a positive evaluation, its use in a meme family that expresses condescension frames it as insincere. Despite the meme author’s adherence to the necessary cohesive quiddities across the levels of form and stance, this meme was negatively evaluated by the community. It seems that associating religion with lack of education is not a position this community endorses.

Likewise, the most disliked iteration of the ‘Futurama Fry’ meme adheres to the cohesive quiddities by employing the requisite still image of Fry and adding the text, “Not sure if gay / or just European” which presents two alternative states of affairs. Because all the cohesive quiddities are met, it can be assumed that the Knowyourmeme.com community dislike this image macro because of its particular referential content, and the idea it expresses. By coordinating the attribute ‘gay’ with ‘European’ as a potential alternative judgement, the meme author is using the animator’s gaze to express their opinion that two personal categories are similar, homosexuality and being European. While there is the potential for humour in the juxtaposition of these incongruous categories, the online community’s disapproval of the referential content demonstrates that this attempt at humour has misfired.

The least popular iteration of ‘The Most Interesting Man in the World’ seems to fulfil all the necessary cohesive quiddities. The lengthy meme phrase “I don’t always march/ but when I do, I march my ass to work because I’m a responsible adult with bills to pay and a family to support” uses the generic structure of this meme to suggest that marching one’s ass to work is a superior way of marching. However, this image macro was uploaded to a series ‘March for our Lives’ which was based on the anti-gun violence protests, following a Florida high school shooting in February 2018. Thus, there are real world referents for the two senses of ‘marching’, which form the basis of the meme author’s pun. Accordingly, in addition to expressing the meme author’s coolness or superiority, this iteration also performs a somewhat poetic communicative function, foregrounding the dual sense of the word ‘march’ and the contrasting ways in which the action can be carried out. Nonetheless, despite the image macro’s adherence to the meme family’s cohesive quiddities and use of additional resources for humorous purposes (which contributed to the success of image macros, see Section 4.2.3), this iteration proves unpopular. This effect is unsurprising, given that the meme author employs the superior stance afforded by this meme to criticise the forum and its members’ political action.

In each of these three cases, the mimetic form was used ‘correctly’ but in order to advance social prejudices (towards religious, sexual, continental or political identities) which were in turn, subject to community policing. The dislike towards these three image macros can be explained through consideration of sharing memes as ‘keying’, specifically of the playful variety (see Section 2.2). Goffman (1974/1986, p.49) observed that:

[A]lthough individuals can playfully engage in an extremely broad range of activity, limits on playfulness are established in various groups […] Among familiars, for example, there will be appeals to “taste”; it is not nice to make light of certain aspects of the lives of friends.

If we understand sharing an image macro as playful keying, these particular instances make light of an idea that the community do not find acceptable, either stereotyping or judging social groups and identities.

4.2.3 Liked: Rich intertextuality, humour and additional communicative functions

In this section, it is demonstrated how the most-liked iterations adhere more closely to the cohesive quiddities of their respective meme families, which seems to be a key attribute for a
successful iteration of a meme. It is also found that the most-liked iterations perform additional communicative functions, above and beyond generic expectations. The findings of previous researchers are also confirmed; successful image macros are those which are rich in intertextual references, either to pop culture in general, or to internet culture and other memes more specifically. Moreover, they frequently use anomalous juxtaposition (sometimes in the form of intertextual references) to achieve humour, also confirming the findings of earlier studies (Knobel and Lankshear 2007; Shifman 2011). In this analysis, I draw more fully on theories of humour more fully than have previous meme researchers, in order to understand the joke-bearing potential of the texts.

The most popular ‘Philosoraptor’ image macro includes intertextual references from pop culture and uses the meme structure to create a linguistic joke which, judging by its popularity, resulted in humour. Interestingly, it espouses controversial views, which do not seem to have troubled the Knowyourmeme.com community like the image macros discussed in 4.2.2. This meme sees the philosoraptor ponder the proposition, “If an illegal immigrant fought a child molester / would it be Alien vs. Predator?”. A pun is created on the dual sense of alien and predator to refer to the species in the film and to the social groups introduced in the meme phrase’s apodosis. Indeed, the conditional structure that is key to this meme family provides the ideal vehicle for a formulaic linguistic ‘joke’ such as this one. In their influential General Theory of Verbal Humour, largely based on canned and written jokes, Attardo and Raskin (1991) propose that jokes have three essential stages, i) setup, ii) incongruity and iii) resolution. In this image macro, the apodosis serves as the setup, introducing two different kinds of people according to their societal roles. The apodosis also introduces an incongruity, in the unlikely pairing of these two kinds of people in a fight. Lastly, the protasis serves to provide a fictional frame in which this incongruity would make sense, calling on the meme reader’s pop culture knowledge of the film and linguistic knowledge of the polysemes for the joke’s resolution. Thus, through the feigned puzzlement of the Philosoraptor as animator for the author’s joke, this image macro foregrounds the word meanings, fulfilling the metalingual and, arguably, the poetic function. It is successful, despite the fact that the joke is contingent on dehumanising both categories of people, including a derogatory term for a migrant (alien) and an insouciant term for a pedophile (predator). Further understanding of the online community would be necessary to understand why certain groups are deemed unfair game, while migrants and pedophiles seem to be acceptable targets of meme humour in this domain.

![Figure 1. The most liked iteration of ‘Y U No’](image)

The most liked iteration of ‘Y U No’ (Figure 1) uses an elaborated meme phrase, “You say you like it/ Why U no put a ring on it?”, referring to a popular song by Beyoncé called ‘Single Ladies’. This cultural text has pre-established the expectation “If you like it, then you shoulda put a ring on it” through its chorus’ repeated refrain, which serves as the cultural
schema from which this meme generator draws to create the expected action key to ‘Y U No’. While quoting the song lyrics, the meme phrase also manages to retain the ungrammatical, abbreviated style typical of the meme family. The intertextual reference made in the meme phrase is strengthened through mimetic adaptations made to the image, where the stick man character is crudely adorned with Beyoncé’s hair, make-up and a ring. Moreover, the one-shouldered black bodysuit and triplicate characters replicate the aesthetics of the song’s equally famous music video. This image macro is particularly successful because of its intertextual references to shared knowledge of popular culture, of which meme readers may feel part. The blend of a glamorous celebrity with an ugly, pleading stick man fulfils the incongruous juxtaposition fundamental to humorous discourse.

In the most liked version of ‘The Most Interesting Man in the World’ (Figure 2), the meme author does not perform the expressive function (coolness) in the usual way (i.e. by taking claim to a particular way of doing an action). Instead, in using the meme phrase “I don’t always see, but when I do, it’s what you did there”, this meme author has used a phrase popular in internet discourse, “I see what you did there” and blended it with the formal features of this particular meme. The phrase, which originates from 90s sitcom Friends, is used when the speaker overtly recognises a ‘move’ made by their interlocutor, an utterance serving a particular communicative function (Swales, 1981; 1990). In this way, the phrase inherently serves a metalingual function. By integrating the phrase into the formal structure of this meme, the meme author upholds the formal quiddities of ‘The Most Interesting Man in the World’ and draws on shared knowledge of the popular phrase to fulfil the referential function. In doing so, he or she refers to the addressee’s discourse, as well as to wider colloquial discourse, performing a metalingual function. Moreover, by violating one rule of this meme (that verb Y be a cool way of doing verb X), the author foregrounds the linguistic trickery, fulfilling the poetic function. While the expressive function is not performed directly (through reference to doing X in a cool fashion), the meme author’s status as cool is affirmed indirectly through their skill at mimetic practice, in terms of imitating and adapting content, complete with the intertextuality, incongruity and resultant humour that lie behind the most successful memes.
Fulfilment of the metalingual function is clearly evident in 2a (Figure 3), which serves as a good example of a ‘meta meme’ (Shifman, 2011) or a ‘meme about a meme’. Although the methodology led to its identification as the most-liked iteration of Futurama Fry, it is not strictly an image macro, but an animated image (only partially captured in print) and so requires some additional description here. The meme phrase “Not sure if cop tailgating me wants me to go faster / or is just testing me” preserves the formal cohesive quiddity of this family by using “Not sure if” followed by two alternative states of affairs that could be potentially confusing, capturing the meme’s typical expressive function. As usual for this meme family, the confusion is reflected in the character’s expression and in the division of the coordinated construction between top and bottom of the image. However, seconds into reading the meme, a character from another meme family ‘Socially Awkward Penguin’ waddles across the image accompanied by the text, “Wanders into the wrong meme”. By doing so, the typical characteristics of ‘Socially Awkward Penguin’ are upheld, but in intertextual interaction with this meme, leading to an anomalous juxtaposition and resultant humour. By visually and verbally calling attention to the status of ‘Futurama Fry’ as a meme and as distinct from the ‘Socially Awkward Penguin’ meme which interrupts it, this ‘meta meme’ fulfills the metalingual function and, in the process of foregrounding the mimetic form, the poetic function. Yet the poetic and the metalingual functions are only fulfilled if the reader is ‘meme literate’, once again highlighting the significance in-group knowledge and identity as key factors in a meme’s approval rating.

The most liked iteration of the ‘Condescending Wonka’ meme dates from 2016, shortly after the death of Gene Wilder, the actor who plays the meme’s character. Willy Wonka is attributed with the words, “Oh, I died? / Please suddenly tell the internet how much of a fan you’ve always been” (Table 3: 5a). In this case, the meme author’s disparagement is directed at those internet users who, in reaction to news of the death of a public figure, claim to have been longstanding fans, jumping on a bandwagon of mourners. Through embedding the words of the ‘fan’ in the utterance, the meme author is echoing their discourse and parodying their behaviour. Moreover, by doing so through the medium of a Gene Wilder meme, the meme author uses the fictional animator to comment on non-fictional behaviour around the animator/actor’s death, appealing to his/her peers who share the same disparaging view of such behaviour. Thus, as well as upholding the meme’s cohesive quiddities, it makes intratextual links to directly relevant current affairs and to objectionable internet behaviour. By drawing attention to the real world relevance and consequently the fictionality of the text, the meme author imbues it with new meaning and fulfils the poetic function. As with the other popular image macros, scrupulous attention to the meme’s rules along with skilful performance of
additional communicative strategies merits high levels of approbation amongst the online community.

5. Conclusions
The pragma-stylistic analysis has yielded several findings which add to contemporary understanding of memes. Using an augmented version of Shifman’s (2014) framework, I have demonstrated that in these image macro families certain elements of each dimension — content, form and stance — are cohesive quiddities which determine the characteristics of the meme family. In the data, the referential function was consistently subject to change, meaning users could employ an image macro’s formal properties and consistent expressive or conative functions to take a particular stance on a chosen referent. It was argued that these referential ‘gaps’ and the endless playful iterations they afford are what make internet memes so engaging and spreadable (Jenkins et al 2009).

This study develops the theoretical and analytical approach to memes in several ways. First, Shifman’s framework was enhanced by integration of Goffian concepts. I borrowed Goffman’s distinction between an author and an animator to better describe the distinction between the meme creator and the meme character, respectively, as well as to understand their roles in the discourse. As discussed in Section 4.2, further research as to how these memes are used in interaction is necessary to fully understand participant roles, which are determined by the texts in their contexts. Moreover, integrating a Goffmanian understanding of each iteration of a meme as a ‘keying of a common model’ helped to explain why some image macros were disliked, either a) because their playful keyings made light of content that was deemed unsuitable or b) their technical redoings failed to cohere with the meme family’s quiddities. I believe there is further work to be done on the significance of keying in digital discourse in general, as digital media affords imitations, (re)iterations and extensive sharing.

Second, I drew on humour studies to account for how formal patterns in memes can result in humorous readings, an account that was lacking in previous studies. With reference to the most-liked image macros, it was demonstrated how anomalous juxtapositions lead to humour, because incongruity is a fundamental aspect of joke-bearing texts. The Philosoraptor meme illustrated how memes can utilise the three stages of a formulaic joke. While previous research has identified intertextuality and parody as key characteristics of internet memes, this study brought the two concepts together by demonstrating, through analysis of the most liked memes, how intertextual references supply the anterior discourse necessary to producing parody. I would argue that references to other memes or aspects of pop culture serve to solidify in-group membership in terms of shared cultural knowledge. Yet, the image macros studied here emphasised that “it is not only the parody form, but the quality and subtlety of execution that matters” (2009, no pages). In some of the most successful iterations, that ‘quality and subtlety’ was achieved through mastery over the mimetic form, including adherence to the cohesive quiddities and skill at using the freedoms afforded through the referential content to make additional communicative functions, namely the metalingual and poetic.

Further research into memes in interactive contexts would allow for the proper investigation of some issues raised by this study. It would be helpful to understand why, for example, some social groups were deemed acceptable targets of meme humour and why some were not. Previous researchers found social biases in memes which tend to represent white people and men more frequently (Shifman 2011; Segev et al 2015). In this study, all of the top five meme families feature male characters as animators. The androgynous ‘Y U No’ character (2a) and Philosoraptor (4b) are doctored for feminine characteristics, suggesting the unmarked version is male. This pattern indicates a gender bias in mimetic representation. Furthermore, although Shifman (2011) found ‘no social commentary’ in her corpus of popular YouTube
memes, my meme pool contained a high proportion of image macros taking political or ideological stances, or identifying social groups as the target for humour. However, this may have been a result of the method of data collection, whereby the most disliked memes were also included, resulting in unpopular political stances being represented. While this study has revealed the pragma-stylistics of these memes in isolation, further research of memes in interaction is necessary to fully understand the communicative function of these fascinating texts.

References


