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“One does not simply categorize a meme”: A dual classification system for visual-textual internet memes

Leslie Cochrane, Alexandra Johnson, Aubrey Lay & Ginny Helmandollar*

Abstract. Internet memes are a popular and long-standing genre of discourse on social media platforms used to express everything from emotional states to political opinions. Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2017) define internet memes as intertextual, multimodal discourses that combine text with images. Attempts to sort memes into paradigms or other categorical distinctions have come from the fields of new media studies and digital literature (Wiggins & Bowers 2015). While taking these categories and paradigms into account, we assert that linguistic methods are uniquely suited to analyze the language of memes due to the structural and thus diachronic nature of linguistic description. We utilize a discourse analysis approach to analyze visual-textual memes and offer a linguistic lens for understanding the creation of memes and their usage across contexts and time.

In order to capture and compare these rapidly-changing discourses, we propose a descriptive dual classification system for memes with two components: meme composition and multimodal quality. Meme composition groups memes by their structure—beyond the individual images they employ—and thus explains how memes recontextualize images and text to create new meanings. For example, the composition we term *Comic* utilizes consecutive images and text in a highly narrative structure that cannot be reordered. Another meme composition, *Comparison*, juxtaposes two images paired with text that indicate an opposing reaction to two related concepts. Multimodal quality serves to describe the way(s) that the text interacts with the image in the meme: as a caption, label, and/or utterance. Combining one meme composition with one or more multimodal qualities classifies an individual meme structurally and provides a basis for explaining its intertextuality, modality, and meaning-making.

In this study, we apply the dual classification system to English language data collected in its naturally-occurring context on the social media platform Instagram from 2019 to 2021. Analysis of this data shows that the dual classification system is a flexible and robust approach which provides a vocabulary for discussing the creative agency exerted by meme creators in a wide range of communities. We argue that the dual classification system affords researchers the ability to study memes linguistically across a variety of platforms and over time.

Keywords. disability; digital media; discourse; intertextuality; memes; multimodality; social media

1. Introduction. This proceedings paper is part of our ongoing study of disability discourse, including researching “inspiration porn” (Young 2014, Cochrane 2020) and other false societal discourses (Gee 2007) about disability. The data was collected in order to study how a marginal-

* The authors are grateful to the Instagram creators for their meme data, the William & Mary Linguistics Program and Department of English for travel funding, and the attendees at LSA 2022 for their comments. Authors: Leslie E. Cochrane, William & Mary (lecochrane@wm.edu) & Alexandra Johnson, Aubrey R. Lay, and Ginny Helmandollar, William & Mary (discourseanalysis@wm.edu).

ized community combats damaging narratives in online discourse (Cochrane et al. 2021). As we collected our corpus, we noticed patterns in the ways meme creators used multimodality and intertextuality to subvert harmful master narratives. While existing literature on memes (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017, Yus 2018) offer some tools for analysis, they lacked a sufficiently flexible framework to describe the variation that we observed in visual-textual memes. Past research has studied memes in context on social media platforms such as Facebook (DuPreez & Lombard 2014, Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong 2015, Procházka 2018), Reddit (Nissenbaum & Schiffman 2018), and WhatsApp (Al Zidjaly 2017). In this study, we consider data on Instagram, a relatively under-researched yet widely used platform for visual-textual memes.

Because memes are primarily used as digital discourses, they change rapidly in both format and popularity (Dancygier & Vandelanotte 2017). Any particular style of meme will be quickly joined, and often overtaken, by new creative varieties. Therefore, we propose a flexible dual classification system that can be used to analyze memes across a variety of platforms, communities, and topics. Our goal for this system is to create terminology for the study of memes that can be applied to data past, present, and future.

2. Methodology. We collected a corpus of 50 memes that had been posted between January 2019 to December 2020 on the social media app Instagram. We limited our dataset to English language memes posted on public accounts. Through participant observation on Instagram, we identified the following hashtags as relevant: #chronicillnessmemes, #disabilitymemes, #fucka-bleism, #inspirationporn, #notyourinspiration, and #spooniememes. The data was collected on an account specifically created for our research in order to reduce the influence of Instagram’s content promotion algorithm on the displayed posts. We searched under the qualifying hashtags and took screenshots of each meme and its accompanying text, noting the author account, date posted, and applicable hashtags. For the purpose of our ongoing research, the data needed to address a societal discourse about disability beyond simply joking or commenting about life experiences.

Although the term meme can describe a variety of cultural artifacts, this study was specifically concerned with visual-textual memes, not with video memes or text-only memes. We limit our use of the term to a small-d discourse posted online or on social media that is both multimodal and intertextual. In our study, multimodality requires both text and image to interact meaningfully with each other. Intertextuality requires the meme to draw on an identifiable prior text for understanding of the current text. The interaction between the multimodality and the intertextuality of the memes in our corpus form the basis for our proposed system.

3. Dual classification system. Our classification system combines one meme composition and at least one multimodal quality in order to describe the multimodal and intertextual relationships within a meme. As memes change over time and across platforms, new composition styles and multimodal qualities may be observed and added to the dual classification system.

Meme composition describes the visual language of memes, and thus explains how meme creators make new meanings. The meme composition considers how the images and text are recontextualized through their interaction (Table 1). The different styles of meme composition classify memes by their structure, going beyond previous studies’ limitation to the individual images, layouts, or fonts employed. Each meme is described by only one meme composition.

Style Name	Explanation
Character	Figures in the image are redefined using text, thereby attributing the figures actions/reactions to the textual object (see

	Figure 1).
Comic	Consecutive images are combined to create a narrative that is dependent on movement through time or cause and effect. The images cannot be reordered.
Comparison	Two consecutive images featuring a facial expression or body language change that indicates one positive and one negative reaction to two opposing ideas or concepts (see Figure 2).
Conversation	At least two entities converse verbally or nonverbally, followed by an image that represents the response of the second speaker to the first (see Figure 3).
Description	Text is given alongside or overlaid on an image to contextualize what the image is meant to represent.
Sign	A figure interacts with an object that contains text, where the actions of the figure inform interpretation of the text.
Subtitle	A screenshot from another piece of media (e.g., a movie) with edited subtitles to alter the speech (additive or subtractive) of the character in the screenshot.

Table 1. Meme Composition

Multimodal quality describes how the text and image interact within a meme. While the meme composition classifies the structure of the meme, the multimodal quality classifies a meme by the interface between the image and the text (Table 2). Based on our observation of the data, the system allows more than one multimodal quality for each meme. Creators may use multiple different multimodal qualities, and, as such, a separate multimodal quality may be required to describe each individual text-image relationship.

Quality Name	Explanation
Label	Entities in an image are labeled with text to indicate alternative representational meanings (see Figure 1).
Caption	Text recontextualizes the image as a whole by giving it a different referential meaning (see Figures 2 and 3).
Utterance	Text represents the language attributed to a figure in the image (see Figure 3).

Table 2. Multimodal Qualities

Each meme has one meme composition and at least one multimodal quality. Below are three examples of memes, described according to our dual classification system. In Figure 1, the meme uses a Character meme composition and a Label multimodal quality.



Figure 1. A man looks at a sandwich, smiling. The man is labeled *Able bodied people in desperate need of motivation* and the sandwich is labeled *Disabled people*.

By labeling the entities in the image, this meme conveys the meaning that *Disabled people*, in the character of the sandwich, are being objectified by *Able bodied people in desperate need of motivation*, in the character of the person about to eat the sandwich. The meme thus is able to counter the false societal discourse that disabled people should serve as inspiration to non-disabled people (cf. Cochrane et al. 2021).

In Figure 2, the meme uses the Comparison meme composition and the Caption multimodal quality.



Figure 2. In the top panel, the rapper Drake scowls and gestures in disapproval next to the question *What happened to you?*; in the bottom panel, Drake smiles next to the question *What are your access needs?*

The captions recontextualize Drake’s facial expressions and body language as responses to the juxtaposed questions. The comparison of the two panels creates the meaning that *What are your access needs?* is an acceptable question and *What happened to you?* is not.

In Figure 3, the meme uses Conversation meme composition and both Caption and Utterance multimodal qualities.

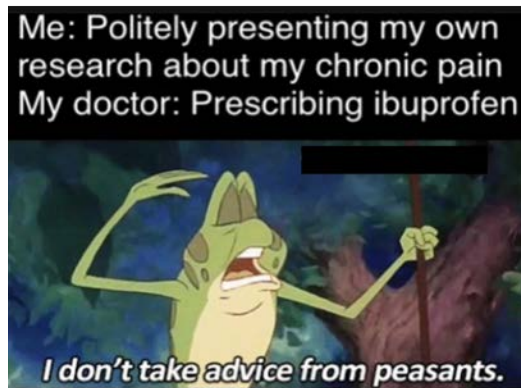


Figure 3. The text at top reads Me: Politely presenting my own research about my chronic pain and My doctor: Prescribing ibuprofen. The image underneath shows a still of an anthropomorphic frog from the animated film *The Swan Princess* with a subtitle of the film dialogue I don't take advice from peasants.

The two multimodal qualities combine to describe how the text and image interact in this meme: the utterance *I don't take advice from peasants* is attributed to the figure of the frog in the image; the Caption multimodal quality recontextualizes the whole image as being part the third part of the conversation. The *Me* with *chronic pain* addresses *My Doctor* as one of the *peasants*. The meme thus comments on a paternalistic societal discourse in which the lived experiences of disabled people are devalued in medical contexts (Cochrane et al. 2021). Note the different ways that the Caption multimodal quality is applied in Figures 2 and 3. Both have recontextualized images, but Figure 3 has the additional Utterance multimodal quality. These three examples serve to show how the dual classification system functions to categorize memes and to help us explain how they make new meanings.

4. Conclusion. Memes have been discourses in popular culture for decades; having a classification system to study and discuss memes is valuable for the further study of digital discourses. The dual classification system reflects the linguistic choices made by meme creators. This terminology provides a language for explaining the creative flouting of expectations and variability in memes.

A key finding of our study is that meme composition and multimodal quality are not the same aspect of a meme, but rather, they interrelate. Thus, a dual classification system creates a more accurate and resilient categorization of memes than previous approaches. This flexible system is designed to be expandable to other data, including other online communities of practice and alternate modalities. Our system allows for the inevitable addition of further multimodal qualities or meme compositions, while preserving the internal dual classification structure and maintaining comparable terminology. Therefore, our approach is designed to be applicable not only to current, but also past and future data. Since we define internet memes not by a particular style but rather by their multimodal and intertextual relationships, rapidly changing future memes will still be classifiable under our system.

Our work provides insight into new methods of meaning-making in digital spaces. In further studies, we hope to apply the dual classification system to new data, demonstrating its flexibility.

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