

Internet memes and the dynamics of stance

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Stancetaking has been recognized as “[o]ne of the most important things we do with words” (Du Bois 2007: 139). In an era of communication in which combining language forms with images has become second nature, it is important to bring into sharper view the ways in which image-text combinations, too, centrally involve stancetaking. This paper focuses on Internet memes – online artefacts replicated, altered, shared and commented on in various ways – which recent work in Cognitive Linguistics has argued can be approached as a particular kind of multimodal constructional pattern (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017, Bülow et al. 2018, Zenner & Geeraerts 2018) with linguistically interesting properties, such as the use but also modification of existing linguistic constructions or the use of images to ‘fill in’ constructional slots normally expressed verbally.

Using a large manually collected data set, this paper presents a qualitative analysis of how words and/or images contribute to conveying multiple stances. Preliminary analysis suggests the following:

1. In some meme families the image plays a minor, supporting role, but the words themselves constructionally stack up stances (cf. Dancygier 2012), as in examples like *Can I wear your Crocs, said no one ever*, in which the apparent positive evaluative stance is cancelled, and exposed as ludicrous, by the apparent reporting clause.
2. Other meme families feature an image calling up a (pre-given or more *ad hoc*) frame used to categorize a new instance as being of the same type. For instance, the *one does not simply* meme originates in a film scene where “...walk into Mordor” is an impossible task; this has come to serve as an evaluative stance template to categorize ever more undertakings as futile and unattainable.
3. A final class of meme families relies more specifically on multimodal simile, first described by Lou (2017) for *when*-memes, which complete a *when*-clause not verbally but via visual depiction of a scene or situation in respect of some properties of which an experience or attitude is evaluated. Other simulative memes include *be like* memes, which posit a stereotypical attitude and express a stance towards it, and *me: ... also me: ...* memes, which contrast good intentions with less-than-good outcomes, and take an evaluative stance towards this contrast. Both of these types tie in with existing descriptions of quotations as depictions (Clark 2016). So-called labelling memes are different again: they overlay discrete elements in complex images with words to guide stepwise interpretation, reframing the depiction as a complex stance expression.

In addition to evaluative stances, online memetic discourse involves affective, usually humorous stances intersubjectively shared in online communities of discourse. In sum, Internet memes provide a fascinating testcase for current concerns in Cognitive Linguistics concerning constructions, intersubjectivity, multimodality, and the expression of complex, ‘stacked’ stances.

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