

UNIVERSITY
OF OSLO

Master thesis

The Secret Third Thing

A Pragmatic Analysis of Post-irony and Post-ironic Internet Memes

Anton Lymarev

English Language and Linguistics

60 study credits

Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages

The Faculty of Humanities



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Acknowledgements

Dedicated to all my friends who helped pondering thoughts back and forth, and who provided their valuable judgment of the memescape as its active participants. I wish to express special gratitude to Rob, who was of great help during the final proofreading stages.

This thesis is brought to you by formidable doses of caffeine, the great number of sleepless nights, and the sheer passion for memes. Please, enjoy.

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Introduction

Internet users are on to something, and researchers should follow. - Limor Shifman, "Memes in Digital Culture"

Many contemporary online users would agree that memes are fun. This term is used to denote humorous or satirical images, videos, and texts that are shared widely on the internet, and that are rapidly taking over the cultural space. Not only that - with every year, the memescape is becoming more complex, subversive and absurd. With every new generation of meme formats, the meme culture becomes more entrenched and less penetrable for those who do not possess any cultural and contextual knowledge surrounding it. The memes become less intelligible, humor more obscure, and means of self-expression more exotic. What is interesting, though, is how these multimodal utterances work pragmatically.

This dissertation sets out to elucidate some of the underlying pragmatic and linguistic mechanisms which define online interaction, specifically as they relate to meme culture. Succinctly put, memes are a new - and quite prominent - genre of online communication which has today become an integral part of digital, and especially youth culture. This is why they are worth studying - both so that one might better understand and analyze online communication, and by extension, communication in general - as well as to better perceive and adapt conventional pragmatic theories and analyses to reflect the generational shift currently taking place within the spheres of both online and offline discourse.

Research questions and dissertation objective

The thesis sets out several research questions, first of which concerns a fairly recent cultural phenomenon of post-irony, and post-ironic memes as its vehicle in the online space. What are the defining features of post-irony and post-ironic memes in particular? How can one describe these in terms of pragmatics? These are the questions that the work is pondering. The paper not only seeks to provide a satisfactory definition of post-ironic memes; it ultimately goes a step further, arguing that it is important to understand these dimensions of online interaction, as one might already trace their influence upon more traditional (offline) discourse - which has an ever increasing impact upon the field of conventional pragmatics.

After defining post-irony from a cultural and pragmatic stand-point, this dissertation is applying the echoic approach to classical irony to post-irony in hopes of finding out, whether the new cultural phenomenon will fit the existing pragmatic framework, and if not, what could be added in order to make it work?

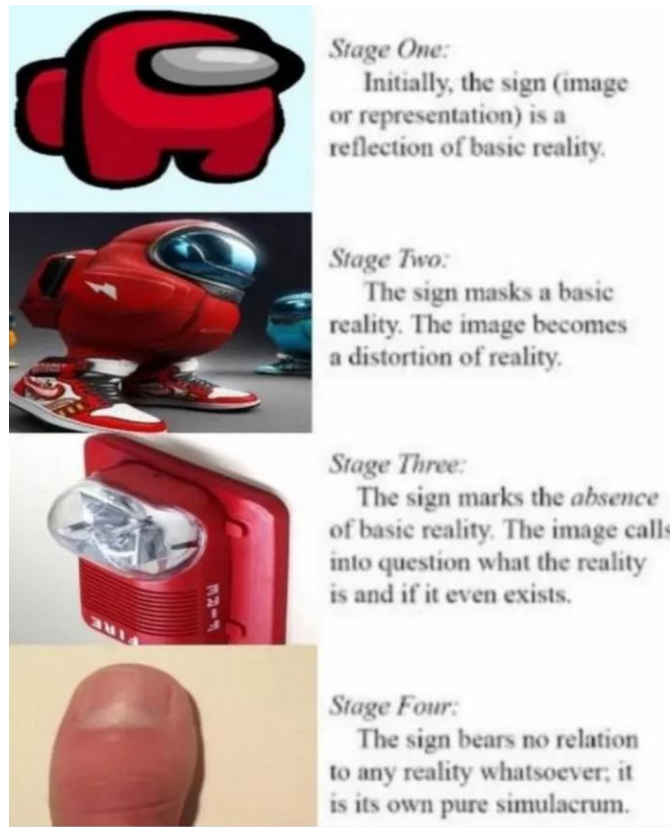
Lastly, after defining and characterizing post-irony, the thesis will move on to the final part of its contribution: deriving a working pragmatic method for the analysis of post-ironic memes, and applying it to a couple of examples in order to see whether it yields any fruitful interpretations and can be utilized as a reliable tool for analyzing the new online utterances.

A brief introduction to and history of memes

The earliest conceptualization of what we today know as memes can be traced back to the work of biologist Richard Dawkins, who coined the term in 1976. These days, the term ‘*meme*’ has acquired a different, albeit related sense to the one initially proposed by Dawkins, and the term is no longer associated with the field of memetics to the same extent. Instead, it is today most often employed to refer to humorous images shared over the internet. Due to their intertextual nature, large degree of versatility and heavy context dependence, these images can have a number of different forms and social functions. Typically, internet memes act as jokes, but can also elicit feelings of familiarity, melancholy or anger, or convey diverse social, political or philosophical messages, in addition to performing a large array of other communicative purposes. Their versatility as a communicative tool is something that has hitherto gone largely unexplored within the field of conventional pragmatics - at least insofar as to reflect the most recent developments within meme culture, as this thesis aims to illustrate.

Originated from simple images and mundane topics on text-based message boards in the late 90s and early 2000s, memes have since developed into a cluster of multi-modal forms of expression at once uniquely idiosyncratic (reflective of the personalities and subcultures in which they originate), as well as universalized as common lingua through shared cultural touchstones (perhaps best described as *originator memes* or *prime memes*) - memes which go on to spawn trends of mimicry, becoming established *memeformats*. This history is further expounded upon in the section on meme history below.

It is worth noting in passing that this process is not entirely without philosophical precedence. As has been observed, the mechanisms through which memes are conceived, popularized, disseminated, regurgitated and reconstituted arguably bears echoes of Baudrillard’s conceptualization of *simulacra* (1981), as illustrated below (this point remains only tangential to the main argument of this thesis, however, as exploring this dimension in-depth would be well beyond its scope, and deserving of a dissertation of its own.)



Meme invoking Baudrillard's conceptualization of *simulacra*, illustrated through the (d)evolution of the *amogus* meme family.

Relevance theory and cyberpragmatics

The thesis argument builds upon a plethora of terminology and heuristics from existing pragmatics literature, and ultimately goes on to synthesize these into a tailored heuristic for the purposes of providing a coherent and reliable framework for meme analysis (the *Yus-Scott heuristic*) - specifically as it relates to the often overlooked and criminally understudied yet widespread usage of irony, post-irony and meta-irony within modern online discourse. The thesis leans heavily upon the work of Wilson & Sperber (1987, 1995, 2004) on Relevance Theory, in particular the notions of implicature and explicature, and relevance-guided comprehension heuristic, their echoic account of irony and the concept of layering in communication. The paper thus advocates for a Relevance-theoretic approach to understanding online pragmatics, as it specifically focuses on the use (and subversion) of irony as a primary communicative tool - which, it argues, combined with the notion of layered communication, is capable of explaining the ambiguous nature of post-irony.

Additionally, this dissertation makes use of Francesco Yus' work on cyberpragmatics (2011), in particular his notion of interconnectedness of online and offline personas, and Kate Scott's recent work "Pragmatics Online" (2022), where she presents the notion of sharing as an ostensive communicative act. It also invokes Shifman's (2014) notion of topic-form-stance unity, relying especially on the concept of stance as a heuristic for decoding the communicative intent of memes.

Irony-based discourse and post-irony - history and analysis

As for the thesis' pivot into examining modern irony-based online discourse and post-irony specifically, it here employs a variety of mostly non-academic sources. The paper humbly suggests that this is notable not as an evident lack of effort or intellectual rigor on the part of the author, as much as reflective of the general lack of quality research on the subject currently available within the existing literature - a perceived oversight which this dissertation ambitiously tries to ameliorate in some small way. As such, it resorts to what might be considered a wide net of ad hoc definitions - but through this, it seeks to give a brief overview of what little academic thinking has been invested in the subject, such as the work of Markowski (2022), Wallace (1993) and Khrushcheva (2020).

It builds on its initial account of the history of memes in general, presented in the first section, to delve further into the development of irony-based meme culture, and the factors which gave rise to the post-ironic paradigm shift. The dissertation goes some way to illustrate how this development is situated within a wider cultural pivot, briefly contextualizing it through the lens of postmodernist deconstructionism (for instance, the title meme itself seems to reflect this, in how it might be seen as to allude to - but leave mostly unarticulated - an objection to the binary thinking traditional postmodernist critiques might attribute to the lasting and still ongoing legacy of scientific positivism.) This is, however, a tangential observation which will not be explored further for the purposes of the main thesis argument - yet it is worth mentioning here, as it illustrates the inherent uncertainty and ambiguousness of communicative intent which lies at the core of post-ironic discourse. This is an aspect which will be exhaustively examined in the sections on post-irony and applied analysis.

Method, analysis and discussion

Lastly, the thesis will engage in the hands-on pragmatic analysis of two post-ironic meme tokens, performed with the help of the originally derived Yus-Scott heuristic, alluded to earlier, and will discuss at considerable length the possible interpretations and implications of the post-ironic memes chosen, later contemplating on how such cultural

and communicative shifts that happen online can influence the offline discourse, and how they already do.

Mememes

Memetics

The word meme first appeared in 1970's, and was first used in a completely different sense than today. The term was first coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976, in his book "The Selfish Gene." There, he defines a meme as a counterpart to a biological gene that, instead of spreading via sperms and eggs, propagates itself "by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation." (Dawkins[1976] 2006) The word itself was derived from the Greek "*mimema*", meaning "something which is imitated."

According to Dawkins, memes are a minimal unit of cultural evolution and exist in the form of music, literature, clothing styles, dances, or even scientific ideas - anything that defines and propagates in a given culture or a time period. Just like genes, they replicate themselves in different people of a given population by the means of imitation, undergo a process of selection and die out once they are no longer relevant - that is, when there is not a single person left carrying the meme in their consciousness.

Although mentioned in passing - Dawkins only dedicated a single chapter to it - this notion of a meme has spawned a whole new branch of science called memetics, the study of memes.

Originally, Dawkins tended to see cultural evolution as highly similar to the biological evolution, ascribing most of the qualities of the biological gene to the cultural meme. According to Dawkins, they are both replicators, they both form pools, and they both "compete" with each other for the limelight of cultural (in case of memes) or biological (in case of genes) prominence in the heads and gene pools of a given population. Hence, the field of memetics primarily focuses on the study of culture and transmission of ideas and cultural habits through the lens of Charles Darwin's theory of biological evolution.

Just like genes "compete" for limited space in our genome, memes "compete" for limited memory and attention capacity in our minds, with the weaker ones being squeezed out of the meme pool, and the stronger ones prevailing, sometimes for the longest of times. Dawkins offers the example of God as a meme that occupied the minds of millions of people for centuries and millennia, and shows how now it competes with the meme of

scientific method, the two being at odds with each other. These qualities - replication, longevity and spread through the means of human communication - make memes successful replicators, and as Dennett suggested, human minds themselves seem to exist for the purpose of transferring and reinforcing memes. (Dennett 1990)

One of the prominent figures of memetics, Susan Blackmore, furthered the idea of a meme in her book "The Meme Machine" (Blackmore 2000). There, she gives depth to Dawkins's ideas and goes as far as to claim that the notion of a meme could be "the grand new unifying theory we need to understand human nature." (Blackmore 2000, 9) Blackmore adopts the memetic approach to culture and applies it to answer questions about the origins of language, the nature of human attraction, the nature of cultural altruism that seems to have surpassed the innate "selfishness" of biological genes, and even the notion of the self.

Although appealing, memetic theory exhibits several limitations, and has faced significant criticism. Firstly, Dawkins himself pokes a hole in the theory by admitting to a potential problem of identifying a minimal unit of a meme, since these entities are too abstract. He does not clearly state what a meme is, except for some diffuse examples, such as one of Beethoven's symphonies where the whole piece could be considered a meme, or a short passage, if it is recognizable enough, or even just a few notes.

Another example is Darwin's theory of evolution, and how every Darwinist has their own personal interpretation of it in their minds, as opposed to the exact theory formulated by Darwin himself. Some scientists might adopt some aspects of the theory, and omit others.

This leads Dawkins to suggest that an idea could constitute a minimal unit of a meme, where several ideas might be linked together in order to form a single, more coherent meme (Dawkins [1976] 2006, 212-213), not unlike atoms and chemical bonds.

However, this notion does not seem to withstand scrutiny either, since ideas are not quantifiable in the same way genes are, as measurable pieces of amino acid chains. Unlike genes, memes are conceptual entities that can take many different forms, sizes and levels of complexity. This makes it difficult to identify and track specific memes as they move through a population, and raises questions about how they can be reliably replicated and passed on. The limitation was further treated in Blackmore's book with the introduction of memeplexes, by analogy with gene complexes, but the core issue of unquantifiability was not treated significantly well.

Another substantial critique of this theory of memes, as formulated by Dawkins, was put forward by Dan Sperber (2000) in “An objection to the memetic approach to culture”.

There, Sperber also challenges the idea that memes can be understood as self-replicating entities. He argues that cultural transmission is not simply a matter of copying and disseminating memes, but that it involves complex processes of interpretation, transformation, and adaptation. People do not simply pass on ideas, procedures and other things that are culturally transmitted uncritically - like an idea ‘going viral’. Instead, they actively engage with them, modifying and reshaping them in the process. This means that the idea of memes as discrete, self-contained units of culture is fundamentally flawed. “[M]ost cultural items are ‘re-produced’ in the sense that they are produced again and again—with, of course, a causal link between all these productions

—but are not reproduced in the sense of being copied from one another.” (Sperber 2000, 164)

All of this makes the idea of Dawkinsian meme rather interesting, but ultimately “misguided.” (Sperber 2000, 173)

What are internet memes?

In modern times, the term meme has become more closely related to the online phenomenon of producing, disseminating and remixing multimodal internet content (typically humorous images), for purposes such as self-expression, social bonding and entertainment. The connection to the original memetic theory introduced by Dawkins has been weakened.

In their broadest sense, not only images can be considered internet memes. There is a large array of media content forms and elements of culture that could be called an internet meme:

- Short videos containing edited images or animations that are shared on various platforms like TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube, such as [this](#) one
- Songs, e.g. “Shooting Stars” by Bag Raiders, “All star” by Smash Mouth, or an intro to the TV-series “Better Call Saul” by Little Barrie
- Catch phrases, often misspellings, such as “Baba Booney” or “covfefe”
- Entire movies, e.g. “The Green Elephant”, a legendary underground psychedelichorror film from Russia that gained popularity in the Russian-speaking segment of the Internet

- Dance moves, e.g. “Dancing Backpack kid”, animated dancing emotes from a videogame “Fortnite”, as well as countless dance challenges from TikTok
- A combination of two or more things listed above

This list is by no means exhaustive, as the nature of the modern meme format allows for infinite creativity through combination, juxtaposition and remixing. Moreover, a large amount of cultural events have been seen to spawn memes, or even become memes in themselves. Some might say that virtually anything that leaves a digital trace on the internet has the potential to become a meme, given enough exposure and attention from the internet audience.

The definitions of an internet meme are plentiful and diverse, just like the internet memes themselves. This nascent field of research is still developing, and so there is yet no unifying definition of a meme which is widely accepted by the linguistic community at large. However, one of them comes close to that.

Many modern works on digital communication reference Limor Shifman’s (2014) book “Memes in Digital Culture”, where she defines an internet meme as a group of content items that have three crucial characteristics:

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

(Limor Shifman 2014, 41)

According to this definition, an internet meme is not a single image, video or post, but a group of content items existing in so-called cyberspace - inextricably linked to a certain culture or socio-contextual interpretation, more so than the objective substance of the idea in itself. Every item in that group shares a number of features characteristic of that specific group. The thesis adheres to this classification by using “meme” when referring to a group of items (or “meme family”, “meme format” when it’s important to stress that we are dealing with such a group), and “meme token” (or just “token”) when referring to an individual content element within that group.

A good illustration of this distinction is the LOLcats meme. According to Shifman, meme tokens that form the LOLcats meme family “share a topic (cats), form (photo + caption), and stance (humor)” (Shifman 2014: 177). A typical LOLcats token represents a cat with a humorous caption describing or commenting on the actions of said cat, in intentionally stylized, “broken” English. The latter can also be considered an example of language

play, with its own grammar, syntax, morphology and lexicon (Gawne & Vaughan 2011), as shown below.



A LOLcats meme token #1, taken from [knowy.ourmeme](#).



A LOLcats meme token #2, also taken from [knowy.ourmeme](#).

None of these LOLcats meme tokens are created - or arguably, make much sense - in isolation. All of them exist as a part of a larger meme family that imbues them with meaning. Every person creating a new LOLcats meme token non-verbally declares (or implicates) that they are aware of the existence of that meme, and that the new memetoken belongs to it. Despite the fact that any LOLcats token can be enjoyed on its own merit as a funny or cute picture of a cat, the presence of this topic-form-stance unity after Shifman classification defines a silly picture with a silly caption as a part of something larger. There are still plenty of memes involving silly cats on the internet to this day, but most of them can hardly be considered LOLcats tokens, because they are missing these idiosyncratic captions of so-called 'LOLspeak', albeit most of them could arguably be considered direct descendants of the LOLcats format.

Other useful meme theory

One of the key ideas in Shifman's book, which we have briefly touched upon, is the unity of *topic*, *form*, and *stance* in internet memes. This idea stems from Shifman's approach of looking at diffused units of content as existing in several memetic dimensions - i.e. aspects that people are able to imitate. (Shifman 2014, 39) Of these three dimensions, *topic* refers to "the context of the specific text", *form* to "the physical reincarnation of the

message” in visual/audible form, and *stance* to “the ways in which addressers position themselves in relation to the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees, and other potential speakers.” (Shifman 2014, 40)

Shifman further divides the dimension of stance into three sub-dimensions:

- (1) participation structures - describing who is entitled to participate and how;
- (2) keying - delineating the tone and style of communication;
- (3) communicative functions.

The communication functions are further subdivided into six categories after Roman Jakobson’s classification of human communication:

- (a) referential communication - oriented toward the context, or the “outside world”;
- (b) emotive - oriented toward the addresser and their emotions;
- (c) conative - oriented toward the addressee and available paths of actions;
- (d) phatic - serves to establish, prolong, or discontinue communication;
- (e) metalingual - used to establish mutual agreement on the code (for example, a definition);
- (f) poetic - focusing on the aesthetic or artistic beauty of the construction of the message itself.

(Shifman 2014, 39-40)

Shifman argues that the unity of topic, form, and stance is essential for the success of internet memes. Those who fail to achieve this unity may be confusing, uninteresting, or even offensive to their intended audience. By understanding and harnessing this unity (even subconsciously), creators can produce memes that resonate with their audience and contribute to the ongoing evolution of internet culture. (Shifman 2014, 46) Although this can be considered true for memes in general, in certain cases the unity of topic, form and stance can be broken in creative ways in order to achieve new meanings and appeal to new audiences.

To reliably analyze these complex cultural phenomena in-depth, we require a precise classification system. Of course, new internet memes are being spawned, forgotten, reincarnated, remixed and subverted on a daily basis, which makes the task of accurate classification a rather challenging one - but even a rudimentary divide would do for the

purposes of this paper, such as Shifman's division of memes into three broad genre classes:

(1) Ones based on the documentation of "real-life" moments, such as photo fads and flash mobs. These are always anchored in a concrete and non-digital space.

(2) Genres based on explicit manipulation of visual or audio-visual mass-mediated content: reaction Photoshops, lip dubs, misheard lyrics, recut trailers, etc. These "remix" genres often re-appropriate news and popular culture items, thus providing commentary on contemporary culture.

(3) Genres that evolved around a new universe of digital and meme-oriented content, such as LOLCats, rage comics, and stock character macros, Wojak comics, and many more. These genres allegedly emerged after 2007, and they "embody the development of a complex grid of signs that only those 'in the know' can decipher." This makes them a sort of an inside joke for the community that is involved with the meme, which in turn contributes to social bonding within that community and in many cases creates a unique language with visual, textual and sometimes audible elements that itself becomes a characteristic of the community.

"These genres are thus strongly associated with what Ryan Milner describes as the meme subculture, which flourishes on specific sites such as 4chan, Tumblr, and Reddit."

(Shifman 2014, 118)

Emergent and established memes

In addition to genre classification, there is a categorization of memes based on their lifecycle. Bradley Wiggins and G Bret Bowers (2014) conceptualize this as three distinct stages: *spreadable media*, *emergent memes*, and *(established) memes*.

Spreadable media is strictly speaking not considered a meme at all, but rather a piece of content that is shared online without any alteration. These are not restricted to online space, but "possess the capacity for broad distribution." (Wiggins & Bowers 2014).

Wiggins and Bowers highlight the movie trailer "Man of Steel" as an example of such *spreadable media*: it is shared and viewed multiple times (42 million views as of this writing) by many internet viewers, but it is not altered in any way. Every time the trailer is shown, reposted, re-uploaded and broadcast on television, it appears in the exact same form it was originally published.

An *emergent meme*, on the other hand, appears when a certain piece of spreadable media is altered, remixed, parodied or otherwise differently interpreted. Say, if someone were to screenshot a frame from the “Man of Steel” trailer and put a humorous caption in it, that would be considered an emergent meme, given that there are no memes that have been made with it before - or at least not to the creator of this meme. The meme is not referring to anything else but the trailer, and therefore does not belong to an overarching meme family, since it is lacking the topic-form-stance unity.

Lastly, the emergent meme can reach the stage of an *established meme* when a group of online users starts remixing it and creating new meme tokens. That same “Man of Steel” meme could reach the established stage if this meme template is picked up and emulated by enough other people, and the referential relationship is established; that is, other people choosing the same frame as the original creator - or even another one (preserving the topic), come up with new captions for it (preserving the form), and carrying on the humorous attitude towards the trailer in general (preserving the stance).

So, why is the new definition better than the old one?

Even though the original concept of a meme is lacking the complexity needed to describe cultural development as a whole, it was reincarnated in the digital space with far more success. The memetic notion was changed and narrowed to describe the evolution of funny pictures on the internet that led to a shift in communication style and perception of cultural events.

The biggest similarity between the new and the old meme is their tendency to spread across human minds. Both definitions represent units of cultural information that spread across human populations, and the most fruitful ones are defined by the amount of minds they were able to reach. However, there are several crucial things that make the new definition of a meme more precise and resilient than Dawkins’ original formulation: some of these are conceptual, whereas others are more technical.

The first conceptual difference is in what counts as a meme - a single idea as opposed to a group of items. Initially, the meme was considered a single (complex) idea that was passed on by the means of a meme vehicle - a written text, a picture, a ritual, or spoken word. This approach was advocated by Dawkins himself, and is called *mentalist-driven*. (Shifman 2014, 37) Another branch of memetics is *behaviour-driven*, and treats memes not as ideas, but as behavior, because, as they claim, memes are inseparable from the *meme vehicles*. Shifman, on the other hand, makes use of the third approach, labeled *inclusive memetic approach*, which combines both the mentalist-driven and the

behavior-driven approaches, and flips Dawkins' definition on its head "by looking at memes not as single ideas or formulas that propagate well, but as groups of content items." (Shifman 2014, 41)

The second conceptual difference is the shift of perspective: while Dawkins imagined the meme to be just as selfish as the gene, and created a metaphor of memes hijacking human brains in order to self-propagate, the researchers of digital culture make it clear that memes are an instrument that is entirely controlled and steered by online users, and exist for the purpose of social bonding (Zappavigna 2012). The third conceptual difference of the internet meme from the Dawkinsian model is the absence of randomness factor during a mutation (read - recreation) of an internet meme: usually, all the changes that happen from one meme token to another are intentional, and come as a result of a creative process. There are, of course, some exceptions to that, such as AI-generated memes, but even those are ultimately controlled by the audience that elevates the memes that are funny and even remotely meaningful, and leaves the rest forgotten.

The technical differences, on the other hand, include the propagation process and the quantifiability of memes. Since internet memes are groups of items and not single ideas, every meme token is created anew, but with the awareness of the overarching meme family and its specific characteristics. In this sense, internet memes are re-created, or "re-produced", in accordance with Sperber (2000, 164), and not merely replicated, as initially postulated by Dawkins. This unquantifiability issue in Dawkins' rudimentary formulation is diametrically opposed to that of modern memes; meme tokens rarely exist as single videos or images in isolation, but rather as *meme clusters* that together form a meme (culture). Internet memes always have digital representations, and do not exist without them. Every meme family has its distinct number of identifiable features or rules, which allows for recreation, reference and ultimate remixing.

The new notion of a meme is in a way more modest in scope than that of Dawkins: it does not describe a process of cultural development as a whole, but rather a very specific, quantifiable aspect of it. This new definition does not have a unifying theory behind it that aims to explain memetic phenomena as a whole - instead, it is an attempt to name and classify a specific newly emerging phenomenon that is playing an increasingly important role in how younger generations communicate and relate to each other.

History of internet memes

Early memes of the internet

The title of the first ever internet meme can be attributed to emoticons. These are a special combination of orthographic symbols that shows a simplified face with a certain emotion expressed, typically :-)) or :-(. These were introduced by Scott E. Fahlman as a solution to a problem of miscommunication, where online users could not tell whether a certain statement is a joke or not in long forum posts. In order to avoid that, Fahlman proposed to put “:-))” after the sentences that were intended as jokes by the author. (Davison 2012, 124)

The attribution of emoticons to internet memes is unproblematic according to Davison’s definition of an internet meme (Davison 2012, 123), but is arguable from Shifman’s standpoint, because emoticons exhibit certain signs of viral texts, or viral posts, which are close to internet memes in their definition, but do not undergo any change whatsoever and are being spread over the internet in a form that is identical to the original. (see Shifman 2012 for further discussion).

However, well before emoticons were ever introduced by Fahlman, Ludwig Wittgenstein arguably anticipated them - as well as memes in general. During one of his lectures at Cambridge university in 1938, he drew three emoticons on the blackboard and claimed that this type of visual language could potentially convey more than adjectives, and was in fact “more flexible and various”. (Wittgenstein 1966) These were not mere offhand remarks, but indicative of a more fundamental language theory. Even in his earlier work “Tractatus Logico-philosophicus”, Wittgenstein emphasized the importance of pictorial forms of communication alongside the linguistic ones. (Wittgenstein 1961) Moreover, in an article dedicated to Wittgenstein’s philosophy of pictures, Kristóf Nyíri explicitly states that “[t]he later Wittgenstein is interpreted as holding a use theory of pictures, according to which pictures by themselves do not carry any meaning; they acquire meaning by being put to specific uses and by being applied in specific contexts.” (Nyíri 2013) Further, he argues that these uses and contexts are primarily defined by language - just like memes that create a “multimodal ensemble” of text and image and become more enriched and complex as a result, as opposed to text or image alone. In this sense, Wittgenstein’s theory has only proven more visionary since the advent of the internet.

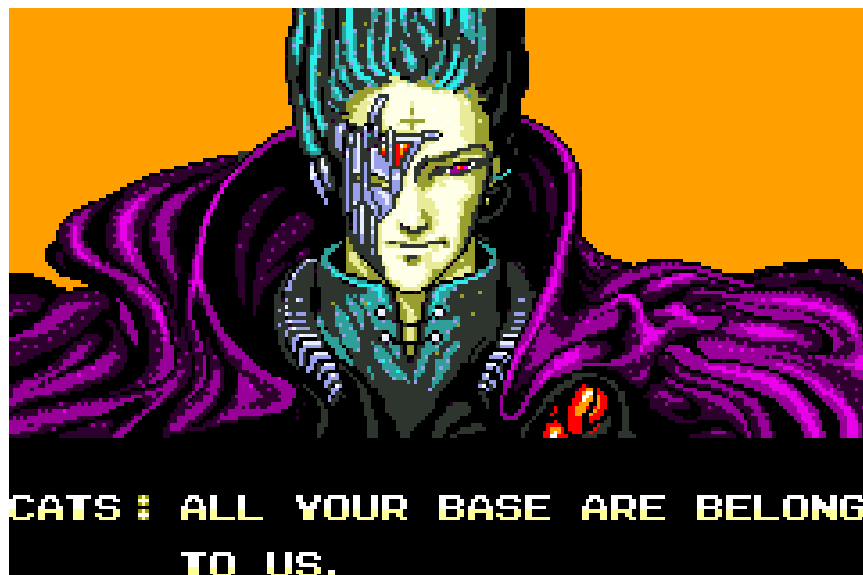
In the 1990s, visual memes were first seen to emerge. These *proto-memes* were typically simple images or animations that were shared between small online communities, often in the form of email chains or forum posts.

One such meme is the "Dancing Baby". It first originated as a 3D animation of a baby dancing to the song "Hooked on a Feeling" by Blue Swede. ("Dancing Baby" 2009) The animation was created by Ron Lussier, who was working for LucasArts studio at the time. This animation was then shared within the company, and eventually made its way into the internet. The "Dancing Baby" quickly became popular, and was featured in several television shows and movies, including "Ally McBeal" and "The Simpsons", and can be found on [YouTube](#), even now. The meme became so popular, in fact, that it even spawned a line of merchandise, including t-shirts, coffee mugs, and stuffed animals. The "Dancing Baby" is considered to be one of the first internet memes, and its popularity helped pave the way for the Cambrian explosion of memes in the years that followed.

The rise of the meme subculture

After Web 2.0 was introduced, allowing for websites that emphasize user-generated content, the spread of memes increased. This led to the appearance of one of the most prevalent forms of internet memes known today - image macros. These represent "captioned images that typically consist of a picture and a witty message or a catchphrase" that create a multimodal (image+text) ensemble of meaning. ("ImageMacros" 2012)

One of the most famous early image macros is "All Your Base Are Belong To Us." It originated from a poorly translated cutscene in the Japanese video game "Zero Wing" (1989). The phrase "All Your Base Are Belong to Us" appeared in the English version of the cutscene, which depicted a group of aliens called the Cats threatening to take over a spaceship. The poor translation, which included several grammatical errors and awkward phrasing, made the dialogue sound humorous and nonsensical. ("All Your Base Are Belong To Us" 2008)



Screenshot of the original "Zero Wing" game. From KnowYourMeme.

The phrase was later shared on the internet in the early 2000s and quickly went viral, and the meme was accompanied by images or videos featuring the phrase. The popularity of the "All Your Base Are Belong to Us" meme was further fueled by a technoremix of the cutscene, which featured a lively beat with the phrase "All Your Base Are Belong to Us" repeated over and over again. It became a hit on various internet forums and file-sharing websites.



A remixed version of the catchphrase featuring Daft Punk collective.
Also from KnowYourMeme.

With the rise of Web 2.0 and user-driven content came the big influx of personal photos, including ones with pets. Around the same time, in 2003, the imageboard 4chan was launched. ("4chan" 2009) These two forces together led to the emergence of LOLcats, the meme family referenced earlier. The name is derived from LOL, internet slang for "Laughing Out Loud", and 'cat'. The stylized, fractured English used for this meme template became known as 'LOLspeak'. It is perhaps no accident that this bears a striking similarity to the earlier "All Your Base Are Belong To Us" meme, sharing a similar broken grammar in its parody of second-language learner mistakes. The comedic thrust of this meme cluster similarly revolves around awkward, ungrammatical English, which in turn is twisted into complex language games. (Gawne & Vaughan 2011) This style of comedy has proven quite tenacious, as LOLspeak was - and in certain communities still is - perceived as highly entertaining

The first known instance of a LOLcat was posted on 4chan in 2005, and the meme quickly gained popularity in other corners of the Internet. In 2007, the website I Can Has Cheezburger? was launched, which allowed users to submit and share their own LOLcats. (“LOLcats” 2008)



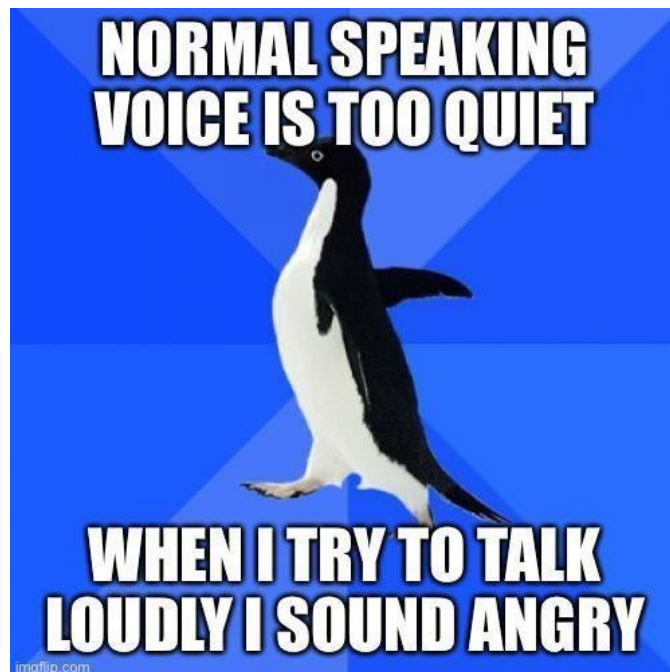
The original “I Can Has Cheezburger” meme token that served as an inspiration for the name of the corresponding website. Source: [KnowYourMeme](#).

As social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram began to gain popularity in the late 2000s and early 2010s, memes began to spread more rapidly and reach larger audiences. “Advice Animals” was one of the most widespread memes of the time. This meme traditionally featured a picture of an animal or human, often a popular or recognizable one, typically portrayed against a colorful background, and accompanied by a caption which offered advice or an opinion in a humorous or satirical way. The top text of the caption would typically set up a joke, and the bottom text would deliver the punchline. (“Advice Animals” 2011)



The early example of an Advice Animals meme, KnowYourMeme.

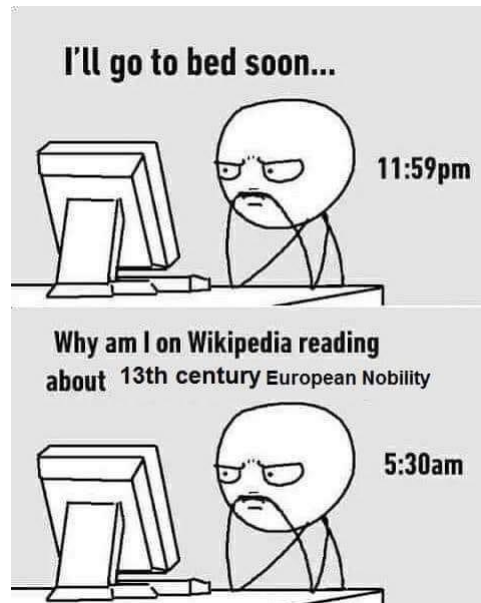
The earliest known example of an Advice Animal meme is "Bad Luck Brian," which was posted on Reddit in 2012. The meme featured a picture of a high school yearbook photo of a teenager named Kyle Craven, with a caption that described a series of unfortunate events in a humorous way. The meme quickly gained popularity, and numerous variations and spin-offs were created, featuring different animals and captions. Some of the most popular Advice Animals include "Success Kid," "Socially Awkward Penguin," and "Scumbag Steve."



Socially awkward penguin meme, KnowYourMeme.

It is the author's impression that ‘*Advice Animals*’ and ‘*Distracted Boyfriend*’ memes are among the most analyzed in the field to pragmatics as it pertains to online communication, even to this day, despite the fact that both these memes would be considered rather dated among younger audiences. (Scott 2021, Scott 2022, Yus 2018, Wiggins & Bowers 2014, Rina et al. 2020, Grundlingh 2017, among others) The exact reason for this is unknown and well beyond the scope of this paper, but it is the author's suggestion that it might have to do with simplicity these meme formats, the clear nature of their messages, and a general lack of shocking or controversial content in their captions - all of which more easily lends itself to analysis.

Another staple of meme culture of the early 2010s was ‘*Rage Comics*’. Just like LOLcats, it first emerged on 4chan message boards around 2008, and revolved around a series of web comics with ‘*rage faces*’, often drawn intentionally poorly, using simple software such as Microsoft Paint. (“Rage Comics” 2011)



“Rage Comics” had a significant impact on internet culture, and their popularity led to the creation of numerous websites and online communities dedicated to sharing and creating new comics. The format was also adopted by advertisers and marketers, who used rage comics as a way to connect with younger audiences and capitalize on the trend's popularity - a trend which persists to this day, even if the meme seems to largely have fallen out of style among its erstwhile fanbase.



Archetypical ‘Rage Comics’ characters include *Rage guy*, *Troll face*, *Forever Alone guy*, “*Me gusta*” guy (depicted below), and many others.



Left to right: Rage guy, Troll face, Forever Alone guy, “Me Gusta” guy. Source: KnowYourMeme.

While ‘Rage Comics’ have since declined in popularity, they remain a significant pillar of internet culture, and have gone on to influence the development of other internet memes and trends - even as the original meme cluster itself has largely died out, with only a few exceptions. In fact, this meme family was later seen substituted by ‘*Wojak comics*’, a sort of spiritual successor to ‘*Rage Comics*’ which also originated on 4chan, and likewise features a whole array of simplistically drawn characters with a similar, but extended pool of archetypes. Though ‘*Wojak Comics*’ generally have more visual detail than traditional ‘*Rage Comics*’, they both share similarities in the situations and reactions depicted - arguably speaking to a similar and persistent need to express the sentiments depicted within the online community, or the cultural overlap between these generations.

Extant ecological community



Mass extinction



Survivors refill vacant environmental niches through speciation



A clear illustration of Wojak filling the cultural niche of the “Rage comics” that internet audience has picked up on over the years. From_KnowYourMeme.

Further spread, irony and subversion

Starting around the second half of the 2010s, the meme subculture entered the *ironic era*. Before this time period, memes were usually comparatively uncomplicated, rather limited in use and dissemination, and even somewhat rudimentary. They were fairly straight-forward in their stance, intended message and audience, and the spread of these memes could be safely considered an act of sincere communication. Of course, even during this time of innocence, not every meme token could be seen as sincere, and ironic utterances were indeed present - but by the advent of the ironic era, irony had started to become a dominant trend among meme culture as a whole. Moving into 2014 and beyond, online space seemed to become oversaturated with ‘sincere’ media

content, and these once hegemonic comedic trends based upon genuinity increasingly lost their luster, especially among younger audiences. (“Ironic Memes” 2015, “Family Guy Effect” 2009) Popular opinion demanded an alternative to the now regurgitative andstagnating meme formats of yesterday.

It was around this time that irony started to become the prevalent mode of online communication. As Markowski (2022, 28) says: “[t]he spread of memes, their ubiquity and overuse led to the rise of communities attempting to distort the message or subvert narrow norms.” With the continued expansion and diversification of the internet audience, meme creators started to look for new, unconventional means of expression and humor, oftentimes going far beyond earlier formats and the boundaries of pre-ironicmemes - leading to results both bizarre and revolutionary.

The most radical changes happened in the form of memes. New meme-makers challenged the old, traditional forms of meme production and invented new ones, including the intentionally awkward cropping of images, nonsensical captions, intentionally crude editing, resolution downscaling, and many more. Others went completely the opposite route, adding excruciating level of detail. Among other things, video-memes became more popular. For instance, many people online during those times might remember the endless “Shooting Stars” edits and “Shrek is Love” - a poorly made amateur animation movie. Apps revolving around short-form video content, such as Vine (later followed by TikTok) also saw a rapid increase in popularity around this time. All of these factors contributed to making memes a ubiquitous cultural force among ever wider audiences.

Moreover, memes started to become more prominently utilized to talk about aspects of life other than generic jokes and puns. An especially striking example of this is the increased popularity of political memes, with many people now using memes to express political opinions and/or engage in political discourse. This gave the discourse a new dimension, enriched the meme vocabulary greatly, and even made it so that certain memes are now associated with certain political groups (Pepe the Frog and the InternetRight wing community, for example).

At this point, meme culture had become such a long-lasting inside joke for the active young internet community that a large part of the point of creating superficially unfunny, cliché-ridden and subversive memes was to make fun of users with less internet experience that do not get them, and to catch those people off-guard. (“Ironic Memes” 2015)

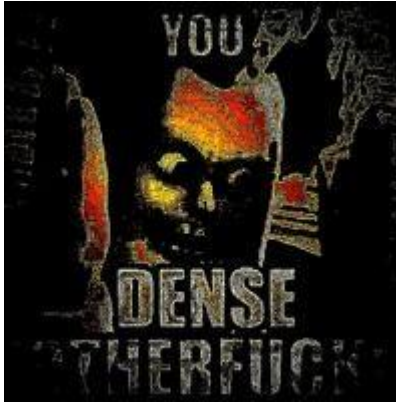
A popular variation of such subversive memes belongs to the subgenre of “Dank Memes”. The name itself is “an ironic expression used to describe online viral media and in-jokes that are intentionally bizarre or have exhausted their comedic value to the point of being trite or cliché.” (“Dank Memes” 2014) In the context of these memes, the word "dank," which was originally used to describe high quality marijuana, is humorously utilized to mean "cool" or "excellent.” (ibid.)



A dank meme token taken from [r/dankmemes](#). The misplacement of the text is intentional.

“Deep Fried Memes” refer to a particular meme family that involves applying numerous filters to an image, resulting in a grainy, washed-out, and oddly colored appearance. These memes are often associated with popular Black Twitter meme accounts (accounts which target or resonate with African Americans as their primary audience). (“Deep Fried Memes” 2017)

“Deep Fried Memes” are humorous because they undergo extensive filtering and JPG compression, resulting in significant distortion of the original image. The name "deep fried" is likely derived from the yellowish tint that appears on images that have been repeatedly screenshotted and uploaded with multiple instances of compression, similar to the color of deep-fried food.

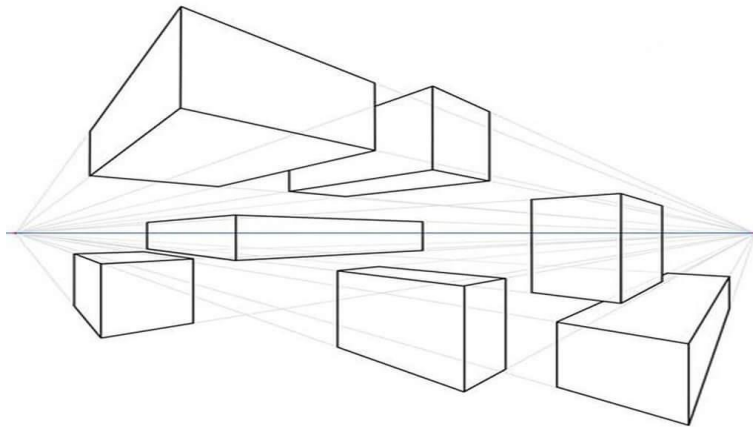


Deep fried meme. Source: [_KnowYourMeme](#).

Surreal Memes belong to the sub-genre of Ironic Memes, featuring bizarre and artistically strange appearances that derive humor from their absurd style. Although the distinction between Surreal Memes, Deep Fried Memes, and Dank Memes is subtle, mostly in visual cues and characters involved, there are certain features and characters that frequently appear in Surreal Memes, alongside their minimalistic design. Before "Surreal Memes" became an umbrella term for the style, various meme families and characters such as Meme Man and Mr. Orange had been used in surreal ways, eventually becoming permanent features of the genre. ("Surreal Memes" 2017)

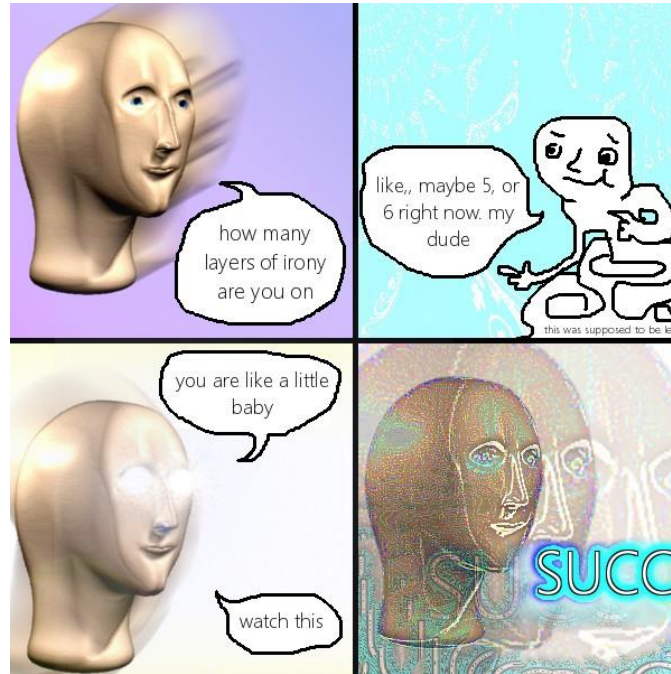
haha its is an

LAUGHTER IMAGE



A surreal meme. From [_KnowYourMeme](#).

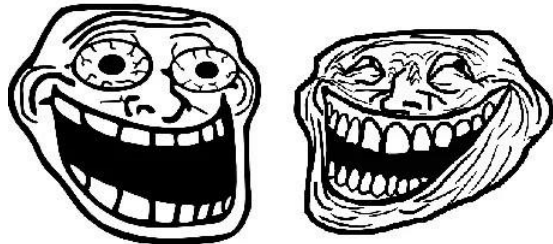
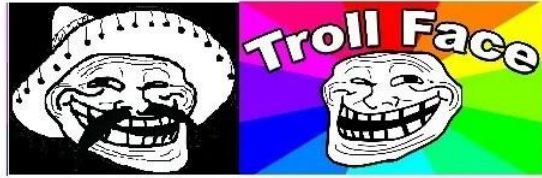
Needless to say, the intentional misspellings and awkward phrasings are integral to memes of this era, continuing the long tradition of internet lingua that began with “All Your Base Are Belong to Us” and LOLspeak.



“Layers of Irony” meme involving the Meme Man. KnowYourMeme.

A particularly bizarre, yet interesting case of remixing happened to the “Rage Comics.” Recently, this declined meme was revitalized in the form of parodies and further remixes of the original Trollface character. Despite the clear link to the “Rage Comics”, the new meme family can hardly be considered the continuation of the series of light-hearted comics. Instead, its stance and topic is completely changed, creating a new, grim universe of disturbing meme tokens, which add a new layer of meaning to the original character.

Troll face then:

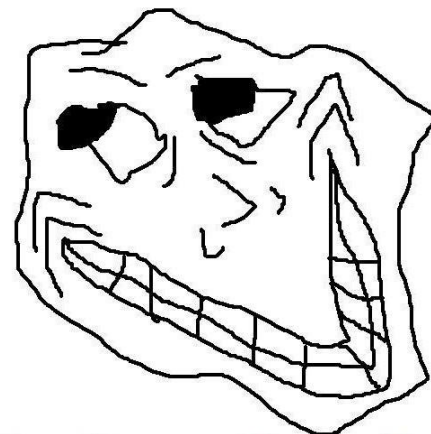


Troll face now:



The new Trollface meme from Memedroid.

The shift of this meme already began in 2012, with the emergence of “Coaxed Into a Snafu”, a meme series that features badly-drawn rage comic and advice animal characters, paired with variations of well-known internet catchphrases. These images were usually meant to ridicule the incorrect use of internet memes on platforms such as Reddit and 9gag. (“Coaxed into a Snafu” 2012)



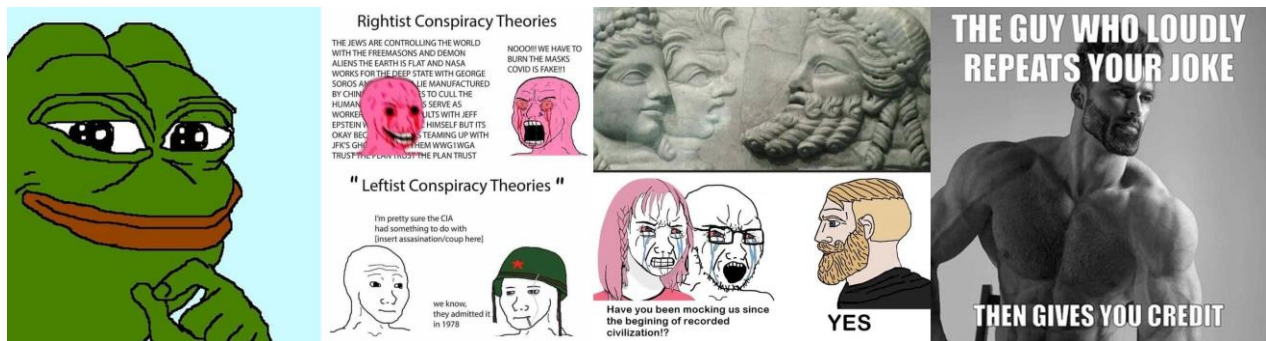
Botherations?

Completely freed from any hint of normality, utterly grotesque and beautifully unhinged. From KnowYourMeme.

The role of imageboards in the meme subculture (the meme underground) and more recent memes

As we have seen, imageboards, particularly 4chan and its predecessor 2chan (*Futaba Channeru*), have played a significant role in shaping the contemporary meme culture, since a lot of influential memes originated or were popularized there. These platforms have created a unique space where users can freely share and develop memes with minimal amount of personal judgement or censorship. The culture of anonymity and multiplicity allows users to explore a wide range of topics and humor styles, free from the limitations of identity-based social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. This has led to the emergence of a distinct type of humor that is often characterized by its ironic and sarcastic tone. In contrast to mainstream social media, where users carefully craft their online personas (such as Facebook and Instagram), image boards provide a space where users can share content without the fear of social backlash. (Chateau 2020) But as much as it was instrumental and vital for the meme culture to prosper, this atmosphere of unruliness has also given rise to a culture that can often be seen as nihilistic and irreverent, sometimes revolving around a range of very dark and controversial themes, such as a depression, suicide, sexual perversion and war crimes - all of which is conveyed with a(n intended) humorous edge, which is not always seen as positive or acceptable outside or even inside these niche sub- communities.

Other prominent meme formats that were popularized on 4chan include “Pepe the Frog”, “Wojak”, as well as “Yes Chad” and “Gigachad” memes. (“Pepe the Frog” 2015, “Wojak” 2015, “Yes Chad” 2019, “GigaChad” 2018)

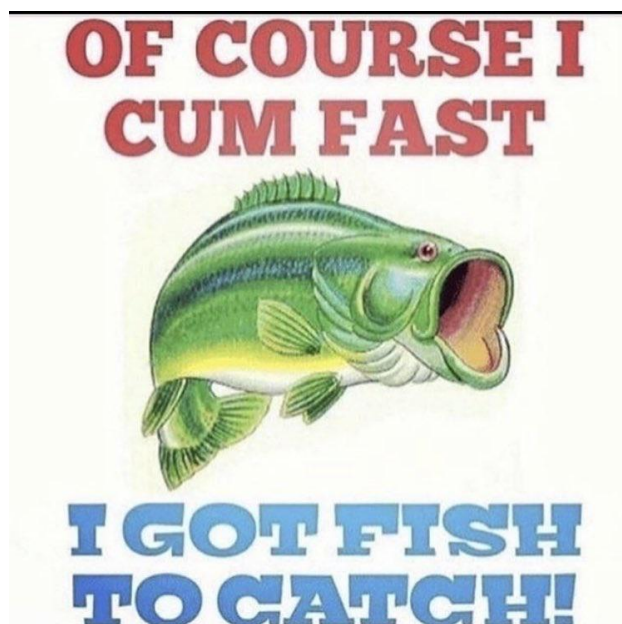


Memes left to right: Pepe, Wojak, Yes Chad, GigaChad. All taken from KnowYourMeme.

Post-ironic and meta-ironic meme

The main part of this thesis chiefly delves into the subject of post-irony and post-ironic memes in particular, which deviate from the conventional styles and structures of pre-ironic memes, and evolve directly from the ironic ones we have just covered. The terms post-irony and meta-irony, often used interchangeably, require a detailed explanation and context, which will be provided later. These modern memes abandon the traditional ironic framework and straightforward satire. They try to avoid the dichotomy of irony and sincerity, instead treating it as a spectrum. The creators of such memes intentionally leave their message vague and ambiguous, which may lead to honesty and distorted truthfulness of the content being mixed together. It is hard to pin down a certain kind of meme family these memes adhere to, since what makes them post-ironic is, in Shifman's terms, not the topic or form, but primarily the stance of the author, which is ultimately unclear.

Hence, such meme tokens may arrive at a certain kind of honesty, but in doing so they would reject cultural norms, making the message appear jocular, too exposing and potentially too vulnerable to be considered truthful by a general public. Conversely, they also may double down on the ironic interpretation, ridiculing the idea presented in the meme, the potential ironic responses to it, or even the very persona of the author. For instance, the meme below could be seen as making fun of people who are obsessed with fishing, those who have underwhelming sexual performance, or both. There is no way to tell without additional context, whether the author is being sincere or not, and the meaning of this meme remains unknown, and for most meme viewers, ultimately irrelevant.



Post-ironic meme taken from [r/memes](#).

Since the beginning of the Web 2.0 era, every public online post has had the potential to be seen by millions. Of course, the real scalability of most online posts was restricted to a narrow number of users who were considered its target audience. However, in some cases, a post intended for a certain kind of audience could be randomly shown to someone outside of it, and there would be no guarantee that the context behind that post would be preserved. (Scott 2022, 12) This feature is at the core of post-ironic memes; it is built in into them from the very start. The joke in most of these memes exists independently of whether or not the viewer is exposed to its surrounding context. Moreover, even if the viewer were to try and access the context of the meme, he would discover that it was intentionally limited by the sharer, or lacking altogether.

Literature review

In order to be able to discuss memes in general, and post-ironic memes specifically, from a pragmatic standpoint, one needs to first establish a certain theoretical framework.

This chapter will thus cover the fundamentals of pragmatic theory - firstly summarizing Grice's Theory of Conversation, and his notion of implicature. Section two will go over Relevance theory, with specific emphasis on relevance-theoretic comprehension heuristic, which will form the thesis' foundation for further analysis.

The third section introduces key works that explore online communication from a pragmatic perspective, represented chiefly by Francesco Yus and Kate Scott. The main point of this section is to outline some similarities and differences between face-to-face communication and its online counterpart, as well as show that memes specifically do in fact fall under the domain of pragmatics. This section also introduces the notion of layering in communication, and how it relates to meme culture.

The last section is dedicated to the main theories of irony that exist in pragmatics, and how this phenomenon is defined within that field. Starting with Grice's approach to irony, it then moves on to cover a relevance-theoretic view on irony. It briefly reviews the main theory of irony in use today - the *echoic approach* - and tangentially mention its main counterpart, the *pretence approach*.

Gricean pragmatics and the notion of implicature

Cooperative principle & Maxims of Conversation

As speakers, we often convey more than just the literal meaning of our words. We rely on a wide array of concepts, set expressions, metaphors, and intonations. One of the things we depend on in having effective communication is social context. Our communicative intentions extend beyond pure semantics - they create an additional layer of meaning known as pragmatic meaning. This type of meaning is heavily context-dependent, so we rely on our audience to

correctly interpret the circumstances of a given situation and fill in any gaps that may occur during the communication process.

Paul Grice, a philosopher of language and prominent figure in the field of pragmatics, developed a Theory of Conversation, where he made an attempt to describe these conversational rules. This theory includes the Maxims of Conversation, which are ultimately governed by the Cooperative Principle.

Grice noticed this tendency of social exchanges to follow in a “mutually accepted direction” (Grice 1989, 26), and pointed out that depending on the direction the conversation is headed, certain conversational moves are rendered more suitable - or probable - than others, and some are simply considered improper. From that, Grice derived a universal principle, the Cooperative Principle, a default expectation for any rational conversation based on good faith: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.” (Grice 1989: 26)

In effect, this postulates that speakers should be as cooperative as possible in conveying their intended meaning. In Grice’s view, this involves concise, clear, appropriate, and contextually-related contributions to the conversation. The ultimate aim of any genuine conversation is to successfully convey messages, and understanding the principles that facilitate this process can shed light on how meaning is created and interpreted. Grice suggests that the speaker's goal of effectively transmitting messages should be seen as essential to understanding how meaning is derived from language.

Thus, the principles that guide effective communication can be helpful in explaining how meaning is attributed to utterances.

Aside from the general principle of conversational cooperation, Grice defines four categories, under which certain aspects of that principle might fall - called Maxims - and they follow thus:

1. The Maxim of Quantity, which relates to the quantity of information provided during the conversation, further divided into two sub-maxims:
 - a. “Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).”
 - b. “Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.”
2. The Maxim of Quality - “try to make your contribution one that is true.” This one also goes into more specifics:
 - a. “Do not say what you believe to be false.”
 - b. “Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.”

3. The Maxim of Relevance - simply “be relevant.”
4. The Maxim of Manner, which does not directly relate to what is said, but instead to *how* it is said.
 - a. “Avoid obscurity of expression.”
 - b. “Avoid ambiguity.”
 - c. “Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).”
 - d. “Be orderly.”

(Grice 1989, 26-27)

It is important to mention, however, that both the Cooperative Principle and the Conversational Maxims were never intended as actual rules of conversation, but rather as a description of behavior that speakers can *typically expect* during a rational social exchange. Moreover, that principle is intended for a certain category of conversations where both parties are mutually interested in productive information exchange. There are, of course, many other categories of exchanges that are situated in a different context, where one of the conversational partners might not be equally motivated in the exchange, or even not motivated at all - for example, during a court hearing or interrogation, where it is in the culprit’s best interest to not give any truthful information at all, as it might compromise his or her position. (Allott 2018, 8) The Cooperative Principle does not apply in situations like these. Grice himself limits the scope of the principle:

“observance of the Cooperative Principle and Maxims is reasonable (rational) along the following lines: that anyone who cares about the goals that are central to conversation/communication ... must be expected to have an interest, given suitable circumstances, in participation in talk exchanges that will be profitable only on the assumption that they are conducted in general accordance with the Cooperative Principle and the Maxims.”

(Grice 1989, 30)

Implicatures

Another part of Grice’s theory lies in differentiating between the linguistic meaning of a given utterance, and its unspoken, but inferred pragmatic messages. In other words, according to Grice, every utterance consists of two integral parts: what is said and what is implicated. In order to discern the two, pragmatists use the notion of implicature to mark the part of the utterance that the speaker intentionally implies, but does not explicitly state. Refined over the years, the notion of implicature derived by Grice has become a staple of modern pragmatics.

It is important to note, however, that in Grice's original work, the term *implicature* was reserved to speak about the act of implicating something, and the implicated message itself was called *implicatum*, but the latter term never caught on. (Grice 1989, 24; Allott 2018, 2)

Grice distinguishes between two types of implicature: conventional and conversational. Conventional implicature relies on shared knowledge of conventional meanings of words or phrases, and are communicated through the use of specific linguistic devices, such as scalar implicature, presupposition, and conventional expressions. These implicatures are not "what is said" in Grice's sense, but they are still part of the conventional, or linguistic meaning of the utterance.

A typical example of conventional implicature would be "He is an Englishman, therefore he is brave." Here, the linguistic meaning of the conjunction *therefore* leads us to the assumption that the proposition expressed by the first clause "He is an Englishman" is presented as causally connected to the proposition expressed by the second clause "he is brave." We understand that the complete meaning of the utterance is that the reason for that man's bravery is on account of him being an Englishman, and that Englishmen naturally possess this quality. Here, the use of *therefore* establishes the conventional implicature.

Other pragmatists, especially relevance-theorists, have challenged the notion of conventional implicature, claiming that there exists no such thing; they argue that, by definition, no implicature can be part of the linguistic meaning of an utterance, and therefore decoded from it. In their view, the phenomenon which Grice calls conventional implicature is in fact part of explicit communication - not an implicit one. (Sperber & Wilson 1995, 182; Blakemore 1987; Wilson & Sperber 1993, 13-14)

Conversational implicatures, on the other hand, are not at all part of the linguistic meaning of the utterance, and cannot be encoded there. They can only be worked out based on the context of a given conversation. Nicholas Allott (2018, 2) neatly outlines four features that are characteristic of conversational implicature:

1. The speaker intentionally implies it by making an utterance.
2. The implicature is part of the utterance, or "speaker meaning."
3. The implicature "does not contribute to the direct (or explicit) utterance content."
4. The implicature is "not encoded by the linguistic meaning of what has been uttered." An

example of conversational implicature would be the following exchange:

(1) A: Ahh, this cake is delicious. Would you like some?

B: I'm on a diet.

Here, B does not directly answer the question posed by A, and, on the surface, she is breaking the Relevance Maxim. However, A is still able to infer that B is denying the offer through a chain of logical conclusions: ‘B is on a diet, so she is not likely to consume a lot of processed sugar. Cake contains lots of processed sugar. Therefore, B is declining A’s offer.’ This way, despite the seeming uncooperativeness, B provides certain cues for A to be able to work out the complete meaning of her utterance, and if A successfully decodes them, the communication is still effective, and the Cooperative Principle is therefore not broken. Further, A might infer that B *wants* to accept the offer, but feels obligated to decline - conveying an inner struggle that might be hard to communicate explicitly; illustrating how implicature in fact can make for more effective, succinct communication, as per Grice’s first and fourth Maxims (regarding brevity).

Since this thesis adheres to a relevance-theoretic framework, which does not agree with the notion of conventional implicature, all conversational implicatures from this point forward will be referred to simply as *implicature*.

Properties and strengths of implicatures

Implicatures have four distinct properties. The first, and most important one, is **calculability**. Any implicature can be worked out rationally by the hearer, since it is implied and inferred, as opposed to being encoded and decoded linguistically. The addressee should be able to pick up on the implicature, given the utterance and the circumstances under which it was produced. (Allott 2018, 13)

The second property of implicature is their **cancelability**. Since they are not part of linguistically encoded meaning and are only inferred, implicatures can be cancelled, given additional context. Consider a revised version of the cake example:

(1’) A: Ahh, this cake is delicious. Would you like some? B:
I’m on a diet, but I think I will have some anyway.

Here, B explicitly cancels the implicature made in the first part of her utterance by adding the second part. Note, however, that it is only possible with the part of the utterance that is inferred, but not linguistically encoded. That is, if B were to respond with “I’m on a diet, but I’m not on a diet”, that would not (seem to) make any sense, because they are directly contradicting what they just uttered.

The third property of implicature is **non-detachability**. This means that an implicature does not depend on the exact lexical items used in the utterance, and does not disappear, were one to rephrase that utterance with other words. For example, if instead of a response produced in (1) B were to say “I am on a strict regimen where I only consume the food that is low in carbohydrates”, the implicature produced would not go

away, or change in meaning. However, non-detachability is not a necessary or exclusive property of implicature. (See Allott 2018 for further discussion)

The last property is **indeterminacy**. Not every implicated message is determinate and clear, and may vary from one utterance to another. Some utterances may also implicate something completely indeterminate, evoking an array of several weaker implicatures, rather than a singular, stronger one.

Strong implicatures are those that the speaker intentionally implies; they are easier to work out for the addressee based on the context, and contain one clear idea. They are often times directly necessary for the adequate interpretation of the utterance. Weak implicatures are less obvious, may not be as easily recognizable, and not as strongly intended by the speaker, if intended at all. (Clark 2013, 235-237)

Weak implicatures are quite common in literary language. Take Shakespeare's "Juliet is the sun." This utterance does not have any single strong implicature, but conveys several weaker ones, such as 'Juliet is beautiful', 'Juliet brings me joy', 'I think fondly of Juliet', 'Whenever Juliet is around, my mood improves', and so on. It is not to say that the speaker (in this case, Romeo) means any one of these in isolation, but rather all of them together, and encourages the listener (or reader) to consider at least some of them as part of the meaning of his utterance. (Allott 2018, 16) This way, instead of relying on one strong implicature, the writer relies on several weak ones, creating a certain 'cloud' of meaning, as opposed to a single 'dot' represented by a strong implicature. This notion of weak and strong implicatures is not attributed to Grice, but to Relevance Theory pragmatists, chiefly Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber. (Sperber & Wilson 1995, 195-200)

Relevance Theory

Grice's framework laid the foundation for all of modern pragmatics, and introduced terms that are still in use today, such as implicature. However, as any pioneering attempt, the framework itself proved to be somewhat lacking in certain nuance. It did not account for all kinds of communication, and did not explain some aspects of others thoroughly enough - such as irony, as we will see later. Pragmatists of the Neo-Gricean school have introduced several variations upon Grice's original theory, such as Horn and Levinson's attempt to reduce the number of maxims down to their very essentials (Horn 1984; 2004; Levinson 2000), and Leech, who, conversely, extended the original list by adding ten more maxims of Politeness. (Leech 1977; 2014)

These analyses are not uncontested, however. (As evidenced by Sperber and Wilson's work on Relevance Theory) Among these non-Gricean pragmatics, perhaps the most compelling alternative was developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1995), dubbed Relevance Theory (RT). As opposed to Grice's maxim-like treatment, RT takes a cognitivist approach to communication, and focuses not on what speakers aim to follow during communication (Cooperative Principle), but makes generalizations about what they actually do based on human cognition.

The central claim of Relevance Theory is that "[s]omeone who engages in any kind of ostensive behaviour intentionally draws some attention to himself" and makes manifest the assumption that "he is trying to be relevant." (Sperber & Wilson 1995, 53-54) When directing someone's attention to something, we convey our belief that it will be worth their while to focus on it, and that their attention will yield certain cognitive benefits.

Relevance theory posits that pragmatic interpretation mechanisms and heuristics are activated not only by speech, but by any action that "clearly communicates an *intention to communicate*" (Clark 2013: 113; emphasis added), extending the scope of pragmatics beyond just language to all forms of ostensive communication. Sperber and Wilson reject Grice's notion that every speaker strives to abide the Cooperative principle or any other communicative convention, and instead simply exploits the potential relevance that may be present in utterances they produce, because the search for relevance is a basic feature of human cognition. (Wilson & Sperber 2004, 608)

The backbone of relevance-theoretic approach to pragmatics consists of two principles of relevance, which in turn give rise to the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure - a process of utterance interpretation.

Cognitive Principle of Relevance

Since Relevance Theory is a general approach to human cognition, it extends beyond pragmatics, and applies to anything that concerns the way we acquire and process information. Because of the way our cognitive systems have evolved over time, they argue, we are naturally predisposed to search for the most relevant stimuli in the environment, in order to use the processing resources available to us in the most effective way possible. Therefore, the Cognitive Principle of Relevance goes thus:

“Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance.”

(Wilson & Sperber 2004, 610)

In an RT-framework, an input is only relevant when it connects with the information an individual has available from before, and interacts with it in such a way as to yield new conclusions that are useful to that individual in some way or another. For example, we may consider relevant a honk of a car that is moving towards us from behind, a book that broadens our knowledge in a certain topic, or an answer to a question we have been dwelling on. In scientific terms, an input is relevant to a cognitive system (an individual), when it yields *positive cognitive effects* by being processed in juxtaposition with the assumptions available. In the original work, a positive cognitive effect is defined as “a cognitive effect that contributes positively to the fulfilment of cognitive functions or goals.” (Sperber & Wilson 1995, 265)

There are 4 types of positive cognitive effects:

1. Contextual implication. This is the most important type of positive cognitive effects, and it is “deducible from input and context together, but from neither input nor context alone.” (Wilson & Sperber 2004, 608)
2. Strengthening of the pre-existing assumptions.
3. Revision of these assumptions.
4. Abandonment of the assumptions no longer rendered useful.

Moreover, relevance is a matter of degree. Some ostensive stimuli are more relevant than others, depending on how big of a positive cognitive effect they produce, and how much effort is required to process them. Suppose a friend tells us one of the three following sentences:

(1) Let's meet sometime in May.

(2) Let's meet this Thursday at 6 p.m. at my place.

(3) Let's meet at the day that follows the closest full moon, 64800 seconds after midnight strikes, in the place that is 2 km away from your home, but only 1 km away from the city center.

Out of these three, it is natural to assume that most would prefer (2), because it gives all the essential information one needs to know and is easiest to deduce. (1) is also easily processed, but gives less information to work with, and (3) could theoretically yield the exact same information as (2), and perhaps more information, but requires more effort to process by far, as well as seeking out additional information to decode (such as checking the lunar calendar). All in all, “when similar amounts of effort are required, the

effect factor is decisive, and when similar amounts of effect are achievable, the effort factor is decisive.” (Wilson & Sperber 2004, 610)

Communicative Principle of Relevance

With the Cognitive Principle laid out as a base, Wilson and Sperber move on to analyze inferential communication specifically, and introduce the Communicative Principle of Relevance, which reads thus:

“Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance.”

(Wilson & Sperber 2004, 612)

In Relevance Theory, the inferential communication is called ostensive-inferential communication, because it has two levels of intention instead of one: the informative intention (to inform an audience of something), and the communicative one (to inform the audience of one’s informative intention). Mutual comprehension is achieved when the communicative intention was fulfilled - and with it, the informative one was recognized. The mutual understanding can be achieved with the use of *ostensive stimuli* which are designed to attract the audience’s attention and focus it on the speaker.

According to RT, these ostensive stimuli create expectations of relevance that surpass those of other inputs, following from the Cognitive Principle of Relevance. (Wilson & Sperber 2004, 611)

The *Presumption of Optimal Relevance* created by the use of such ostensive stimuli means that the audience is expecting two things:

- a. The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough to be worth the audience’s processing effort.
- b. It is the most relevant one compatible with communicator’s abilities and preferences.

(Wilson & Sperber 2004, 612)

Here, in clause (b), the combination of ability and preference is key. The speaker assures the audience that she will produce the most relevant ostensive stimulus that she is willing and able to produce. And if the result of her communicative intention is non-ostensive behavior (like complete silence), it could indicate that adequately communicating her intent is beyond the speaker’s ability or willingness. This differs from the traditional Gricean view, which tends to disregard unwillingness to cooperate as a factor, on account of its fundamental Cooperative Principle. In fact, this notion of disinclination towards cooperation by means of non-ostensive behavior and vague communication is a key feature of post-ironic meme culture, which suggests that they cannot be understood through a traditional Gricean lens.

Relevance-guided comprehension heuristic

Both the principles of relevance presented above, as well as the presumption of optimal relevance, provide a tool for theoretical and practical analysis as it pertains to the decoding of utterances in context. This *Relevance-Theoretic Comprehension Heuristic*, when boiled down, consists of two clauses:

- a. Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility.
- b. Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied (or abandoned).

(Wilson & Sperber 2004, 613)

In most communication, especially oral, the utterances are made as easy to understand as possible, due to the factors mentioned above. It makes sense for the hearer to reach for the first satisfactory interpretation of an utterance, as its ease of access itself gives it a certain plausibility. It also makes sense for the hearer to choose only one possible interpretation. That way, he can avoid ambiguity while interpreting the speaker's meaning, in order to maximize the relevance of said utterance and spare himself further processing effort.

However, as we have seen with weak implicatures, one clear and unambiguous meaning is not always possible to achieve. In these cases, one might assume that the speaker is intentionally obscuring the utterance, forcing the hearer to spend more time and processing effort in order to decode it - but this in return offers a much greater degree of relevance. In other words, the speaker implicitly promises that the additional processing effort spent decoding the vague, figurative utterance will yield more fruitful positive cognitive effects (associations, connotations, inferences, etc.) for the hearer, rather than a series of singular and uncomplicated ones.

Explicature: said or implicated?

This rejection of the Cooperative Principle is not RT's only major deviation from Gricean thinking. Another is the difference between explicit and implicit communication. Grice, for his part, had only one classification of this: what is *said*, and what is *implicated*.

Everything that is said is categorized as *explicit communication*, and everything that is not is *implicit communication*. However, Sperber and Wilson challenge this assumption. Whereas Grice had only one distinction, RT has two: firstly, between linguistically encoded content, and the content that is pragmatically inferred, and secondly, between what is stated explicitly, and what is stated implicitly in the utterance. (Allott 2018, 12)

Applying the two distinctions simultaneously, one yields a more nuanced analysis than Grice's binary framing. The lexical content of the utterance would fall on the former side of both categories: it is both linguistically encoded and explicitly stated (Gricean what is said). The

implicatures fall on the latter side of both: they are pragmatically inferred and stated implicitly. However, there are things that are also linguistically encoded, but only implicitly stated. In RT terms, these are called *explicatures*. (Sperber & Wilson 1995, 182) Just as implicatures, they are not explicitly pronounced in the utterance, but they are still dictated by the linguistically encoded content, which means they are not pragmatically inferred. A typical example of an explicature would be this exchange:

- (4) *Alan*: Do you want to join us for supper?
- (5) a. *Lisa*: No, thanks. I've eaten.
b. *Lisa*: No, thanks. I've [already] eaten [tonight].

As is, both (5a) and (5b) produce the same effect on the hearer. Lisa could have dropped the content put in square brackets and still be understood by Allan. However, that content is still stated in (5a), but only implicitly so. It represents a development of the logical form encoded by the explicit part of the utterance, and is therefore considered an explicature. (Sperber & Wilson 1995, 182)

Ambiguity and layering in communication

In the 1987 précis (or review) of Sperber & Wilson's original work, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Morgan and Green raise a valid objection to Relevance Theory's perceived tendency of dismissing the ambiguity in communication. While Sperber & Wilson claim that the addressee tends to land on the first satisfactory utterance interpretation, Morgan and Green provide an example from a movie *Amadeus*, where that is not the case. In the movie excerpt, Salieri asks Mozart for his opinion on Salieri's piece he has just heard, upon which Mozart declares: "I never thought such music was possible." (Sperber & Wilson 1987, 727) Even though the sentence is syntactically and semantically unambiguous, Salieri is confused by this response, unable to work out whether Mozart is praising or mocking his music. In cases like these, Relevance Theory seems to suggest that the communication should fail, because the addressee is confronted with two essentially different, but relevant interpretations and is unable to choose just one. However, as Morgan and Green point out, the communication in their example succeeds rather than fails, because Mozart was intentionally vague. "Either way Mozart wins, by communicating ambiguously." (Sperber & Wilson 1987)

In their response, Sperber & Wilson invoke the notion of layered communication as a solution to this problem. They essentially claim that if an utterance is deliberately ambiguous and seems to be failing on the first layer of communication, it illustrates a point on a higher, second-level (or n-level) communication. In the particular example of *Amadeus*, Mozart intentionally makes a vague statement in order to show the lack of mutual understanding between him and Salieri. Thus, even though the utterance may seem ambiguous at first, Relevance Theory admits to such

cases being successful, if there is an overarching communicative intention on a higher level. (Sperber & Wilson 1987, 751) Such ambiguous utterances are considered a class of weak communication in Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 2015, Gibbs 2000), with post-irony falling under that category. This makes the notion of layering in communication instrumental in explaining the communicative intention of post-ironic utterances (and memes).

Cyberpragmatics and the pragmatics of memes

General cyberpragmatics

How different are online and offline communication?

In 2001, Francesco Yus coined the term *cyberpragmatics*, denoting a field of pragmatics primarily focused on internet-mediated communication. Its scope also extended to how internet users access contextual information needed to fill in the gaps and properly interpret utterances typed by other users, given the ‘limited’ nature of virtual encounters, as opposed to face-to-face interactions. Some of the basic hypotheses that cyberpragmatics operate on are directly adopted from Relevance Theory - that is, that addressers have a communicative intention they wish to convey, which gives rise to the presumption of optimal relevance on the part of the addressee. Utilizing inferential strategies and contextual cues in order to decode the text message in accordance with the Cognitive Principle of Relevance, addressers (generally) expect their interlocutors to have access to all necessary contextual clues, and that the attributes of different media (e-mail, message apps, post histories, profile page, etc.) influence the user’s access to and quality of contextual information, thereby altering possible interpretations and processing effort expended decoding the utterance. (Yus 2011)

As is evident from these hypotheses, online and offline communication works according to the same fundamental principles of human cognition - an opinion shared not only by Yus, but by scholars such as Scott (2022) and Locher (2010). Despite the virtual nature of online communication, it is just as ‘real’ as offline communication, in the sense that it triggers the exact same mechanisms and reactions in us, despite the person we are speaking to not being physically present. The main difference is the medium of communication and differing forms of accessing context, as opposed to accessibility itself.

Though some critics, such as Yus, might still argue that online communication is inferior or somehow lacking compared to offline discourse because it happens chiefly through text-based formats and thus lacks most of the social cues present in face-to-face discourse. It is the author’s impression that this is true - albeit only in part. With time, users have adapted to the online medium, and developed many strategies to enrich internet-mediated interactions with cues that are arguably equally valid, and similarly inaccessible during face-to-face exchanges (Scott 2022). For instance, we can attach images and videos to our messages, send voice recordings,

include direct links to referenced information, utilize a plethora of emojis to express our emotional state, and even utilize text itself in ✨cReAtivE✨ ways in order to convey a certain tone. It is the author's personal belief that online communication is in no way impoverished in comparison to offline discourse; it simply offers a different array of expressive and communicative means that new, digital-native generations have developed as a result of extended exposure to the environment of online communication.

Online identity and anonymity

Many might have experienced the striking contrast of some people's face-to-face identity and their online persona. This has become increasingly apparent in the recent years, with the aforementioned surge of content saturation on the internet, and the lengths content creators go to in order to keep their viewer base engaged. Yus (2011, 37) defines a virtual identity as a combination of "the social context and the personal contribution to the community by using certain discursive forms (of a textual, visual or multimodal kind)". He also mentions that the core human tendency to use social networks as anchors for identity - that is, to base and reinforce your identity based on the people surrounding you - is also present in cyberspace.

He goes on to say that "people do not turn into different people in either of the environments (offline/online), but provide a different image, divide their identity into physical and virtual sides of the self." (Yus 2011, 37) Thus, even in the cases of extreme discrepancies between the offline and online identity counterparts, we are looking at the same person, albeit from a completely different angle. When online, people might feel more free to express certain parts of themselves they might otherwise keep hidden, and say things they might not say otherwise, since users do not have a physical presence during communicative activity when they are online. This reduces the amount of responsibility a person has while communicating with others, especially when their virtual identity solely consists of a nickname that is virtually untraceable, and when they can disconnect from the discourse at any moment, if they so wish. (Scott 2022, 29)

This phenomenon is widespread on anonymized platforms, chiefly imageboards such as 4chan. Even among what might be called *identity-based media*, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, which can only be accessed through verification in the form of phone number or e-mail, it is still easily possible to create anonymous accounts.

Moreover, even when people comply with the unspoken rules of identity-based social media and willingly make their virtual identity as consistent with their offline one as possible, discrepancies can and will still occur, as a natural and unavoidable result of the different medium. These replica identities arguably often end up as carefully curated online image that only exhibit certain personality traits, and omits others, based on the person's conscious or unconscious bias in how they wish to present themselves. This is known as *The Happiness Effect*, which describes the pressure a lot of social media users might feel to always and solely

present their best and happiest sides online, and hide away any sad and difficult part of their lives - which in turn leads to an illusion of a happy, light-hearted and worry-free life which not only does not correspond with reality, but serves to reproduce similar effects in others, like a self-reinforcing social feedback loop. In the words of Freitas: “[B]ecause young people feel so pressured to post happy things on social media, most of what everyone sees from their peers are happy things; as a result, they often feel inferior because they aren’t actually happy all the time.” (Freitas 2017: 14)

This phenomenon will later be seen to contribute to the rise of depression memes and the overall trend of self-deprecation, both serious and jocular, on social media. This will be discussed in more detail in the analysis section below.

The pragmatics of sharing

In a way, any act of posting content online could be considered ‘*sharing*’, in the sense of disseminating information or content for the consumption of others. In this way, the entire field of cyberpragmatics could perhaps be rebranded as ‘the pragmatics of content sharing’. However, in the online world, *sharing* (or *retweeting*, *reposting*, etc.) typically refers to users distributing and redistributing content which they did not create themselves. For the sake of clarity, the thesis consistently utilizes the term introduced by Kate Scott for this type of regurgitative online activity, *rebroadcasting*. (Scott 2022, 41) This notion is central to the thesis’ analysis, as most meme sharing is in effect rebroadcasting. Speaking proportionally, it is a relatively small part of internet users which create meme tokens, and an even smaller number takes part in the formation of new meme families. The rest of the online community is divided into two broad categories, which can often be seen to overlap: meme broadcasters, and meme enjoyers.

**Mediocre meme
rebroadcasting fan**



Average meme enjoyer



“Average fan vs. average enjoyer” meme token (created by the author for illustrative purposes)

Users may rebroadcast other's content for various reasons. Some of the most common ones include:

- a. saving content for future personal access;
- b. amplifying or spreading content to new audiences;
- c. entertaining or informing a specific audience, rebroadcasting as an act of curation;
- d. rebroadcasting content and attaching your own comments, often in order to start a conversation;
- e. making one's presence as a listener visible;
- f. publicly agreeing with someone, or validating someone's thoughts
- g. rebroadcasting as an act of friendship, loyalty, or homage
- h. rebroadcasting for self-gain, either to grow your own audience or gain reciprocity from more visible participants.

(Scott 2022)

All of these are general to any type of social media, and the reasons for rebroadcasting can overlap. For example, we can retweet a post because we think our followers may find it interesting (b), while also using the retweet to express an opinion about the topic and potentially start a discussion (d).

As laid out above, Relevance Theory has broadened the field of pragmatics to account for not only written and spoken utterances, but for all kinds of ostensive communication. (Sperber & Wilson 1995, 53-54) Rebroadcasting fits into this categorization of ostensive communication; when we are reposting something, we make a certain piece of content appear in the feed of everyone who is *following* (or *subscribed*) to our social media profile - which is to say that we are intentionally attracting our audience's attention to a certain piece of content, and in so doing, we are raising a presumption of relevance in their minds. In a way, rebroadcasting content can thus be compared to traditional acts of showing something during face-to-face interactions, such as a home video or vacation photo, and especially with regards to *directive pointing*. (Pepp et. al 2019) Showing, in turn, is considered an act of ostensive communication: according to Sperber and Wilson (1995, 49), there is "no point in drawing someone's attention to a phenomenon unless it will seem relevant enough to him to be worth his attention". In this light, one could argue that rebroadcasting, and meme sharing by extension, falls directly under the domain of pragmatics as acts of ostensive communication.

Online reach and inconsistent context

During (offline) face-to-face communication, it is only possible (or at least practical) to convey our message to the people physically close to us, as opposed to video calling someone through an online messenger service. When we post something online, depending on the website we choose, each of our posts has the potential to be viewed by millions. In theory, this allows anyone to be a media outlet. Even so, regardless of the theoretically possible *reach* (how many people are exposed to our shared content) of our post, it is far from a guarantee that it will be so high. (Scott 2022, 12) As online users do not have full control over who sees their public posts, they may lose control of the context their utterances are interpreted in, which could be considered of pragmatic interest.

Perhaps one of the clearest and most notorious examples of such unwanted viral spread is Barbra Streisand's lawsuit against photographer Kenneth Adelman. In 2003, Streisand sued Adelman, as well as the website pictopia.com, for 50 million US dollars, claiming violation of privacy. As it happened, some of the photographs Adelman had taken as part of his contribution to the California Coastal Records Project coincidentally showed Streisand's mansion. The project contained 12,000 other photographs, with the intent of illustrating the degree of coastal erosion, in an attempt to influence American policy-makers - as opposed to specifically expose Streisand's place of residence in anyway. However, the lawsuit's attempt to purge the photo from the public sphere infamously had the complete opposite effect: the original website saw an explosion of user views, and the picture of Streisand's mansion ended up being downloaded and exported to numerous other websites, for the sole purpose of showing her house to the public (this phenomenon would later become known as *doxing*). This incident was dubbed the '*Streisand effect*' - a phenomenon that occurs when an attempt to suppress or remove information from the internet results in greater public attention or awareness of that information. ("Streisand effect" 2006)

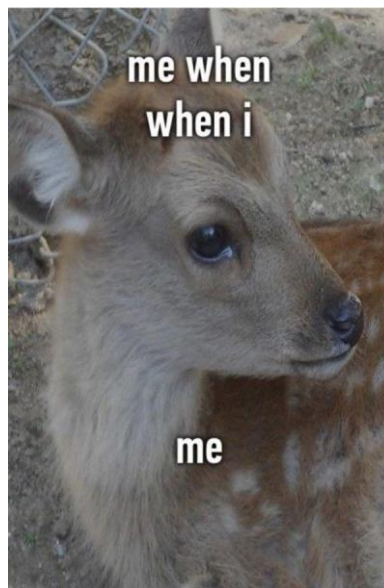
The pragmatics of memes

To a large degree, the same mechanism of context manipulation (as in the Streisand effect) can be observed within meme culture - in fact, it might even be considered the norm, or part of the comedic thrust of these appropriations. Many pictures that have since become associated with famous meme families - such as 'Bad Luck Brian', 'Distracted Boyfriend', 'Excavator Digging Out Suez Canal Ship', and many others - were not originally intended as such. Moreover, a vast majority of memes based on typos or slips of tongue are all subject to context manipulation, such as the iconic '*All Your Base Are Belong To Us*' meme. Later on, even ready-made regurgitative memes have become subject to context manipulation. This tendency has only increased in the era of (post-)irony, becoming ever

more intricate - so much so that the underlying messages have become almost ubiquitously vague, ambiguous and absurd. To this day, context manipulation is becoming ever more prevalent in meme generation, which pragmatically makes them immensely interesting yet challenging to research, as they seem to progress and evolve much quicker than their field of research.

When looked at through the pragmatic lens, memes might be reliably considered ostensive communicative acts, as they are often rebroadcast by internet users and shared privately, in personal messages. As memes usually combine visual and textual (or even audial) dimensions, they are most often multimodal (Yus 2019). This is in fact what makes them different from the simple act of showing, as the multimodal nature of memes helps to convey far more complex messages. As Scott puts it, “The user could, of course, choose to share an unedited version of an image or photograph. This in itself would be an act of showing. However, when an image is edited and labels are added, it becomes what Jewitt (2013: 254-255) calls a “multimodal ensemble”.” (Scott 2021, 9)

Moreover, the informative intention of a meme is not always clear. Sometimes, it may seem that there is no informative intention at all - just a superficial communicative one. In other words, a desire to communicate *for the sake of communication itself*. This is even more true for post-ironic memes in particular (illustrated below).



Example of a post-ironic meme (note the classic broken grammar and text-animal juxtaposition, and the (post-)ironic subversion by nonsensical repetition and abrupt abortion of the initial proposed premise)

All of this illustrates the distinct divergence of (post-)ironic memes from the classic utterances often analyzed in pragmatics - though they are not entirely without precedence. As Zappavigna (2012, 101) writes: “memes are deployed for social bonding rather than for sharing information.” Meme tokens are often used as vehicles to convey experiences, values, and attitudes. They have proven to be a powerful tool in community building, because every member sharing a meme token is involved in an “act of semiotic belonging”, and exhibits an “awareness of a particular aesthetic.” (Zappavigna 2012, 103) In this way, every member of a particular meme community is showing that they are privy to an inside joke, and that they (ostensibly) share the values and experiences expressed in the meme token in question. In essence, by posting a meme publicly - or even privately - the addressor is sending a particular message; signaling belonging to a certain social group (*stance*), not unlike offline acts such as putting bumper stickers on one’s car, or wearing pins, badges, or T-shirts with certain slogans. All of this contributes to the formation of perhaps unique, perhaps unprecedented interpersonal bonds - forming an ambient sense of affiliation between users of an internet community. (Zappavigna 2012)

Instead of directly conveying something by meme tokens, users implicate contextual awareness surrounding specific meme tokens and families - and by its emphasis, a certain penchant or inclination towards it. Thus, memetic culture becomes a way of marking one’s social status and belonging to various in-groups. It is the author’s impression that this identitarian endeavor is the communicative intent at the core of (post-ironic) memetic expression.

We might further examine this through the lens of layering in communication by Sperber & Wilson (1987), which was introduced earlier in the paper. They postulate that, since communicative intention is in effect an informative intention about the informative intention, the *communicative intention itself* can serve as an ostensive stimulus to second-order (n-order) communicative intention. (Sperber & Wilson 1987, 751) Simply put, one utterance *can be used as an example to convey another utterance*. Sperber & Wilson thusly explain cases of ambiguous communication and the relevance of fiction - in which events are not directly correlated with the real world, yet still exhibit truth-like patterns that would be replicable in real life. Thus, they can modify our version of reality and therefore should be (and are) considered relevant. According to Sperber & Wilson’s model, memes may fail in the first-level communication - they might not bring any relevant information to the table - but may still be considered successful in second-level communication, by signaling the sharer’s belonging to the meme community (or merely a desire to amuse its addressee).

Wiggins & Bowers argue that memes exist as artifacts of digital participatory culture, where they are produced, reproduced, transformed and rebroadcast in order to reconstitute a social system (2014). As opposed to conventional utterances, memes mainly exist inside a

participatory culture within a digital sphere, and it can be argued that their chief function is to propagate and reassert themselves through continuous disseminatory interaction between millions of community members. There is no conscious end goal to this process, nor overarching intention - merely the process itself. In a way, this might be regarded as another second-order communicative intention of memes: to contribute actively to the participatory culture sustaining it.

Theories of irony

Gricean irony

As a linguistic phenomenon, irony has long bewildered philosophers and pragmatists alike. In pragmatics specifically, it was traditionally conceptualized as a literary device, not unlike metaphors or euphemisms, but the post-Gricean paradigm has since called this into question.

Grice's account of irony is based on the (supposed) violations of maxims. By his account, irony is a literary device that violates the first maxim of Quality ("do not say that which you believe to be false"). Further, he claims that, in using irony, the speaker implicates the exact opposite of what they have just uttered. (Grice 1989, 53) He draws a hypothetical example of two friends, X and A, at odds with each other, because X has revealed A's secret. A utters "X is a fine friend" to an audience that is completely aware of the situation (*verbal irony*), and it is obvious to everyone, including A, that the proposition they have just expressed is blatantly false. According to Grice, the audience will thus infer that the implicature of A's proposition is diametrically opposite to its explicit content.

Modern pragmatic thinking, such as RT, rejects this notion on account of its perceived simplicity. For instance, Sperber & Wilson (1981) argue that there are numerous ironic utterances that do not involve saying the exact opposite. Moreover, Grice himself proposed an example of an exchange that should have been ironic by his own definition, but was not. (1989: 53) Later theories of irony have been more successful in explaining why this might be the case, such as the echoic account developed by Sperber & Wilson (1981, 1992, Wilson 2006, Wilson 2013).

RT irony: echoic use

In the field of post-Gricean pragmatics, Relevance Theory offers a lot of compelling alternatives - here notably irony analysis. Unlike Grice, Sperber and Wilson can be seen as to adopt an *echoic* approach to irony. Based on the notion of *echoic use of language*, they define three basic features of irony, as follows:

“[T]he recovery of [ironic intention] depends, first, on a recognition of the utterance as echoic; second, on an identification of the source of the opinion echoed; and third, on a

recognition that *the speaker's attitude to the opinion echoed is one of rejection or dissociation*. We would argue that these are *common factors in the interpretation of all ironical utterances*.” (Sperber & Wilson 1995, 240; emphasis added)

At its core, echoic use is “an interpretive rather than a descriptive use of language” (Wilson 2006, 1729), meaning that an echoic utterance does not as much describe a state of affairs (actual or potential), but rather refers to *another representation*, which it seeks to emulate. Wilson also writes that such interpretive use of language requires “a higher order of metarepresentational ability” than ones of descriptive nature. (Wilson 2006, 1729) This means that, in order to properly comprehend an utterance used interpretively, the addressee has to recognize that the addresser is not expressing her own proposition, but attributing it to a source external to herself at the time, and in fact mimicking the thoughts and utterances of another person (or people). This is typically done to express the speaker’s attitude towards the thought that is being echoed.

Wilson provides an exemplary conversation between two friends, Jack and Sue, in which Sue’s replies illustrate different forms of echoic responses:

- (1) *Jack*: I had dinner with Chomsky last night.
- (2)
 - a. *Sue*: You had dinner with Chomsky! What did he say?
 - b. *Sue*: You had dinner with Chomsky? Is he in England?
 - c. *Sue*: You had dinner with Chomsky. Don’t make me laugh.

In each of these utterances, Sue is not just reminding Jack of what he just said, but showing him that she is thinking about his initial utterance, and expressing vastly different sentiments towards it. These attitudes rank from surprise and curiosity in (2a), careful suspicion and skepticism in (2b), and open disbelief and mockery in (2c).

As illustrated above, the attitudes expressed by these echoic utterances towards the descriptive content they echo can vary from endorsing, positive, and accepting, to rejection, scorn, and mockery. Thus, this echoic account of irony postulates that any ironic utterance should be echoing a certain proposition, but furthermore - *the attitude of the speaker towards the ironic utterance should always be a dissociative (non-positive) one*. That is to say, if the speaker is genuinely endorsing the thought that she is echoing, she cannot be ironic - and vice versa. The ironic dissociative attitude can vary from light, friendly banter to outright disdain and loathing, but the speaker has to be showing the emotion of a (at least somewhat) negative spectrum - that they are dissociating themselves from the thought echoed, creating a distance between their own opinions and the attributed thought.

Wilson (2013) neatly summarizes the main claims of the echoic account in her paper on irony comprehension:

1. Dissociative attitude. “The point of an ironical utterance is to express the speaker’s own dissociative (e.g. mocking, scornful or contemptuous) attitude to a thought similar in content to the one expressed in her utterance, which she attributes to some source other than herself at the current time. The thought being echoed need not have been overtly expressed in an utterance: it may be an unexpressed belief, hope, wish or norm-based expectation (e.g. that a certain lecture will run as it should, a certain friend will behave as she should, and so on).”
2. Source of the echo. “The source of the thought may be a specific person, a type of person, or people in general; and it is only when the source is a specific person or type of person that the irony will have a definite target or victim.”
3. The similarity in content. “[T]he proposition expressed by the ironical utterance need not be identical in content to the thought being echoed: “it may be a paraphrase or summary of the original, may pick out one of its implications, or may be a caricature or exaggeration used to cue the audience to the speaker’s mocking, sceptical or contemptuous attitude.”

(Wilson 2013, 7)

In the same paper, she introduces three distinctive features of irony that make it qualitatively different from any other linguistic phenomena:

1. Dissociative attitude.
2. Normative bias.
3. Ironical tone of voice (optional).

While the dissociative attitude has already been covered, the two additional features might require further explanation, as follows:

Normative bias refers to norm-based expectations that are being flouted, e.g., saying ‘that went well’ after a terrible lecture, or exclaiming ‘what a sunny day’ when it is storming outside. In these examples, what is being echoed is not a specific thought of a specific person, but generic beliefs that lectures should run smoothly, and the weather should be nice. It has been observed that irony is often used to criticize or complain, and much more rarely to praise and compliment; even then, it is highly contingent upon specific requirements being met, such as the specificity of the initial utterance being echoed, which are unmediated by norm-based expectations.

For example, if a visibly muscular man who is openly proud of his physique is struggling to lift a relatively light weight in the gym, it would be ironic to say ‘you’re very good at lifting weights’,

as it flouts the norm-based perception of visibly muscular men generally being adept at such. On the contrary, if the same man were not struggling to lift that weight, saying ‘you’re bad at lifting weights’ would not come across as ironic in the slightest, as much as rude and improper. Contrarily, if a skinny guy came over and claimed ineptitude at lifting weights - but then went on to outlift his more muscular counterpart, saying ‘oh yeah, you’re definitely bad at lifting weights’ might sound appropriately ironic. This is due to the latter example irony not having any norm-based expectation; rather, it is directly echoing the sentiment uttered prior to its response.

The ironic tone of voice, the final feature, could be considered more of an umbrella term for all contextual cues surrounding the exchange that prime the hearer to look for an ironic intention in the speaker’s utterance. Yus (2016) expands this list and includes things like *encyclopaedic knowledge* (both general, and the specific one about the speaker), *previous utterances*, events and actions, *non-verbal behavior* of the speaker (including the aforementioned ironic tone of voice), and certain *lexical or grammatical choices* of the speaker.

Echo vs pretence

Another prominent post-Gricean approach to irony is the *pretence account*. Based on speech act theory, it was originally developed by Clark and Gerrig (1984), and proved a tenacious contender to the relevance-theoretical echoic approach. However, it is the author’s understanding that an echoic account makes a better job of explaining the basic mechanisms of irony than pretence theory, as argued below:

According to the pretence account, irony comprehension involves the addressee’s ability to recognize that the addresser is performing a fake speech act - that is, pretending to perform one without actually doing so. (Clark & Gerrig 1984) However, put into practice, this theory fails to adequately resolve the example provided by Grice as a supposed ironic by his definition, which in fact is not. The pretence account cannot explain this, or any other similar example, without an underlying assumption that ironic utterances involve attributive, or tacitly echoic use. (Wilson 2013, 9)

Following the illustration of this perceived theoretical flaw, some pretence irony advocates attempted to merge the two approaches, creating an *attributive-pretence theory of irony*, or so-called “allusional pretence” account. (Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995) However, upon further analysis (Wilson 2013), although this account is successful in dealing with Grice’s counter-examples and all three distinctive features of irony (dissociative attitude, normative bias and ironical tone of voice), the explanatory work is largely done by the echoic mechanism, and very little by pretence theory, arguably rendering it auxiliary and non-essential.

Moreover, the allusional pretence account, much like the original pretence account, is based on speech act theory, while the echoic account is not constrained by the form or type of behavior

addressors perform - it only looks at the content of mental representation. Wilson's examples (2013, 10) illustrate how an attributive-pretence account might mimic not a speech act, but rather a private thought. Wilson further provides cases where the illocutionary force of the new speech act mimicking the initial one is subverted, which theoretically should not happen (i.e. an assertion cannot suddenly turn into a question or encouragement).

All in all, Wilson does not completely reject the validity of the allusional-pretence account, but asserts that an adequate iteration should incorporate two independent mechanisms of echoing and pretence. The pretence mechanism should allow the speaker to perform an imaginary speech act based on resemblances in public behavior. The echoing, or attributive mechanism should allow the speaker to express her thoughts and attitudes on an attributed thought, based on resemblances in conceptual content. In ironic utterances, the two would combine to allow the speaker to attribute to someone a thought similar in content to the imaginary speech act she is pretending to perform, while expressing a dissociative attitude to the attributed thought. (see Wilson 2013 for a more detailed discussion)

This chapter has introduced all of the pragmatic theory needed for the purposes of this thesis. It has covered the basics of pragmatics (Grice), introduced the leading pragmatic theory in use today (Relevance Theory), illustrated how it might be applied to describe online communication, and how it deals with irony. What follows is establishing the pragmatic framework for post-irony, and then applying it directly to select meme tokens.

Post-irony

In today's post-postmodern era, especially on the internet, traditional literary techniques are no longer as efficient as they used to be. Classic forms of irony - those that are clearly conveyed through echoing, as described in the previous chapter - are deemed too 'ordinary' or mundane for those growing up in a digital age. In the jargon of this generation, regular irony is reserved for 'normies'. This '*Gen[eration] Z*' has been raised in an online environment of increasing informational and sensory overload, and the prevalence of post-truth, which might go some way to explain their search for more nuanced, sophisticated methods of self-expression. Some compare irony to a shield that helps the speaker to detach from her own words and keep her genuine beliefs concealed. If so, then post-irony "is an ivory tower, too tall to ever reach its resident" - and by extension, their genuine beliefs. (Markowski 2022, 60) To this new generation, sarcasm no longer seems as impactful as it used to be (perhaps in part due to a history of cultural overuse, leading it to be associated with older generations), necessitating the invention of an even stronger communicative tool. Similarly, modern irony has these days transformed into something almost unrecognizable, called post-irony by some - a tool which

makes possible at least some degree of genuine sentiment or communication, in a discourse seemingly dominated by ironic detachment. It is often associated with Millennial and Gen Z culture, as it appears to allow these younger generations in particular to connect and engage with the world in (paradoxically) a more meaningful, genuine way.

This chapter is dedicated to post-irony, which forms the central pillar of this work. As of this writing, there exists no unifying definition of the term. Thus, the thesis discusses some of the contenders that do exist, introduce some socio-historical context behind the concept, and trace its historical development, with the ultimate goal of producing a satisfactory definition for the purposes of this thesis. This section will mostly focus on non-academic sources, with the notable exception of Miron Markowski's Master thesis (2022), writing on a similar topic. The scarcity and quality of sourcing for this section is predefined by the limitations of existing research. As it stands, literature on post-irony, especially as it relates to pragmatics, is highly rare. This makes it challenging to find established and credible sources on the topic, as they are virtually non-existent within the field of pragmatics, and only slightly more abundant outside of it. However, this limitation does not make the subject matter any less interesting - quite the contrary.

Post-irony: history

David Foster Wallace, an influential contemporary writer, is tightly connected with the emergence of post-ironic literature and has introduced one of the first post-ironic analyses in his essay *E Unibus Pluram* back in 1993. Consider a Pepsi commercial from 1984 and Wallace's reaction to it:

“It's that Pepsi commercial where a Pepsi sound van pulls up to a packed sweltering beach and the impish young guy in the van activates a lavish PA system and opens up a Pepsi and pours it into a cup up next to the microphone. (...) the sound van is also a concession truck, and the whole beach's pretty population has collapsed to a clamoring mass around the truck, everybody hopping up and down and pleading to be served first, as the camera's view retreats to overhead and the slogan is flatly intoned: ‘Pepsi: the Choice of a New Generation.’”

(Wallace 1993)

The tacky, outright unpleasant sound effects, as well as the comically exaggerated reaction of the beach audience suggests an ironic reading of the ad. Moreover, it is not even the redeeming qualities of the product that are being advertised (they are only tacitly implied), but the fact that even the sound of it is enough to drive the public crazy. The ad is not promoting the product, but the idea of it - in fact, it portrays a successful ad within another ad, the power of advertising within itself. (Wallace 1993, 178) In this light, the ironic reading suggests that the ad is making fun of silly commercials, showing how ridiculous and over-the-top they look, winking an eye at

the audience that has presumably gotten tired of them, almost as if to say ‘yes, we feel the same as you do’. At the same time, however, the ad is still trying to sell you Pepsi. Even though the creators are making fun of commercial clichés, they utilize this irony to achieve the exact same goal these clichés pursue - to push the product onto the viewer. The ad does not take itself seriously, inviting the viewer to laugh at itself, and yet expects him to fall for the direct message anyway. In this sense, it is post-ironic. One might question the effectiveness and purpose of such complexity and communicational layering of the message: level 1 - ‘yes, advertising is ridiculous’, level 2 - ‘but you should still fall for it’. The reason for it lies in the state of modern cultural discourse that emerged as the result of postmodernism.

In philosophy, postmodernism is defined as a skeptic stance towards meta-narratives of the modernist era. (Lyotard 1979) Modernism, rising around the turn of the 20th century, has solidified many grand narratives that were generally accepted as the absolute truth: the notion of Good and Bad, gender norms, nuclear family, and scientific positivism, to name a few. These metanarratives became contested during the postmodernist era, with irony being the postmodernist’s main tool. However, as postmodernism started to be the hegemonic paradigm of our culture (starting from around 1980’s or 1990’s), irony has started to become the norm of certain forms of discourse, the dominant form of artistic expression and practically the only way to get attention from the audience. It became exacerbated in 2000’s and 2010’s, infecting popular culture, and thereby inevitably bleeding into internet communication. (Khrushcheva 2020)

Although effective in deconstructing meta-narratives, postmodernist irony has created a cultural rut that is hard to escape. A discourse that is solely based on irony seems fundamentally at odds with the general notion of cooperativeness. It is hard to agree with someone, let alone cooperate and collaborate, if one cannot be sure whether the person in front of them is being sincere. Moreover, when all of the discourse is based on echoing and dissociation, and none of it is concerned with producing new utterances, ideas and thoughts, the entire community stagnates and struggles to produce anything new. Irony cannot be fought back against with generic sincerity, because it evades all critique and makes it seem nonsensical. Wallace expresses the same thought with regards to television and its conspicuous ability to turn everything on its head. “[W]hat makes television’s hegemony so resistant to critique by the new fiction of image is that TV has co-opted the distinctive forms of the same cynical, irreverent, ironic, absurdist post-WWII literature that the imagists use as touchstones.” (Wallace 1993)

The same is true about trolling. The troll culture could be considered the purest form of ironic expression in that it thrives on disruptiveness and non-compliance. “Trolling can take various forms, but a troll aims to create ‘disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement’ (Hardaker 2010: 237) This might, for example, involve expressing deliberately controversial or divisive views or opinions in

order to shock others and cause arguments.” (Scott 2022, 29) The more a good-faith interlocutor engages with the disruptive party, thereby “feeding the troll”, the more entrenched and combative this ironic behavior becomes. The only way to fight back the troll is to stop feeding him sincere utterances. As a result, the discourse further spirals further down into the ironic pit, becoming increasingly less sincere, or simply halts, if the good-faith party is not willing to engage in the ironic duel.

As a response to the pervasive irony of cultural discourse, the new generation of subversive thinkers had to come up with a solution to overcome the trap of irony. Hence came post-irony, and metamodernism followed. Briefly defined, metamodernism comes as a response to postmodernism and represents both “tiredness of the total irony of postmodernism, as well as the power and energy of modernism, which, however, cannot exist in their direct sense.” (Khrushcheva 2020, 20; trans. author) Metamodernism brings back the energy of a direct, sincere utterance on a new level, which includes the notion of absolute truthfulness of any narrative being rendered impossible.

Post-irony, as the main weapon wielded, allows its user to pass sincere utterances under the guise of irony, thereby allowing to engage with this world on a qualitatively new level and bring back the sincerity in its new form. The post-ironic speaker simply accepts the irony of every utterance as the new normal and pierces through it, making the sincere ones more stark. However, it is a double-edged sword. While others use post-irony to re-establish a truthful relationship with the world, others use it to shift the overtone window and normalize unacceptable behavior.

Post-irony: definition

Post-irony has made its appearance in many forms of artistic expression. In film, it is represented by *The Bad Lieutenant*. (Collins 2010). In visual art, some argue, post-ironic analyses of Duchamp’s *Fountain* are possible, existing alongside the actual post-ironic artworks of Tracey Emin. (Markowski 2022) In music, post-irony is expressed through many forms and means, as exemplified by bands like 100 gecs and Die Antwoord. (ibid.) In the second half of 2010s, post-irony was seen to bleed into popular culture at large, most notably the online sphere - eventually making its impact known upon wider meme culture, giving rise to the phenomenon of post-ironic memes.

The defining feature of post-irony entails the intentional blurring of serious and jocular sentiment. As opposed to irony, where it is in the interest of the speaker to make it clear that the utterance is ironic, post-irony revels in confusing its receiver, as it attempts to

completely conceal the true communicative intent of its addressor, or contrarily, lending itself to a double-lecture interpretation (Sperber & Wilson 1987), where both ironic and sincere elements are part of its communicative intent. This blurred line between sincerity and jest is the domain where post-irony dwells.

Khrushcheva gives several definitions of post-irony, the most significant of which postulating that post-irony is “an utterance that pretends to be ironic, but *also* includes the direct meaning”, and that post-irony is “the irony about irony, and therefore embodies a new sincerity.” (Khrushcheva 2020, 30; trans. author, original emphasis) Although providing a well-rounded, exhaustive list of definitions, Khrushcheva labels all these under a single term, making it rather ambiguous and hard to grasp. Hence, this thesis prefers to employ a different, more precise classification.

In his Master thesis, Miron Markowski (2022) echoes Khrushcheva's sentiment, but for his part defines four different forms of post-irony. In effect, they represent four types of attitudes that depart from classic conceptualizations of irony in their various attempts to subvert it:

1. The New Sincerity. In pragmatic terms, it is a completely sincere statement that is completely devoid of irony, but in practice it becomes so radical (non-normative) that the audience cannot help but assume it was intended ironically.
2. The basic notion of post-irony. “Passing a sincere message under the guise of irony”, or vice versa, passing an ironic comment under the guise of sincerity. The speaker intentionally blurs the line between irony and sincerity, allowing for “multiple interpretations of an utterance and backtracking from a risky or non-normative statement.” (Markowski 2022, 76) Importantly, the utterance still signals the presence of a coherent worldview (as opposed to meta irony).
3. Meta-irony. Distinction between irony and sincerity is impossible, and possibly not even the author can say what the sincere content of the utterance is. There is no coherent worldview behind the utterance. Markowski treats this as a subset of post-irony, which is a position shared by this thesis.
4. Ironizing about irony. Represents mostly behavioral patterns and actions that are not directly communicative; a somewhat performative approach to subverting irony.

This thesis will only engage with the basic notion of post-irony, slightly touching upon meta-irony, and leaving out the rest, mostly because each notion involves a different inferential process and varying context. Every single one of them deserves a separate

chapter with detailed pragmatic analysis. On the surface level, the New Sincerity approach does not seem to hold any interest from a pragmatic standpoint, since it is in practice a full return to sincerity, yet the context of these sincere utterances is flipped on its head, where the hearer is naturally primed for irony, but instead receives a sincere utterance, which again subverts their (already subverted) expectations. The notion of meta-irony can be considered a subset of post-irony (Markowski 2022), but does not represent a coherent worldview. This begs the question: could the utterance even be considered ironic, if no one - including the author - can tell which part is sincere, and which is not? How would pragmatics deal with the lack of attitude towards the utterance on the part of the speaker herself? Lastly, the “ironizing about irony” performative approach appears to deal primarily with more second-level communication, more so than the other three notions; it includes attitudes not towards direct utterances, or even thoughts, but rather to the dissociative attitudes of another speaker - even when expressed as a row of weak implicatures. This approach rarely seems to concern itself with direct utterances, which in its own way makes it uniquely interesting.

How does post-irony differ from classic irony in terms of pragmatics?

In their article *Beyond Speaker's meaning*, Sperber and Wilson state that when the speaker's meaning is indeterminate, the implicatures that the hearer derives “are weak, and cannot be enumerated”, from which follows that “[w]hat is aimed at in such cases of weak communication is a degree of cognitive alignment, not a duplication of precise contents.” (Sperber & Wilson 2015, 147) This thesis argues that post-irony by definition adheres to the class of weak communication present within a relevance-theoretic framework, and can therefore be analyzed through the prism of layered communication.

Moreover, this work claims that the example from the movie *Amadeus* invoked in the literature review chapter is in fact another early example of post-irony (alongside the Pepsi ad). When Mozart responds with “I never thought music like that was possible” upon hearing Salieri's new piece, he intentionally communicates in a vague manner, so that his intention remains unknown, at least on the first communicative level. On one hand, he could be sincerely praising Salieri's music, and on the other hand, echoing that same thought, in effect mocking the notion that anyone could consider Salieri's music worth of praise. It is therefore could be seen as an ironic comment passed under the guise of sincerity, where the line between the two is blurred, perfectly in line with the definition of post-irony given earlier. In purely pragmatic terms, then, post-irony is simply a case of weak communication, where one of the possible utterance interpretations has to be ironic, while the other one must not.

Post-irony in this way appears quite interesting from a pragmatic perspective, especially in examining attributive use. Logically, post-ironic cases should involve the echoing of an attributed thought, since they have so much in common with verbal irony, but at the same time, they distinctly differ from it. The difference between an ironic utterance and a sincere one can be discerned in how an ironic utterance merely echoes its attributed thought, whereas the sincere one directly expresses it, or at the very least endorses.

The ironic speaker makes reference to an attributed thought, but more or less clearly signals that the source of that thought is not themselves - in other words, they dissociate from it. (Wilson 2013, 7) The sincere speaker, by contrast, insinuates that the thought they are expressing is their own, or, in cases of sincere attributive use, that they do agree with the content of the thought they are echoing. Hence, the concept of post-irony poses an interesting pragmatic dilemma: it is impossible to tell whether the speaker is echoing a thought, or the thought is indeed their own, and should therefore be interpreted as a sincere utterance. In effect, the speaker (intentionally) communicates vaguely, and leaves a void in place of their personal attitude or stance to the utterance produced (as in the Mozart example) - or makes their attitude more nuanced, in combining jocular and sincere messaging.

Take the following example:

A: (to a friend who is single, but wishes they were not) I see you have a lot of One Direction CDs. Do you like the band?

B: Yes, I sometimes like listening to sad songs for fifteen year-olds. (in an ironic tone of voice) They help me get through lonely nights. (in a natural, unironic tone of voice)

Here, the speaker expresses an opinion that One Direction songs are chiefly directed at adolescents - a demographic the speaker does not associate with, and might even be seen as to deride. However, the second sentence, given the context of B's lack of a relationship, might insinuate that she does in fact listen to these songs, finding some solace or consolation in them. Juxtaposed with the first sentence, one might conclude that B listens to One Direction songs as a guilty pleasure while simultaneously admitting that she does not identify with the group's core demographic. In this way, the speaker can be seen as to produce a (seemingly disingenuous) utterance, and then immediately backtrack from it in an ironic way - in effect ironizing about their own music preferences, and veiling their true preferences behind layers of subversion in the process.

However, whether or not post-irony exhibits typical features of irony is a much harder question to answer.

1. On the one hand, there are cues of dissociative attitude prevalent within post-ironic utterances, although they might not be strong enough for us to be certain. After all, it is the very nature of post-irony to obfuscate the speaker's attitude towards an attributed thought. The only thing that can be safely assumed is that the speaker has at least some kind of attitude towards the thought, as evidenced by the effort invested in producing an utterance/meme about it.
2. Normative bias is usually present in post-ironic utterances, but not as often in memes: the notion of an 'online norm' is not quite the same as an offline one (related to the distinction between virtual and offline personalities, further discussed in the section on Cyberpragmatics), and what is considered normal can vary enormously from one online community to another. This goes some way to explain why most people might be confused as to whether they are looking at an ironic or sincere utterance when presented with a post-ironic meme. The utterance made by the speaker is one that could be interpreted as a critical one, as most post-ironic memes are. However, due to the ever shifting nature of what is considered online normality, one can never be completely sure whether the meme token one is looking at is indeed ironic, or simply deranged. This could thus potentially trigger contradictory cognitive mechanisms, creating a stalemate of conflicting interpretations during the relevance-guided comprehension heuristic process.
3. Ironic tone of voice and its online alternatives. Offline, this feature is utilized strategically in order to strengthen or weaken the possibility of ironic intent as compared to a sincere one. The online sphere, for its part, is somewhat of a similar story. Since it is these alternative features that tend to reveal whether the meme is truly ironic or not, they play an important role in post-ironic memes. These features (text manipulations such as misspellings and awkward grammar, intentional cropping, frame positioning and other visual cues) are either intentionally omitted in order to not give away the communicative intent of the shared meme token - or added in abundance, so as to potentially point in both directions at once (as in, simultaneously imply both sincere and ironic elements, in order to further obscure the authorial intent behind the meme).

In short, the echoic account of irony is well-suited for explaining post-irony - moreover, it seems to be instrumental in its explanation, since any post-ironic case is bound to have attributive use in at least one of its possible interpretations. The echoic use of language, as well as the discussion of the three distinctive features of irony, illustrate the inner pragmatic workings of post-irony in due detail. The only piece of puzzle that is needed to work out the ultimate communicative intent behind post-ironic meme tokens is the notion of layering in communication, as the speaker's meaning reveals itself on a second level of communication.

Analytical method

The heuristic which forms the basis of this thesis' analysis is built upon the earlier work of Scott and Yus. The first of these was outlined by Kate Scott in her article "Memes as Multimodal Metaphors: a Relevance Theory Analysis" (2021), where she analyses object-labelling memes through the prism of Relevance Theory and ad hoc concepts.

The second approach was introduced by Francisco Yus in the chapter "Multimodality in Memes. A Cyberpragmatic Approach." from a book called "Analysing Digital Discourse: New Insights and Future Directions." (2019)

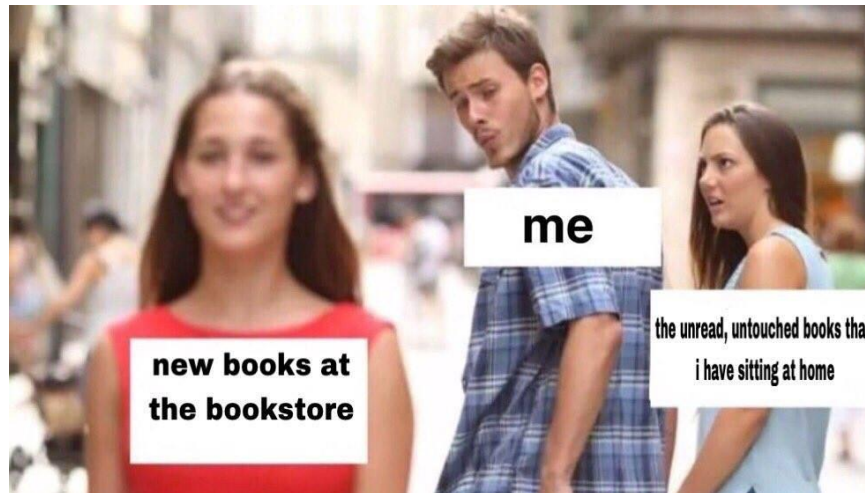
Overview of Scott's method

Scott's aforementioned article (2021) explores the use of memes as multimodal metaphors, and analyzes how they communicate meaning through relevance theory. She discusses the various features of memes, such as their multimodal nature and the use of culturally shared images and text, and argues that memes can be understood as a form of metaphorical communication. The article also explores how memes can be used to create humorous and persuasive effects, and how they can be analyzed within the framework of relevance theory to understand how they create meaning for their audiences. Moreover, Scott provides a method for analysing object-labeling memes from a relevance-theoretical perspective.

Ms. Scott presupposes that the act of sharing a meme on social media (be it on one's profile page, or in personal/group chats) is an act of ostensive communication, and, according to Relevance Theory, this is why memes can be considered part of the pragmatics field. "Social networking sites thrive on sharing. When a user shares content on a digitally mediated platform, she is, in effect, showing that content to other users.

Showing is an ostensive act of communication [according to Sperber and Wilson], and as such it triggers relevance-based comprehension heuristics." (Scott 2021, 8)

In the article, Scott analyses a meme token of a popular meme family "Distracted Boyfriend" (shown below).



Scott's method, as applied to the meme token, is illustrated below:

1. **Analyze and describe the picture itself**, without context. Or, “[consider] how the “multimodal ensemble” (Jewitt 2013: 254-255) of text and image is processed by a viewer as a standalone stimulus”. (Scott 2021, 11)
2. Imagine that the viewer would **create a “conceptual file”** (a mental representation of a reference that contains all the information about an individual concept) for every character involved in the picture, and store the basic visual information about them (given that they doesn't know those people from before).
3. Imagine then that the viewer would seek to *map referring expressions (RE)* - linguistic labels presented in the meme - to *certain conceptual files* (either existing ones, if the RE is definite, or create new ones, if the RE is indefinite).

The viewer will follow the path of least resistance and, in this case, most likely assign “me” to the person who shared the meme with him. If the sharer is known to the viewer, then the existing file will be accessed; if the meme is shared anonymously, a new one will be created (perhaps a quite rudimentary one, with only a username attached to it). In Scott's example, the meme is shared by Sara, who is known to the viewer from before.

4. “The viewer now has two sets of conceptual files. A set representing the characters depicted in the image, and another representing the referents of the labels.” (p. 14)

Now the viewer has to *decode what Sara wanted to communicate by adding the labels to the specific parts of the image*. Within a relevance-theoretic frame of reference for interpreting ostensive stimuli, the viewer will follow a *relevance-*

theoretic comprehension procedure: test interpretations in order of accessibility until reaching the one that satisfies their expectation of optimal relevance. In this case:

- ♦ Sara is the Distracted Boyfriend
- ♦ New books at the bookstore are the Woman in Red
- ♦ The unread, untouched books that I have sitting at home are the Woman in Blue

The sharer intends the viewer to infer a coreferential relationship between the two sets of conceptual files, i.e. tie them to each other. Of course, not in a literal sense (supported by RT (Scott 2021, 15)), but rather as a *multi-modal metaphor*.

5. Since the coreferential relationship between the two sets of conceptual files is not literal, the viewer has to *create ad hoc concepts that make sense in the context of the meme*. Thus:

- ♦ Sara is *DISTRACTED BOY FRIEND**
- ♦ New books at the bookstore are *WOMAN IN RED**
- ♦ The unread, untouched books that I have sitting at home are *WOMAN IN BLUE**

*SMALL CAPS** notation signifies ad hoc concepts. Those are "inferentially derived in the discourse context and this process is guided by the principles of relevance." (Scott 2021, 16) Since the picture is showing a very particular moment in time with a very particular situation happening, the viewer can assume it's relevant and see how Sara is similar to the Distracted Boyfriend presented in the picture in relation to other characters. "**The viewer will look for ways in which the depicted scene and the behaviour of the characters in that particular moment resemble the objects or people referred to in the labels.**" (Scott 2021, 17-18)

Hence, the ad hoc concepts for this meme will look thus:

- ♦ *DISTRACTED BOY FRIEND**: easily distracted by the *WOMAN IN RED**; finds the *WOMAN IN RED** attractive and enticing; does not appreciate the *WOMAN IN BLUE**
- ♦ *WOMAN IN RED**: new; interesting
- ♦ *WOMAN IN BLUE**: familiar; available; not new

Combining the ad hoc concepts with the mapping of conceptual files, we get the following propositions:

- Sara is easily distracted by new, interesting things;
Sara finds new, interesting things attractive and enticing;
Sara does not appreciate familiar, available things that are not new
- books at the bookstore are new and interesting
- The untouched, unread books on Sara's bookshelf at home are familiar, available, and not new

As a result of all of the above, we get a range of implicatures: Sara

- is easily distracted by new books at the bookstore
- Sara finds new books at the bookstore attractive and enticing
- Sara does not appreciate the untouched, unread books on her bookshelf at home

Scott also notes that different viewers might incorporate different features in their ad hoc concepts. "For example, a viewer with a particular affection for books might anthropomorphise them as having feelings, and might see the emotions of the characters as resembling the emotions of the books. In that case, they might, for example, derive the proposition that the books at home are upset or angry, and this might then lead to further related implicatures and perhaps humorous effects." (Scott 2021, 17-18)

Yus' additions

Yus mentions that just like in verbal utterances, where one finds explicit interpretations (*explicatures*) and implicit or implicated interpretations (*implicatures*), visual content leads to the emergence of *visual explicatures* and *visual implicatures*. (Yus 2019, 107; further discussion, Yus 2016) This means that in interpreting a meme, the user has to make inferential hypotheses about the role that the visual part (the picture) plays in the overall comprehension of a meme token.

The user has to work out whether the picture has a denotative quality (merely identifying the referent of the picture with no further implications), or a connotative quality, which involves inference and can only be worked out from the combination of the picture and contextual information (as is the case with textual implicature). A denotative quality could thus be considered *visual explicature*, whereas connotative qualities would be labeled *visual implicature*. Visual explicatures are more straight-forward and easy to process, while visual implicatures are more complex and context-dependent. (Yus 2019)

Thus, the user has to do three things when interpreting a meme:

- (1) work out the entirety of the speaker's communicative intent, using explicatures, reference assignment and implicated messages,
- (2) do the same with the picture, and finally
- (3) synthesize these interpretations.

Accordingly, Yus comes up with 6 inferential strategies needed to interpret a meme:

1. To decode and inferentially enrich the verbal content of the meme (top and bottomlines of text) in order to obtain the explicit interpretation of the text or *explicature*.
2. To derive *implicatures* from verbal content, if these are necessary to reach a relevant interpretation of the verbal content of the meme.
3. To decode and inferentially enrich the picture to yield a *visual explicature*.
4. To derive *implicatures* or *implications* from the picture in the meme, if these are necessary to reach an adequate interpretation of the meme as a whole.
5. To infer possible combinations of text and picture to yield interpretations (typically implicated ones - especially verbal-visual implicature) which are only made possible through the combination of these sources of information (text and picture), and not from either, taken separately.
Oftentimes, combining text and picture will lead to inferential backtracking and reinterpretation of one or the other, leading to new visual or verbal implicature and explicature. Yus talks about a certain kind of *iconic literacy* needed to process meme tokens, similar to the kind of literacy needed to process cartoons.
6. To access as much contextual information as necessary to obtain interpretations out of strategies 1-5, as certain memes may contain references to cultural or current events, and interpretation of these kinds of memes will inevitably fail if one is not familiar with this context.

(Yus 2019, 108-109)

Synthesizing theories

This paper aims to combine these two approaches, creating a more detailed set of steps involved in meme token comprehension. Yus and Scott choose different starting points for their methods: Yus with the verbal component of a meme, whereas Scott favors the visual one. Depending on different online contexts, the user viewing the meme, and on the meme itself, the order of interpretation might differ. To a large degree, the element to be processed first is the one that has higher salience. (Yus 2019, 110) That salience depends on many factors, among them the positioning of text and image, the boldness, size and font of the text, and the colors implemented in both. Images oftentimes occupy most of the space of the meme, and are usually a more colorful component. Hence, it is logical to assume that in most cases the user will be primed to process the image first, and then move on to the verbal contents of the meme. In the case of meme culture analysis, this generally seems to hold true; that is, most users appear to favor an image-first approach to meme literacy, as evidenced by the meme families and comedic patterns - such as the ‘*Bottom Text*’ meme format, which have developed to humorously subvert this convention; arguably, they could not gain as much traction if the convention was not as prevalent. (“Bottom Text” 2016) Following from the above, the synthesized Yus-Scott heuristic goes thus:

1. **Analyze the picture, describe picture processing.** Here, we examine how a general meme user might decode and inferentially enrich the picture in order to yield visual explicatures (to assign referents of the picture), as well as derive any visual implicatures that may be useful in overall meme interpretation. (Step 1 in Scott + Strategies 3 and 4 after Yus)
2. **Creation of conceptual files** (a mental representation of a reference that contains all the information about an individual concept). These are created for every character involved in the picture and include basic visual information available, alongside any other information that can be extracted from the context of the picture or personal knowledge of the user (cultural references, public personas, popular events, etc). (step 2 in Scott)
3. **Text processing.** This step involves decoding and inferential enrichment of the verbal component of the meme. This process might include semantic disambiguation of lexically ambiguous items (if applicable), followed by respective yielding of conversational explicatures and derivation of conversational implicatures. (Strategies 1 and 2 after Yus)

4. ***Infer possible combinations of text and picture.*** Reassess the emergent verbal-visual implicatures in order to yield the most plausible interpretation using relevance-guided comprehension heuristic. (Strategy 5 after Yus)
Mapping the conceptual files of actual people (together with the referring expressions) and the conceptual files of the meme characters (Step 4 in Scott) is included in here, as well as the creation of ad hoc concepts (Step 5 in Scott). What follows are examples of the detailed execution of this step.
5. ***Mapping of referring expressions with conceptual files outside the meme (optional).***
Here, the user goes through the process of reference assignment, connecting the referring expressions present in the verbal content to the conceptual files (either present from before or created anew) of a person (or people) the meme is addressing. It could be the meme sharer themselves, the speaker, or any other person, group or personality (archetype) (Step 3 in Scott). This step is optional because not all meme tokens have referring expressions that need to be mapped to conceptual files of people.
6. If not already available, ***access any additional context*** (cultural references, events, news) needed to complete the interpretation, reassess any new inferences in order to incorporate contextual implications, and use relevance-guided comprehension heuristic to arrive at the final interpretation involving the assumed intentions of the speaker. (Strategy 6 after Yus)
This way, the overall interpretation of the meme may change several times from one stage to another, as the new levels of context are uncovered and visual-verbal implicatures inferred, due to inferential backtracking and reinterpretation. (Yus 2019)

Benefits of synthesis

Although the original methods described are complete and could theoretically produce satisfactory results on their own merit, the synthesized Yus-Scott heuristic plays to the stronger sides of both. Scott focuses more on the thorough analysis of specific meme tokens, laying out an easy to follow, step-by-step method, whereas Yus provides his method as more of a template, and does not follow it step-by-step throughout the chapter, instead operating on what seems to be an approximation of the heuristic. On the contrary, Yus' template provides more steps than included in Scott's method, thereby laying out in more detail all of the inferential processes that happen during meme token interpretation. Hence, a decision was made to take Scott's method as the basis for the synthesized heuristic, which would provide a solid, reliable and easy-to-follow foundation, adopt it to the analysis of simple image macros and then enrich it with all the missing inferential steps from Yus' template.

Analysis

As laid out in the section on cyberpragmatics, the original context of a public internet post can easily be lost. The same holds true for specific meme tokens. By their mechanisms of dissemination, being shared by anyone who finds them amusing or interesting, they might appear in the most unexpected places - constant recontextualization through reiteration being at the very core of meme culture - without any way to recover information concerning their origin: who made them, where they came from, and the original authorial intent - save a selection of extremely popular and influential examples with enough longevity to become established and documented, such as wiki entries on KnowYourMeme or similar databases, further curated by entire teams of editors. This tendency of context loss regarding the source of a meme has only become more prevalent in recent years, as more and more social media apps have started introducing algorithm-based feeds that are not contingent upon any sort of engagement or connection between users and the mechanisms of meme distribution - unlike following specific meme pages, where they might get at least some kind of context as regards to the original author/sharer. Instead, these feeds suggest new content solely based on user interaction with content shown in the past, sometimes accented by seemingly random suggestions. In this way, the traditional mediator between the user and the content, as encapsulated by the sharer of a meme, can now be seen as starting to fade away - leaving the user to deduce all necessary context from the content itself.

When presented with a meme token, all we have is the token itself. In other words, all contextual cues to the communicative intent of the meme's originator (creator/sharer) are contained within the '*meme utterance*' itself (text, image, sound, video etc.) Most other context surrounding the token might be inaccessible. Of course, one might still discern the influence of cultural references, real-world events, general conventions of meme-making, or specific tendencies of a certain subculture to do or express things a certain way as opposed to another. In some cases, one might trace the meme token to its meme family and try to extract some context thusly - were one lucky enough to find any information on the worldwide web, or happened to be acquainted with it from before.

As such, one might argue in favor of one interpretation over another - but can never be sufficiently rationally assured of which is objectively correct. In this regard, the process of meme interpretation is very much akin to that of literature analysis; as in, one can never access the original intent of the author. Instead, we are left with the work itself, the (con)textual clues contained therein, curated as they may be, and generic information concerning its inception. Theories upon the work's expressive intent might abound - but there is no way of knowing which is the 'correct' one. As there is rarely any information regarding the original intent of its creator, memes are perhaps an ultimate expression of the Death of the Author in its purest form, as

extensively explored in the field of literary critique - e.g. Wimsatt & Beardsley (1946).

This is why this thesis' meme analysis will rely on those means immediately available: contextual cues in the meme token itself, basic publicly available background information (such as KnowYourMeme), the general context of the meme subculture (as presented in the chapter on memes), common cultural references, and last, but not least, personal authorial discernment as an experienced meme viewer and sharer.

There will be two tokens under scrutiny in this section: a *post-ironic meme*, and a *meta-ironic meme*. The analysis of each meme token will be two-fold. Firstly, the paper will briefly cover some relevant cultural context, as well as the available context concerning the meme family, in order to establish a certain foundation, upon which to hypothesize and cross-examine in interpreting the meme tokens. Then follows the pragmatic analysis itself, as per the synthesized Yus-Scott heuristic laid out in the Method section, going through the process step by step with all necessary explanations. Lastly, possible interpretations will be comparatively analyzed, as it is the very nature of post-ironic memes to defy clear definitions of communicative intent.

Meme 1 (post-ironic)

Depression memes

According to the definition above, at its core, post-irony is a communicative message utilizing the vehicle of ironic subversion, which blurs the line between facetiousness and sincerity. As it can thus be interpreted either way by its intended audience, this allows for multiple contradictory interpretations of the same utterance, providing leeway for expressing taboo or otherwise non-normative statements by passing them off as a joke (*cancelling* them) as needed. One of the most widespread examples of post-ironic discourse is the meme family of '*depression memes*'. These are traditionally circulated through various social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. It would in fact be more precise to define them as a cluster of meme families unified not by a singular prime meme, but rather shared themes of feeling mentally unwell (arguably romanticizing the notion).

They typically include jokes about lacking the will to live, struggling with anxiety or depression (as in oblique references to lacking serotonin or dopamine), or otherwise highlighting various aspects of living with mental illness.

A recent study by McCosker and Gerrard (2020) found that up to 35 percent of all the Instagram content analyzed under the "#depressed" hashtag could be classified as depression memes. Out of the initial sample of 3496 public posts made within 48 hours, these memes were second most frequent, outnumbered only by inspirational posts (38 percent, by comparison), going some way to illustrate the extensive dissemination of these memes.

Like other memes based on more positive sentiments, depression memes can still thus be seen as to create a sense of social belonging or unity (Zappavigna 2012) — in this case, around the subject of mental illness. People who struggle with different mental conditions seem to intimately connect with the experiences presented in these memes, relating to the experiences portrayed, which, for better or worse, provides a sort of validation through representation only achievable through the safety of anonymity or curated personas made possible within the online sphere. As McCosker and Gallard put it, “[p]latforms like Instagram, Tumblr and Reddit, as well as dedicated community forums allow the unfurling of the signs, feelings and attributes that express a person’s ordinarily stigmatized experiences of mental ill-health.” (McCosker & Gerrard, 2020)

Yet there can be those who might simply enjoy creating and disseminating these depression memes, not necessarily as an expression of shared personal struggle with the portrayed sentiments, but rather emulating the voice - or *stance* - of such a person (putting on a social mask). This apparent contradiction alludes to the inherent disingenuousness of (post-)ironic discourse, especially as it relates to meme culture. In the case laid out above, for example, one might debate whether the sharing of a depression meme by a non-depressed individual might still constitute a genuine communicative act, as defined above (sharing on the basis of relating to the portrayed sentiment and seeking affirmation or connection). Specifically, although the former part is categorically false, the latter seems largely open to interpretation. This is explored further in the sections on post-irony and second-order communicative intent in the literature review.

Depression meme (taken from “Mentally_thrill memes”)



The presence of both types of users within this online community, oftentimes enjoying and spreading the same meme tokens, makes it hard to distinguish between the two and identify the degree of authenticity of a given meme, since it depends “on volatile and unstable structures of meaning”. But as Lucie Chateau (2020) says, the authenticity of such memes is ultimately irrelevant, because “the sharing of these memes still constitutes a cultural engagement.” (Chateau, 2020)

The rise of depression memes can be seen as to be connected to the Happiness Effect, as outlined by Freitas (2017), describing the pressures put upon regular social media users as a result of the selective and curated presentation of other people's lives, creating unrealistic expectations and false standards which make a lot of especially young people question the quality of their own. This perceived disingenuousness gave rise to a surge of radical sincerity, as exemplified by the explosive popularity of depression memes. What makes the comedic element in these memes so potent is exactly this subversion of The Happiness Effect, supplanting it instead with what Chateau (2020) calls The New Sensibility, which contributes to users expressing more authentic selves on the web.

Expressing personal experiences and struggles, especially of a mental nature, might still be considered taboo or improper within a lot of public settings, both in online and offline communication. Thus, were one to feel a need to express such sentiments, but unwilling to potentially compromise their social status among their peers, it would be logical to resort to a communication strategy that reduces or eliminates this risk. In this sense, post-irony provides a viable solution, as the lasting popularity of these depression memes goes to show.

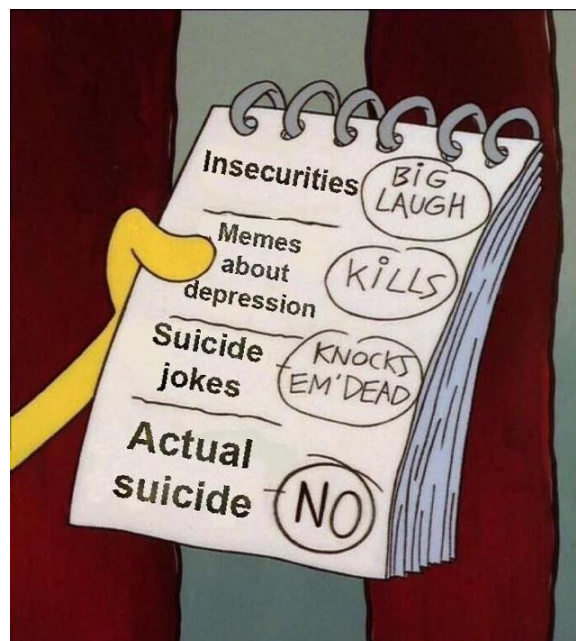
According to Lucie Chateau, the (post-)irony used in depression memes can help users in “evading that stifling regime of the self and doctrine of authenticity.” (Chateau, 2020) This is connected to an anonymity-based culture of online image boards like 4chan, and their rejection of individualistic authenticity. As a result of this rejection, the audience of these image boards interacts with the world in accordance with the notion of dissimulation through irony, and are “infamous for their subversion through trolling.” (Chateau, 2020) However, where comes irony, post-irony follows, because the gradual escalation of ironic messages in a public online environment, where context cannot always be restored and recognized, leads to ambiguity of intention. Hence, irony “trains readers to expect something but never tells us when to stop interpreting its irony.” (Chateau, 2020)

The same notion of dissimulation can be found in ironic and post-ironic depression memes that started appearing after the initial rise of this radically sincere meme movement. These are meta memes that reflect on the sincere depression memes in an ironic way, in fact ridiculing them and implying that they are not the best way to combat mental illness. (Chateau, 2020) In effect,

ironic depression memes are subtly recognizing the fact that depression memes as a means to express oneself and increase visibility of mental illness online have simply turned into a yet another cheap scheme for getting a lot of attention online in the form of likes and reposts. No matter how much one jokes about one's mental struggle, the struggle itself does not go away, and the expression of these struggles online is still only rendered acceptable if ostensibly communicated as a joke. "[The ironic depression memes] re-edify boundaries that depression memes were praised as obliterating. In the ironic memes above, presenting yourself as depressed online is okay, but actually being depressed is no laughing matter (actual suicide = no), and therefore should not be memed about." (Chateau, 2020)



Ironic depression meme taken from @_sadpeplememes.



Another ironic depression meme taken from a _subreddit.

After ironic depression memes started gaining traction online, they became a new trend on social media. However, the sincere depression memes were still present, and they started to as with each other. The sheer magnitude of differing online social contexts has led to the emergence of post-ironic depression memes segment, through which it became incredibly easy to hide one's true intentions behind a social action if needed, for various reasons.

Meme 1

The first meme token to be analyzed in detail in this dissertation belongs to the aforementioned meme family cluster. It is rather simple and straight-forward in terms of form, but still subversive, which makes it a great candidate for an in-depth demonstrational pragmatic analysis. Relying on Chateau's cultural analysis of depression memes for context, what follows is the author's interpretation of a post-ironic meme using the Yus-Scott heuristic derived earlier.



Meme token #1, otherwise fondly called Le Meme 1. Taken from Instagram.

1. **Analyze the picture.** An average user, upon seeing this picture, would decode the following explicature: it is a Facebook Messenger emoji that represents a human face. The emoji is crying and laughing at the same time. The fact that this emoji is covering its face might suggest that it is embarrassed of its own facial expression, or otherwise add to the hysterical intensity of the emotion(s) portrayed.

A row of visual implicatures could include the following:

- One might assume the emoji is not crying from laughter alone, as there is a separate emoji that portrays this alone, different from this combination of laughing and crying emojis (😭 and 😂, respectively). Similarly, these laughing elements can be seen to broaden or nuance the perceived expressed sentiment beyond simple sadness, as might be inferred from a standard crying emoji.

- ◆ Since this emoji is not present in a generic set of Facebook messenger emojis, it appears to be a custom version mimicking these, intentionally edited to convey a more complex emotion than its stock equivalent, as indicated by the original addition of a hand covering its face.
 - ◆ The overall quality of the image is low (perhaps intentionally), and the image itself looks poorly cropped, as if a screenshot of another Instagram meme with the original caption tackily removed in a basic image editor (not unlike the trend of deep fried memes, as discussed earlier). The thick lines and clashing of yellow and white directly beneath the caption, as well as small spots of black near the edges of those lines indicate the presence of an older caption, hastily erased and sloppily color matched, roughly cleaning the slate to update the caption, which stamped directly on top. This seems to suggest that (at least parts of) the meme is not original; rather, it is remixing the work of another.
2. **Create a conceptual file for the meme characters.** At this stage, there appears to be only one that can be created (or accessed). This would be a conceptual file of the emoji, with its decoded explicature and inferred visual implicatures. As the user would probably only have access to the decoded explicature and the first (primary) visual implicature, the rest is not deemed necessary for an adequate interpretation of the image. Therefore, the user would most likely stop at this, as their expectation of relevance would be satisfied, at least for the time being.
 3. **Text processing.** The verbal content of this meme seems relatively straight-laced. There are no ambiguous lexical items, nor notable implicatures. The only thing to process here is an explicature: "nobody [in some set x] likes me." However, a reader might not know which set is intended (if any actually is) and so might not be able to retrieve the exact content of the explicature, beyond the general stance of the addressor towards this set. (Were the user to receive this as a private message, he might thus be left with no option but to infer an implicature that this set refers to or includes him - or at the very least, interpreted as a cry for help, compassion, validation, or the like.)
 4. **Infer possible combinations of text and picture** and reassess the newly emerged verbal-visual implicatures.
Through combination of text and image, the user can infer that the text and the image are intended to complement each other. The newly emerged visual-verbal implicature is that the facial expression conducts the emotional state of the character, whereas the verbal content represents that character's thoughts (the referring expression "me" would here be inferred as to refer to the addressor,

through relevance-guided comprehension heuristic). This would also further probabilize the relevancy of the interpretation inferred in the step prior, as the addressor is portrayed as emotionally distraught and feeling unsupported or alone.

5. **Mapping of referring expressions with conceptual files.** Given that there is no other character in the picture besides the emoji, the user might again follow relevance-guided comprehension heuristic to conclude that the most logical interpretation is that the sharer of the meme is associating herself with the emoji, and the overarching communicative message of the meme represents her current or general emotional state. That is, if one assumes that the meme sharer is producing a sincere utterance and not just mimicking its stance, attributing the utterance to someone else, or just sharing to comment on it, or for other non-identitarian reasons ('here's something interesting/funny/instructive I came across online.')
6. **Access any additional context.** Up until this point, there has been no need to grapple with the issue of ironic intent. However, in order to assess the sincerity of the addressor, the addressee would need to gain more context of the person who produced or sent the meme.

At this stage, the user might go back to analyzing the picture itself, find more visual detail, and infer all of the visual implicatures described in step 1. That is, if his expectation of optimal relevance is not satisfied, the addressee may have reasons to doubt the sincerity of the speaker, upon which he might start looking for additional contextual cues.

One such reason could be the strange facial expression of the emoji. If the expression were to be less ambiguous - say, simply sad or laughing - this could uncontroversially be mentally classified as a depression meme. One might argue that this strange facial expression acts as an online alternative of the ironic tone of voice, where the laughing mouth points towards the ironic interpretation, whereas the tearing eyes - pouring even - point in the direction of sincerity. Although conflicting (and fundamentally post-ironic), these cues prompt the user to dig deeper, setting a higher expectation of relevance.

The user might look for signs of dissociative attitude, and infer them from the visual implicatures described in step 1. He might be inclined to do this due to the raising popularity of memes with intentionally low picture resolution. ("It's Always the Low-Quality Videos" 2022) This type of humorous quality downscaling (**examples provided below**), among other things, is often categorized as an iconic type of

humor usually attributed to (a certain subset of) younger users - so-called '*Gen[eration] Z humor enjoyers*' - and might thus be derided or criticized by other (especially older) users. Part of this critique come from younger users themselves, who might exhibit an awareness of the increasing simplicity and patent absurdity of this socio-cultural comedic style, while still seeming to consciously embrace it ([pinterest profile](#) and [youtube video](#) to illustrate).

▼ Further examples of the low-quality meme family cluster



Taken from [imgflip](#).



Taken from [fandom](#).

Hence, if the user has access to this context, he would be primed to notice the low quality of the picture, as well as the lousy text editing, then arrive at the visual implicatures inferred in step 1 and consider them as relevant for the overall interpretation. However, due to the lack of context regarding authorial intent, it remains unclear whether this style is implemented sincerely, e.g. to reinforce the jocular communicative intent by virtue of the stark juxtaposition between the attributed visual-verbal content and the tone of the meme - or ironically, in order to create a degree of detachment from the dark thoughts portrayed (leaving open the potential cancellability of the sentiment). Both interpretations, however, might ultimately lead to the same result - whether an act of mimicry, or an emotional outlet, the communicative intent still appears to contain a desire to amuse, at least in part (as opposed to a more unambiguous or direct speech act, such as a text message or phone call). Thus, the user might deem the authorial intention completely irrelevant for their final interpretation, and not ascribe any informative intent to the meme at all. However, because there is no further context to the meme and the signs of irony are quite faint (although not completely absent), the user would not settle for a single interpretation, but for a *double-lecture*. (Sperber & Wilson 1987)

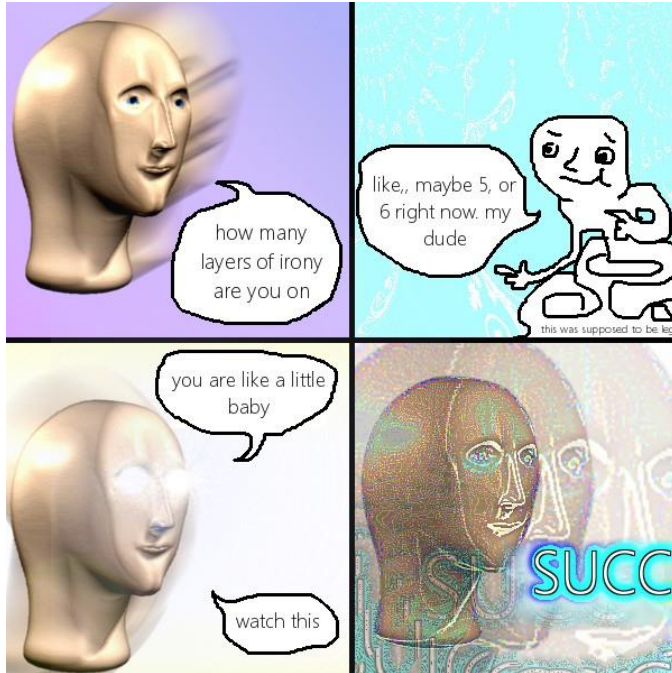
As previously stated, despite all these comedic inferential cues, this meme token could still potentially be considered an accurate reflection of the addressor's emotional state. The relative salience of this interpretation of the token might depend chiefly on how the user came to encounter the meme, graded from the lowest (seeing it on a public Instagram feed) to the highest (coming from a friend known to be struggling with similar emotions described in the meme).

Some users might not look for further signs of relevance, rather than accept the meme at face value and move on, whereas others might render it ironic, and some might deem it to be neither. In normal conversation this would be considered a case of failed communication, but since this is presupposed to be a joke, and the author is deliberately confusing the viewer as part of the comedic thrust of this utterance, no communication can be considered failed communication, as the primary goal of the addressor appears to be that the meme be seen - not necessarily interpreted or understood.

As observed above, post-ironic memes may be interpreted as ironic or sincere depending on the context surrounding the environment in which it is encountered. The same token with the exact same visual-verbal cues can have different meanings depending on the person who sends it, and whether the user expects it to have an informative intention at all beyond the one definitive of all memes: to contribute to the propagation of the digital participatory culture. (Wiggins & Bowers 2014)

Meme 2

The second meme to undergo the interpretation is the one that has already been introduced before as an example of surreal memes. It is the “Layers of Irony” from thememe history section. It is a fruitful example of a meta-ironic meme.



Meme token #2, or Le Meme 2, already known as “Layers of Irony” meme_ KnowYourMeme.

1. **Analyze the picture(s).** The user will identify both characters of the comic, presumably having a dialogue, hinted at by the speech bubbles and the fact that the same character shows up in several frames - thereby suggesting the continuous order of them. Those familiar with the format will instantly recognize both characters as belonging to a certain meme family, and recognize the implicated reference to that meme format. Moreover, the abundance of visual editing implicates a certain tone with which the speech bubbles should be read, and how the meme in general should be perceived. The fact that the amount of editing applied to “Meme Man” increases from start to finish leads the viewer to experience a sense of build-up and climax towards the end.
2. **Create conceptual file for the meme characters.** Since both characters are already known, the viewer most likely won't create any new conceptual files, but access the ones that contain all the info about these characters. (for this reason, step 5 will be skipped) However, if the viewer is unfamiliar with the characters, two files will be created, simultaneously putting the viewer at risk of missing out on parts of the intended meaning of the meme, since he is unable to recognize the implicated reference.

3. **Text processing.** A couple of things to decode here: the reference assignment -[you] in frames 1 and 3, [this] in frame 2 (at the very bottom), as well as the [my dude] vocative, and simple explicatures such as the implied question mark in the first frame and [I am] in the second one, completing the grammatical structure of the clause. In terms of implicatures, the only thing that comes to mind is the fact that a caption outside the speech bubble in frame 2 is directed at the viewer, and not at any of the characters. The viewer would be hard put to figure out what the “succ” refers to at this stage, if he tried to make sense of it.
4. **Infer possible combinations of text and picture** and reassess the newly emerged verbal-visual implicatures. As a result of processing both picture and text, the viewer will surmise that the word [this] in the third frame refers to the last frame of the comic, where “Meme man” performs a demonstration of accessing much higher levels of irony than the other character “Like 5 or 6 Dude.” Consequently, the extravagant visual editing of the last frame is to be linked to “Meme Man” reaching that state. Moreover, the dialogue within the meme presupposes, and therefore implicates, two facts. One: irony can have layers, potentially an infinite amount of them. Two: the characters talk about irony as of an intoxicating substance. (“Layers of Irony” 2016) The “succ” bit still does not make any sense.
5. **Mapping of referring expressions with conceptual files. (skipped)**
6. **Access any additional context.** Outside the general conventions of meme-making, there is not that much context to access. Since “Meme Man” character is a symbol of surreal memes, the viewer from the very start would be primed to not find as much coherence in the meme token. The editing, the misspelling of the word “suck” and the overall intentionally tacky drawing style of speech bubbles strongly suggest humorous intention, but do not provide any further cues to that on a linguistic level. Depending on how familiar the viewer is with the characters, one of the two things might happen. If the viewer is informed, the relevance-guided comprehension heuristic will tell him to skip the first level of communication entirely and indeed decrease the expectation of optimal relevance, instead seeking for a second-level communicative intention, which simply offers a comic reading based on absurdity and spontaneity, as well as the intertextual pleasure (Zappavigna 2012) of recognizing references present in the meme. If the viewer is not familiar with the characters and will actually try to find some meaning in the first-order communication, he will fail to do so and will conclude that the communication either has failed, or that he is lacking the context necessary to understand the meme, which has happened numerous times with this meme token specifically. (“Layers of Irony” 2016)

As is evident, the speaker intention inside meta-ironic memes is simply unattainable due to the lack of a coherent picture. The universe represented in the meme token is in fact a stage-three simulacrum that is marking the absence of basic reality, calling into question what it is and whether it even exists. (Baurillard 1981)

Afterthought

Although highly subversive, the meme tokens analyzed are rather simple, unlike the token below. It would be exciting to analyze that as well, but untangling all the references to different meme families, let alone describing their symbiotic relationship with each other and eventually arriving at even a vague resemblance of the speaker meaning would need a thesis of its own. I will just leave this here as an example of how grotesque, bizarre and complex meta-ironic memes can be.



Taken from @brad_the_rambler (isnt., assessed 15.05.2023)

Conclusion

In accord with the research questions laid out in the introduction, this thesis has attempted to define the defining features of ironic memes, according to several different cultural accounts and pragmatic accounts of irony. Further, it has illustrated the potential benefits and shortcomings of attempting to understand memes through the echoic approach: it seems to be the case that the echoic use of language can be instrumental in understanding post-irony, albeit the phenomenon itself, despite being the direct descendant of the classic irony, slips away from being definitively characterized by the three distinctive features of irony postulated by Wilson.

The paper has examined the role of Relevance Theory in explaining post-irony, as well as all of online communication at large, and how conventional pragmatic concepts such as implicature, explicature and the presumption of optimal relevance might be applied to online discourse, and the analysis of post-ironic memes in particular. Building directly upon the work of various pragmatists such as Sperber, Wilson, Shifman, Scott, Yus and more, the latter two in particular, it has sought to adapt existing pragmatic approaches into a specialized heuristic for meme analysis - illustrating the pragmatic richness contained within them, especially when dealing with layers of convoluted and ambiguous communicative intent which it identifies as the main defining feature of post-ironic discourse, and going over the long and established history which has led to this current post-ironic paradigm. Additionally, the dissertation has provided several demonstrations of how such a heuristic might be applied in practice, both to post-ironic and meta-ironic memes.

The ultimate goal of this thesis, however, has been two-fold: First, to highlight and address some of the unexplored aspects of the pragmatic field regarding post-ironic meme analysis - and second, to show the pragmatic value of such an analysis. This argument is founded on a hypothesized prediction, previously only alluded to or discussed in brief: that not factoring an account of memes, post-ironic ones among them, into modern pragmatic analyses is not just to overlook a new and rapidly developing mode of communication - but one that is increasingly bleeding into offline discourse, into the field of conventional pragmatics. In this way, an exclusively offline-based pragmatic analysis might thus run the risk of becoming somewhat less relevant in the future. The author postulates that the role of meme-based discourse will only become more salient with time, as the 'meme generations' come of age, gaining ever more social and political influence, while the older, more analog generations step back. Already, we can see the creeping effects of meme culture becoming a hegemonic and established cultural force, even in the offline sphere (illustrated below).



An ad banner of FINN, photo taken near Ullevål Stadion, Oslo.

This is an example of meme culture influencing the offline sphere. The text reads: “When you realize how much you would have earned selling your car yourself.” (Author's translation) Note, among other influences, the animal + caption juxtaposition, reminiscent of the Advice Animals meme family, conveys an audio-visual implicature - ‘don’t regret your choices like this fox; sell your car yourself’. One might even identify traces of an ironic influence in how the advertisement seems to subvert the expectation suggested by its format, challenging the conventional perception that advertisements generally should be aesthetically pleasing. Just like any meme, it relies on its audience to work out the reference and experience the same type of intertextual pleasure that could be found online, but this time with a specific goal in mind.

Nevertheless, with the new generation of pragmatists on their way, the author remains positive that the research field of online discourse will continue to grow, as more academics will realize the importance of it, and the unique changes it brings about in our daily communication. Here’s to the fruitful results of future pragmatic studies!

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