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Bakalářská práce

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Linguistic devices of humour in popular memes


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Čestné prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracoval samostatně pod vedením doc. PhDr. Václava Řeřichy, CSc. s využitím pramenů, které jsou uvedeny v bibliografii.

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Podpis 

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Annotation

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Název v angličtině:	Linguistic devices of humour in popular memes
Zvolený typ práce:	Výzkumná práce – přehled odborných poznatků.
Anotace práce:	Práce se zabývá kategorizací a charakterizací typů humorů a lingvistických prvků objevujících se v memech. Teoretická část definuje, co dělá memy humorné, typy humoru, lingvistické prvky humoru a memy samotné. Analytická část se zabývá deskriptivní analýzou populárních memů za poslední rok čili od května 2023 po květen 2024, aby vyvodila závěr, proč byly populární a jak se objevují lingvistické prvky.
Klíčová slova:	Memy, humor, lingvistické prvky, virální, populární
Anotace v angličtině:	The thesis deals with the categorisation and characterisation of humour types and linguistic devices circulating in internet memes. The theoretical part defines what makes memes humorous, types of humour, humorous linguistic devices and memes themselves. The analytical part of the thesis deals with the descriptive analysis of popular memes from May 2023 to May 2024 to make a conclusion about what makes them popular and how linguistic devices are utilised.
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Abstract

The thesis aims to categorise and characterise humour types and linguistic devices circulating in internet memes. The theoretical part defines what makes memes humorous, types of humour, humorous linguistic devices and memes themselves. The analytical part of the thesis deals with the descriptive analysis of popular memes from May 2023 to May 2024 to make a conclusion about what makes them popular.

1 Introduction

Internet memes are a modern form of entertainment that surrounds us on the Internet, and as it is a popular phenomenon, it also blends into real life. The memes are often misunderstood as a nonsensical use of humour as many people might not understand them, mainly people who do not actively participate in social media use. Understanding memes may offer a window of opportunity to relate even more to younger generations, who are primarily associated with consuming social media content. This thesis provides categorisation and characteristics of different humour types and humorous linguistic devices that might occur in Internet memes and their examples. Additionally, the later analysis retrospectively discusses popular memes of last year (May 2023 – May 2024) using the earlier categorisation and characteristics. It is advised to read this thesis on a device with access to the internet, as the discussion often revolves around video clips.

The theoretical part of this thesis defines humour and its types and linguistic devices that are found in memes, with short surveys of the specific examples and a definition of Internet memes and how to differentiate them from viral media.

The aim of the thesis is to identify the most prevalent humour types and linguistic devices in popular memes, which reflect the users' interest, to prove that memes may not be as nonsensical as they seem and to identify the reasons why they might appear as humorous. The research methodology for this thesis involves the observation of memes appearing on social media to provide examples for categorisation. The findings of observation are then utilised in the descriptive analysis of popular memes. The thesis' expected outcome is to offer an understanding of popular memes by providing the context behind them and exposing the hidden references.

2 What is Humour?

The Cambridge Dictionary defines humour as: “*the ability to find things funny, the way in which people see that some things are funny, or the quality of being funny*” (Cambridge University Press & Assessment). It should result in amusement and can be conveyed in different ways and through various forms. One general criterion for humour is that it evokes laughter, smile or positive feelings if it finds the proper audience. However, it does not necessarily mean that laughter or a smile equals an instance of humour. This criterion raises the question: “How do you spot if something is supposed to be humorous?” John Morreall (1987) examines three theories of humour, Superiority Theory, Relief from Restraint Theory, and Incongruity Theory, in his work *The Philosophy of Humor and Laughter*, to conclude that the most relevant theory that explains why something is humorous is the Incongruity Theory as it can be applied to all humorous instances. Meanwhile, the other two happen situationally and are reciprocally combined with the Incongruity Theory. (Morreall, 1987, p. 128-138).

Firstly, the Superiority Theory of humour suggests that humour arises from a feeling of one's own superiority relative to the subject of humour. This amusement, it suggests, arises from positive reinforcement of self-image. It can be observed in jokes that rely on stereotypes or clumsiness – laughter emerges from a sense of "at least that's not me." While it sheds light on humour derived from mockery or misfortune, it struggles to account for humour that utilises self-deprecation, wit, or absurdity (Morreall, 1987, p.129).

Secondly, the Incongruity Theory relies on the idea that humour arises from situations which are out of ordinary patterns individuals are accustomed to – the word itself refers to something being out of place. The unexpected sudden change in a pattern, if pleasant, triggers laughter or positive feelings; if unpleasant, it may trigger negative emotions (Morreall, 1987, p.130). For example, imagine a situation where someone comes back home to find that their cat destroyed a piece of furniture, they did not expect it and probably got angry. On the other hand, if the cat started to walk on its hind legs instead of destroying the owner's belongings, it would be just as surprising but a much more pleasant experience, which could result in laughter as it was perceived as humorous.

Lastly, the Relief Theory suggests that our emotions have the power to build up energy that must be released in some way, for example, through physical action. Laughter is a pleasant release and can happen independently of whatever emotion is causing the build-up of energy. For this theory

to happen, something incongruous must occur, which then makes the build-up of energy inappropriate, and that may be humorous and result in laughter (Morreall, 1987, p.131). However, not all humorous instances require any sort of built-up energy. As stated previously, a sudden change may interrupt the build-up, and it can happen outside of situations with escalation and still result in laughter.

In conclusion, the Incongruity Theory shows itself to be a more thorough framework, even though the Superiority and Relief Theories offer insightful pieces to the humour puzzle. Though useful in understanding comedy originating from mockery, the Superiority Theory suffers from a lack of, e.g., wit, absurdity or self-deprecating humour. The Relief Theory links humour too tightly to a particular method of releasing emotions, even while it acknowledges the importance of the unexpected. On the other hand, the Incongruity Theory provides a more comprehensive explanation. It includes a larger spectrum of humorous scenarios since it focuses on unexpected divergence from anticipated patterns. The skilful manipulation of a well-known saying through someone's wit or the sight of a cat walking on its hind legs are just two examples of how the Incongruity Theory easily illustrates how an unexpected turn in an expected situation may make people laugh. Its status as a dominant theory in the world of humour is reinforced by its capacity to explain laughter in a variety of situations, from clever wordplay to slapstick instances. However, it is important to keep in mind that humour is a complex phenomenon, and a combination of factors, not just incongruity, contributes to what we find funny.

2.1 Types of Humour Across Internet Memes

Internet memes are a diverse way for people to share humour since they originated from the collaboration of all users in the Internet community. Understanding that humour is inherently subjective, memes use a wide variety of different types of humour to appeal to a wide range of audiences. Internet memes function within an infinitely creative framework as popular trends keep changing. Their adaptability enables them to utilise almost the whole range of humour. A thorough classification and examination of different types of humour is essential for gaining a grasp of online memes and their humorous influence. A categorisation like this will act as a helpful tool through which memes may be understood better with constantly changing internet humour.

2.1.1 Dark or Black Humour

Dark humour, also known as black humour, touches upon sensitive subjects such as death, tragedy, and social issues through comedy (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). Despite its controversial nature, dark humour is widely used, reflecting the complexities of human psychology and how individuals cope with the harsh realities of life.

As suggested in the essay “Humour” (1927) by Sigmund Freud, it can provide relief from sensitive subjects and can act as a defence mechanism from the seriousness of the topic as suggested by the Relief Theory.

Many meme templates are not inherently intended for dark humour; however, they can be used to portray it regardless of their intended purpose. For example, this applies to memes like *Disaster Girl*, with a girl smiling while there is a house burning down in the background, usually with a text that implies a mischievous idea but not necessarily a dark one (See *Figure 1*) or a modern meme that is usually accompanied with a sound *Mr. Incredible Becoming Uncanny*, which is usually in the form of a still image slideshow or a video and the character along with the sound get more uncanny by each one, each part has an idea to which the character reacts. Although the *Mr. Incredible Becoming Uncanny* template heavily implies dark ideas used for the meme, it can be used alongside everyday ideas that get progressively worse but are not dark, as can be seen in a user-posted meme in *Figure 2*.



Figure 1 @JOSTIN ASUNCION, 2009. *Disaster Girl*. Dark Humour



Figure 2 @BODYWORXMUSIC, 2023. TikTok. Screenshots of a video Mr. Incredible Becoming Uncanny. Dark Humour

2.1.2 Satire

Satire has been a genre where humour has manifested since Ancient Greek drama, where its characteristics appeared. However, it was a term in the first century AD, when it was coined by Roman rhetorician Quintilian. The primary purpose of satire is to expose the flaws or absurdity of an individual or organised body of individuals using ridicule or mockery, often hoping for a change for the better (Elliot, 2019). It is a spectrum, as it can range from a gentle critique to a harsh critique and should be targeted only towards a high-powered subject; otherwise, it loses its quality as a satire and becomes a cruel mockery (Gottlieb, 2019).

An example of a well-known political satire is *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, where he uses allegory to convey the historical events of Russia's Bolshevik revolution and the further development of the political situation under the reign of Joseph Stalin. The comparison to animals makes it a mockery of Russian authorities (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019). Memes might work in the same way, as seen in *Figure 16*.

2.1.3 Parody

Parody is a creative expression that has been used since Ancient Greece. Its concept lies in the imitation and reinterpretation of pre-existing works, often with a humorous twist. Unlike satire, which primarily aims to criticise societal norms or individuals, parody targets the original author's creations, highlighting their idiosyncrasies, flaws, and prevalent clichés or just comically recreates them (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020b).

At its core, parody is both an homage to and a critique of the source material (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020b). It may function as a form of artistic commentary, using humour to deconstruct and examine the original work's themes, style, or message.

Internet Memes may be a parody of something, as memes always recreate preexisting material (Kristeva, 1980, p.17) and make fun of the original, and this can happen even within memes, creating a chain of references. As seen in these examples, where an innocent family video got spread among internet users and evolved into a meme known as *Fully Conscious Baby* or *Four Seasons Orlando Baby* as a result of the baby's motor and verbal skills (@Aidan Walker, et al., 2024). Internet users started to jokingly imagine the baby's inner monologue, which might have happened during the original video¹ and added highly formal sentences with advanced vocabulary, developing the viral video into a meme². The meme of *Fully Conscious Baby* was further interpreted, ranging from caricature drawings³ to edits of the original video⁴ or just referencing it in a different format⁵.

2.1.4 Sarcasm

Sarcasm, a nuanced form of communication, operates as a linguistic device that indirectly conveys mockery, hurtful comments, and negative critique. Unlike straightforward statements, which express meaning explicitly, sarcasm works by stating the opposite of what is intended, often with an exaggerated or satirical tone. Its effectiveness depends on the speaker's ability to balance clarity and ambiguity, ensuring that the intended audience grasps the underlying message without

¹ @sobrizzle (2024), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@sobrizzle/video/7369772085859732778>

² @charlieblystad (2024), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@charlieblystad/video/7370772546750516526>

³ @chem1gal (2024), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@chem1gal/video/7371274254064569642>

⁴ @dezz0480 (2024), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@dezz0480/video/7370539268680207632>

⁵ @thisiselliz (2024), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@thisiselliz/video/7371093277170339118>

confusion or offence. However, the inherent ambiguity of sarcasm poses risks of misinterpretation, notably where context is lacking (Kreuz, 2019, p. 19-41).

To portray sarcasm effectively through the means of internet memes, meme template such as *Mocking Spongebob* (See *Figure 3*) may be used as the pose of the character, and the formatting of the caption that is attached to this meme template implies mockery. It is always in the form of call and response, where the response repeats the call but in alternating uppercase and lowercase letters (@Matt, et al., 2019); this may indicate a change of tone that may happen in regular speech when individuals attempt to mock someone.

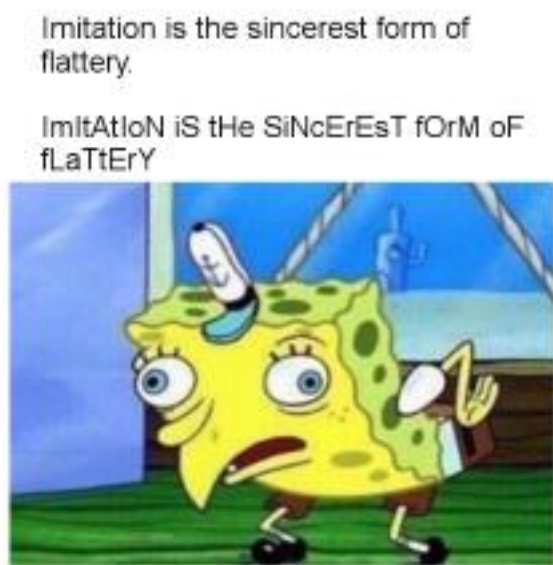


Figure 3 @CHANNING TATER: THE POTATO LORD, 2020. Mocking SpongeBob - Imitation. Sarcasm

2.1.5 Irony

Like sarcasm, irony relies on indirect communication to convey its meaning. Instead of a straightforward statement, it uses subtle hints and nuanced comments to create a gap between the literal meaning of the words and the intended message. This gap is often bridged through irony, where the speaker says the opposite of what they mean (Kreuz, 2019, p. 19-41). However, unlike sarcasm, which can have a harsh or mocking tone, this device can encompass a wider range of emotions. It can be used playfully or teasingly, or it can be utilised in more scenarios, unlike sarcasm, which is linked to verbal only.

As its aim is not to insult the receiving party, in addition to it not being offensive and to clearly distinguish irony from sarcasm, it needs to be categorised precisely to reveal the various environments and situations where they appear.

In Socratic irony, an experienced teacher may pose as an uninformed person and lead his students toward better comprehension by asking basic questions. This is an example of Socratic irony, in which the speaker pretends to be uninformed in order to highlight contradictions or stimulate the listener's critical thinking (Kreuz, 2019, p. 19-41).

Dramatic irony, for example, may be a result of a plot in a horror film where the protagonist is oblivious to the danger that could be around the corner, which is seen by the viewer but not by the character. The audience knows things that the story's characters do not, which builds tension as we wait for what is sure to happen (Kreuz, 2019, p. 19-41).

Cosmic irony, sometimes known as the irony of fate, explores how helpless people are in the face of fate or other outside forces (Kreuz, 2019, p. 19-41). Imagine a skilled firefighter who tragically dies in a house fire. The cruel twist of fate, where someone dedicated to saving lives becomes the victim of their unavoidable fate, exemplifies cosmic irony.

The most prevalent kind of irony is situational irony, in which the result clearly defies expectations (Kreuz, 2019, p. 19-41). Maybe someone plans a sunny day hike carefully, only to be met with rainy weather instead.

Historical irony emphasises occasions when outcomes completely defy expectations (Kreuz, 2019, p. 19-41). For example, cats were brought into Macquarie Island to help control the excessive number of rats and mice. The cats became the new invading species by eradicating the rodents and a number of bird species, which was not supposed to happen. However, fate came into play, changing history (Dunham, 2020).

Romantic irony, this one explores the realm of fiction. Envision a writer entering their own narrative, breaching the fourth wall, to alter the storyline or offer commentary on the characters. Essentially, it is an intertextuality inside the author's own work (Kreuz, 2019, p. 19-41).

Verbal irony is the most common type of irony, in which the speaker's intended meaning is contradicted by the words used (Kreuz, 2019, p. 19-41). Verbal irony is best demonstrated by saying something like "Great job!" when someone makes a mistake.

The Ironic Attitude, this idea explores broader cultural patterns rather than just particular circumstances. It characterises a mindset in which seemingly incongruous qualities coexist (Kreuz, 2019, p. 19-41). Imagine someone who consistently rejects opposing ideas despite claiming to be open-minded. This contradictory conduct may be interpreted as an ironic mindset reflecting human nature's complexity.

2.1.6 Slapstick

It is characterised by exaggerated movements or situations that generally do not happen in everyday life. In the past, it revolved around the portrayal of violence where its name comes from – a wooden tool that made a sound when imitating hitting something or someone, but it was harmless as it consisted of two pieces of wood that hit each other (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018).

In the early years of movies, when technology did not enable sound to be carried over to theatres, actors had to convey emotion in some other way (Carrick, 2018). For example, Chaplin's genius lies in his mastery of slapstick to entertain the audience. He crafted elaborate sequences of physical humour with never-ending surprises and mesmerising comedic choreography (Kamin, 2008). A famous scene in which the absurdity and physicality of slapstick are portrayed is in the movie *The Gold Rush*, where Chaplin nonchalantly and indifferently eats a shoe⁶. Meanwhile, the other character on screen is somewhat distanced from the idea of eating a shoe, pointing out the absurdity. Chaplin does not say a word, however, he manages to convey emotion and meaning through the exaggerated movement of his eyes, face and hands all that is sped up to amplify the comedic effect of the scene.

Slapstick humour might seem hard to translate to a verbal environment because of its physical nature, which focuses on exaggerated movements. However, Frederik N. Smith, in his article *Beckett's Verbal Slapstick* (1983), proves that Samuel Beckett managed to create what could be considered verbal slapstick. Beckett creates absurdity and oddity with the diction of his vocabulary; he mixes words from different lexical fields, often in juxtaposition, like *physical jerks* and *locomotor ataxy*, to describe one subject, the unexpected movements of an individual. Besides mixing words of different fields, Beckett also exploits sentences, where he lists several words

⁶ @Charlie Chaplin (2017), Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u65lvwfTPtM>

following each other to create a fast-paced sentence, which resembles the sped-up scenes of silent movies like Chaplin's (Smith, 1983).

The digital humour of internet memes often lacks the complexity that would be needed for verbal slapstick. Thus, internet memes might be limited only to the use of interjections in verbal environments or image macros implying movement to portray the physicality of slapstick humour as seen in. Or, if the medium allows it, internet memes may use exaggerated sounds or movements for the situation they try to convey, as seen in the example⁷.

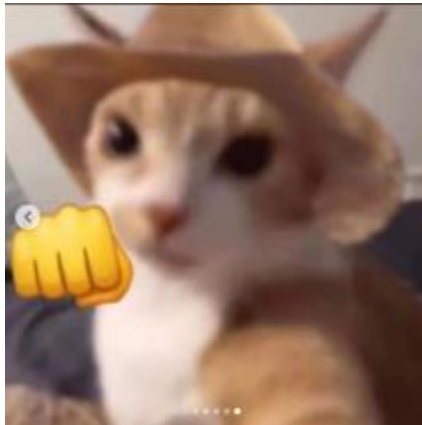


Figure 4 @PAWGIGGLES, 2024. Instagram. Slapstick humour

2.1.7 Puns

Puns revolve around the use of linguistic devices that exploit the inherent ambiguity of language to generate humour. Their effectiveness hinges on manipulating, for example, homonymy - words with identical spellings and pronunciation but distinct meanings, which can be divided into homophones - words with identical pronunciations but different spellings, and homographs - words with identical spelling but distinct meanings (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1999).

In Internet memes, the way puns work may be changed as they are no longer dependent just on the verbal element, and their expressiveness can be enhanced through visuals of an image macro (See *Figure 5*). In the first example, the whole pun should be: *When you finish eating at an Australian Restaurant: check, mate. However, the second part is omitted as a result of visuals of a chess game where a player is executing a move to finish the game in a position which is called “checkmate”, and as it is paired together with the caption, it accomplishes what makes a pun a pun.*

⁷@mouth..cannon (2024), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@mouth..cannon/video/7360654386629987626>

When you finish eating at an Australian Restaurant



Figure 5 @PRINCETAJ97, 2023. 🤖. Reddit. Puns

2.1.8 Dry Humour/Deadpan

It is a way of conveying the humour where the author does not make it emotionally tinted and delivers it with a blank facial expression. This kind of humour mostly manifests in an environment where recipients are in direct contact with the author and is understood only if the recipients are deeply engaged in figuring out the climax of the joke, as the delivery might confuse the recipient whether it is a joke or not. It is humorous due to the joke's climax and the way it is delivered, which is ironic since it lacks any emotion (Understanding Dry Humor: Is it for Everyone?, 2023).

Internet memes can also use dry humour; the dry humour can be expressed in both verbal and visual forms. Verbal delivery can take the form of flat, monotone captions without any signs of emotions like interjections, emojis or exclamation marks. Alternatively, the humour may be intensified by the visual, an image with no expressive aspects or a character lacking any emotion, portraying the deadpan effect. The amusement stems from the underwhelming captions or an image, as can be seen in *Figure 6*.

Shout out to the sidewalks for
keeping me off the streets



Figure 6 @TRACEYJOSEPH127, [no date]. Dry Humor | Dry humor, Funny memes, Funny. Pinterest.

2.1.9 Surreal/Absurd Humour

Surreal humour is a type that plays with the boundaries of reality and logic, often defying traditional humorous expectations (Garza, 2020). Drawing inspiration from the art movement Surrealism, which explored the creative potential of the unconscious mind, surreal humour similarly embraces the absurd and the irrational (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998).

In surreal humour, what is humorous often arises from the unexpected juxtaposition of elements or exaggeration of familiar patterns, which is a crucial component of surreal humour, pushing the boundaries of believability and logic to extreme levels (Garza, 2020).

Surreal humour can be applied to real-life environments in situations where individuals unrealistically exaggerate the situations in which they appear. For instance, in a scene⁸ from the movie *Society* (1989), where the female character offers tea in an unusual way “How do you like your tea? Cream, sugar... or do you want me to pee in it?”. Or a user-submitted joke in an internet forum for practical jokes: “I went to a psychic the other day and asked her if I was gonna go to jail in the future..... She said no, so I robbed her.” (@Mervin, [no date]). Both used examples bend the perception of reality by having an unexpected punchline, i.e., peeing in a tea or a joke’s character willingly going to prison.

One example is the recurring character of *Mememan* (See *Figure 7*), an inaccurate 3D model of a human head plastered onto visually bizarre memes. The humour in these memes pushes the boundaries of what is considered normal, often relying on the nonsensical or grotesque

⁸@mattyduke (2015), Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYuLkky8c68>

(@Dreamworks, et al., 2016). This absurdity extends beyond the bizarre visuals to the nonsensical captions often accompanying *Mememan* (See *Figure 8*).



Figure 7 @JACK THE DIPPER, 2020. Meme Man - Original profile picture. Surreal humour

Figure 8 @ADAM, 2019. STONKS Template | Stonks. Surreal humour

2.1.10 Self-Deprecating Humour

It's important to note that self-deprecating humour isn't about self-hatred or genuine criticism; instead, it's a light-hearted way of acknowledging imperfections and finding amusement in them. Like dark humour, self-deprecating humour can serve as a coping mechanism for dealing with difficult or uncomfortable situations. Individuals can alleviate tension or boost their mood by finding humour in their flaws or misfortunes (@Moderator ★, 2019). This type of humour can also display authenticity, allowing people to embrace their humanity and connect with others through shared experiences of imperfection.

An example is the *Running Away Balloon* meme template, in the form of a comic where the layout offers an opportunity to portray self-deprecating humour. It features a human-like character, who may portray the author or be a relatable subject for the audience and is about to reach for something, which can portray the character's hopes or goals, for example, *opportunities*, but they are ultimately held back in the next slide by another character, who can portray the subject's shortcomings, for example, *shyness* (See *Figure 9*).



Figure 9 @MATT, 2019. Opportunities Shyness | Running Away Balloon, Self-deprecating humour

2.1.11 Wit

Wit is defined as "*the ability to use words in a clever and humorous way*" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). This definition highlights the core aspects of wit: its reliance on language, its cleverness, and its humorous intent. One defining feature of witty humour is its spontaneity, as wit thrives on a quick and thoughtful reaction to a situation or someone else's comment.

In an internet meme environment, witty humour may manifest through the usage of reaction memes, which might be applied in an environment where internet users exchange ideas among themselves, like discussions, comment sections or private chats. The cleverness and wittiness of a user can be proven by the selection of an appropriate meme for the situation, as misuse will not earn any approval from other users in the form of endorsements like hearts or thumbs-ups (See *Figure 10*). Although the contributions in public discussion or comment sections might be delayed, which contradicts the idea of quickness in witty humour, they do, however, after the whole interaction ends, appear as if it was witty humour in quick succession due to the way another user might read it (Chiaro, 2018, p.12-13).

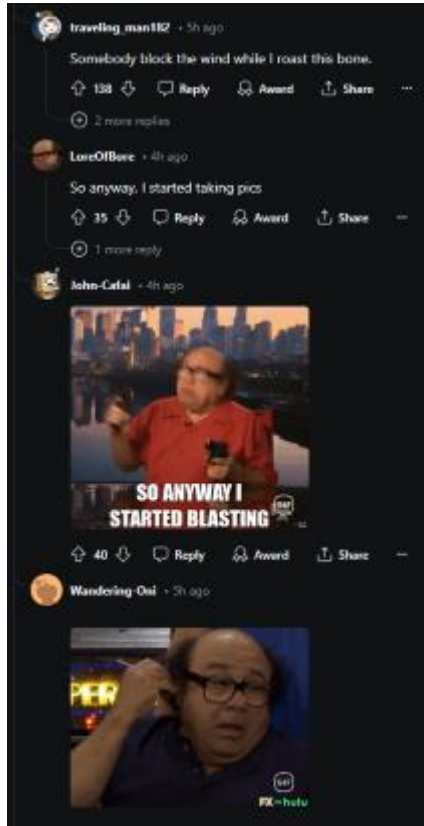


Figure 10 [Author], Screenshot from Reddit comment section. Wit

2.1.12 Observational Humour

Observational humour highlights the familiar aspects of everyday life that many people can relate to. It's often rooted in personal experiences or observations of ordinary situations, behaviours, or social norms that may seem mundane but, when examined closely with a comedic twist, prove otherwise (Christing, 2022).

For instance, in this internet meme in *Figure 11*, where the author jokingly complains about people only complimenting their tattoos without offering to pay for the next one, verbalising their need for another tattoo while implying that tattoos are expensive for them. The example references the *It's Always WYD and Never HYD* phrasal meme (@Matt, et al., 2021).

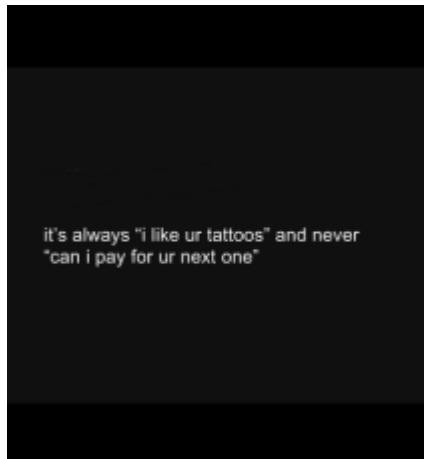


Figure 11 @PIERCINGWORKS, 2024. Instagram. Observational Humour

2.1.13 Digital Humour

Internet memes are a broad category that includes captioned images, which are called "image macros", movies, animations, and even hashtags (Chiaro, 2018, p.122, p.144). Memes are predominantly visual in nature, in contrast to traditional jokes, which derive their humour from a linear, text-based story or punchline. This visual immediacy coincides wonderfully with contemporary online society's fast-paced, image-saturated nature. Internet memes are easily understood and enjoyed with little cognitive work, which is indicative of a consumer culture that is becoming more and more dependent on visual cues (Chiaro, 2018, p.143).

It is possible to claim that memes signal a pattern change in humour, moving away from the "slow humour" of jokes and towards a brand-new "fast humour"(Chiaro, 2018, p.143). Conventional jokes frequently demand effort on the part of the reader or listener to comprehend the setup, analyse the punchline, and detect any linguistic devices, for example, irony or metaphor. Internet memes, for instance, are quick to make people laugh because they use instantly identifiable images and well-known cultural references. Users come upon a meme, chuckle at its silliness or ingenuity, and quickly move on to the next thing that is popular (Chiaro, 2018, p.143).

3 What are Internet Memes?

The word meme can result in confusion because the word itself is defined as *"a cultural feature or a type of behaviour that is passed from one generation to another, without the influence of genes"* (Cambridge University Press & Assessment), e.g. a proverb, so it does not need to be funny. However, this thesis explores the general modern understanding of the word meme, which is an

idea, picture, video or text passed on the internet, usually social media, that tries to be funny. Internet Memes are defined by Limor Shifman as “(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” (Shifman, 2014, p.41). According to the first point (a), for something to be an Internet Meme, it has to follow a certain pattern, which is shared with other interpretations that are posted on social media, which complies with point (b), be it a video, sound or an image macro, that may have a different caption or scenario for each appearance online, as they are flexible interpretation, which complies with point (c). Thus, Internet memes can convey humour through text, sound or visuals, all separately or layered with different types of humour using different linguistic devices to please a wide range of Internet users’ senses of humour as the templates or the bases of the meme are like a blank canvas, which can be exploited in different ways, creating new interpretations, as it is subjective what appeals to the author or the different internet communities.

It is also important to differentiate between what is viral and what is a meme. Meme refers to multiple interpretations of a single idea, which is originally just viral and then gets recreated and shared by internet users. However, something viral, e.g. a video, exists by itself without further interpretations and is popular and shared by great masses of internet users in a small time window (Shifman, 2014, p. 56-59). Not every viral media on the internet is a meme, but every meme is a result of viral media.

3.1 Linguistic Devices and their Use or Realization in Internet Memes

Essentially, the internet meme represents a combination of digital language and visuals. While simultaneously depending on the subtleties of language to offer humour and create a feeling of shared cultural knowledge within online communities, it makes use of the immediacy and exploitability of graphics for broad appeal. Therefore, the study of internet memes provides a useful lens through which to look at how humour is changing in the digital age when visual communication is everything, but language is still the underlying current that creates meaning and connections. A more thorough examination of these linguistic strategies will reveal the complex wordplay, the use of internet-specific allusions, and the manipulation of syntax and semantics that all work together to give memes their capturing quality in the dynamic world of online communication.

3.1.1 Metaphor

A metaphor is the usage of a word or phrase in a way that is not literal, and this unconventional use involves attributing a meaning to the word or phrase that it would not ordinarily have or connecting it with other words in a way that would not be typical (Goatly 2011, p. 15). The key to understanding this non-literal use of language lies in recognising the underlying comparison.

An example from the real world: *something around the corner* functions metaphorically to describe the unpredictable nature of the future. Like a literal corner, what is behind is unknown until the corner is passed; the metaphorical corner creates a sense of hidden possibility. The reader knows something is coming – its physical proximity is implied by *around* – but the exact nature of that *something* remains unknown.

The *Woman Yelling at Cat* (See Figure 12) meme, featuring a frustrated woman yelling at a seemingly indifferent cat sitting at a dining table, offers a humorous example of metaphor use in internet memes. Where the characters of the meme metaphorically represent a reaction to a problem and its source.



Figure 12 @PHILIPP, 2019. Thanks for the free meme template u/-69-- | Woman Yelling at a Cat. Metaphor

3.1.2 Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a linguistic device that uses exaggeration to emphasise a subject without it being true (*Hyperbole - Examples and Definition of Hyperbole*, 2017). For example, *This suitcase weighs a ton* (*Hyperbole - Examples and Definition of Hyperbole*, 2017); this hyperbole complains about a suitcase being heavy, but under real-world conditions, suitcases are incapable of holding that much weight, or *He feels buried under a mountain of work* (*Hyperbole - Examples and Definition of Hyperbole*, 2017), implying that the person is frustrated with the amount of work they have.

The examples can be applied to memes, where the hyperbole is realised through the visuals such as *Yhorm vs. Ashen One* (See Figure 13), where two characters of drastically different sizes are put in juxtaposition, and the difference in size can carry the exaggeration of a hyperbole. The smaller character may represent whoever is dissatisfied or overwhelmed by the challenge, while the bigger character may represent the exaggerated struggle or the source of frustration. Another meme template which could convey hyperbole is *Alien God Looks Down at Lower Beings* (See Figure 14); unlike the previous meme template, it does not portray a struggle. The characters might represent possible differences in power through the captions.



Figure 13 @BRANDON, 2022. *one piece | Man vs. Giant. Hyperbole*

Figure 14 @ADAM, 2020. *Alien God Looks Down at Lower Beings - Song In The Comments. Hyperbole*

3.1.3 Intertextuality

“An internet meme cannot exist without referring to something other than the subject matter it contains.” (Wiggins, 2019, p.35) Internet memes heavily depend on intertextuality, which is creatively reinterpreting already existing media content into a new context and abandoning the initial structure or purpose but still depending on it (Kristeva, 1980, p.17), as their core, the visuals or the sounds come from a pre-existing source. Internet memes may refer to already existing meme templates, suggesting that memes can easily evolve, develop or transform into something else, even within the meme environment. Referencing is not reserved only for the meme’s core, as the

captions can refer to something else as well, ranging from popular trends to current political situations. If an internet meme caption refers, for example, to its core, the image, it then refers to itself, and that makes it an example of meta-humour, which creates an intertextual relationship that does not reach out of the image macro borders (Chiaro, 2018, p.140). These interconnections with pre-existing contexts create a need for background knowledge; without it, the memes may seem nonsensical, or their original intention may be misinterpreted. However, more instances of underlined context enable memes to be relatable to wider audiences.

Based on what is referenced, intertextuality can be distinguished into macro and micro. Macro-intertextuality is a reference to a context as a whole, for example, if it is connected to a movie. Micro-intertextuality refers to singular elements which appear within the macro environment (Omid Mallahi, Ali Poordaryaei Nejad, Parvaneh Zareipur, 2019, p.25-27). A meme using the speech pattern of a character called Yoda from the *Star Wars* franchise has both instances of intertextuality. Macro is the connection to the whole franchise through the character, which may appeal to a wider audience. Then, micro is the character's speech pattern and the character itself, which may narrow it down and appeal only to a niche audience. It can be narrowed further depending on the content of the caption (See *Figure 15*).

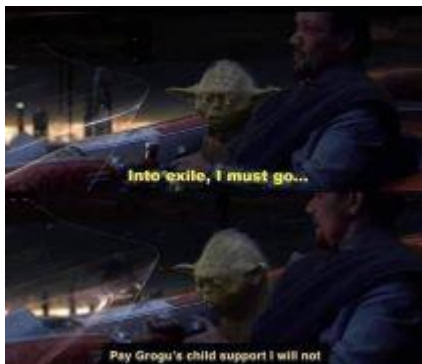


Figure 15 @OURDEERLEADER, 2020. not dealing with this one | Yoda. Intertextuality and syntactic inversion

The concept of intertextuality in cultural, societal, and political contexts, as explored in some internet memes, highlights how these texts are not only humorous but also serve as a medium for reflecting and critiquing cultural and political realities (Laineste, Voolaid, 2017). This intertextuality allows memes to comment on societal norms, political events, and cultural phenomena, making them a form of communication that can influence public opinion and cultural

trends. For example, in this meme (See *Figure 16*), where the author comments on the totalitarian regime and the country's forced obsession with the dictatorship family.

When you take a great instagram pic
but remember you banned the
internet in your country



Figure 16 @SHJO, 2016. Lol | North Korea. Intertextuality and satire

In conclusion, internet memes revolve around the idea of intertextuality and cannot exist without it, as internet memes are always a repurposed piece of pre-existing concepts. The potential appeal of a meme to an audience is affected by the way intertextuality is used; it can make it more difficult to understand or more appealing as it uses more references. Overall, intertextuality provides a means to comment and humorously recreate viral media or events.

3.1.4 Syntactic Inversion

Syntactic inversion, also called anastrophe (*Definition of ANASTROPHE*, [no date]), is a linguistic device where the typical order of words in a sentence is inversed (Cambridge Dictionary, [no date]). In English, SVO (subject-verb-object) word order is used the most, i.e. *Dylan likes him*; other word orders, like OSV (object-subject-verb), need a reason as to why they are structured the way they are, for example, emphasis (Meyer, 2010, p. 37).

A common example of exploitation of syntactic inversion in Internet Memes is the manner of speaking by the character Yoda from the *Star Wars* franchise, who uses OSV word order. In *Figure 15*, the caption that is presented in the image macro follows “*Into exile, I must go*”, where “*Into exile*” is an object, “*I*” is a subject and “*must go*” is a verb.

3.1.5 Catchphrases and Slogans

A brief, memorable phrase or remark that is used frequently is called a catchphrase. These repeated phrases develop a strong connection to a particular source, e.g., a famous person or historical figure,

a fictional character, a social movement or a profession. They spread by public or media exposure. They can serve a variety of purposes, from spreading a certain message or philosophy to making jokes. A catchphrase that is effective reaches a certain degree of familiarity that confirms its association with the original source and may even turn it into a cultural icon (*Catchphrase and slogan: ...*, [no date]).

Meanwhile, a slogan is a brief and memorable phrase specifically crafted for promotional purposes, e.g. to promote a product, service, or idea and aim for rapid recall and association with the source. Slogans achieve a balance between catchiness and meaning, leaving a lasting impression to solidify brand recognition (*Catchphrase and slogan: ...*, [no date]).

Both slogans and catchphrases are brief, memorable statements, but there are some important differences between them in terms of their intended audience and function. Catchphrases develop naturally and frequently as a result of everyday interactions or popular culture. They may be connected to a person, fictional character, company, or organisation, but the connection need not be made with the intention of promotion. For example, a celebrity's amusing comment that resonates with the audience could become a catchphrase. Catchphrases are more natural and adaptable in their use, often developing through viral media and then becoming a meme; for example, singer Abdu Rozik said the word *burger* with an accent which sounded like “*borgir*” or memes becoming catchphrases as they get referenced by people in everyday life (@Phillip Hamilton, @Zach 2021). In contrast, slogans are for advertising, which might get exploited by internet users for humorous purposes, as seen in *Figure 17*, where McDonald’s slogan gets used.



Figure 17 @BILBO SWAGGINS, 2017. *I'm Lovin' it | Increasingly Verbose Memes. Slogans*

3.1.6 Euphemism

A euphemism is a linguistic device used to express sensitive topics. Rather than employing blunt or potentially hurtful language, a euphemism acts as a milder, more indirect substitute. It allows the indirect expression of people's thoughts while acknowledging that the subject matter might be considered unpleasant or offensive (Payne, 2023).

Figure 18 is one example of a euphemism expressed in an image macro *Tuxedo Winnie the Pooh*, where instead of saying *stupid* directly, it is instead implied that saying “*alternative state of intelligence*” is a more pleasant choice of words for a distinguishable gentleman. Social media sites like TikTok force their users to use euphemisms instead of directly labelling something that is not favourable to their policy, as that might be punishable. Such examples are *unalive* for expressing death or suicide or *seggs* for expressing sexual intercourse (Showfety, 2022).



Figure 18 @PARALYZEDGHOST54, 2019. Euphemism. Reddit.

3.1.7 Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics to nonhuman entities, portraying human experience (Guthrie, 2019). For example, attributing malice to a computer towards the user because it is not booting up, so it must be angry at the user or animals speaking like humans.

In internet memes, anthropomorphism might manifest in a form where an image macro of an inanimate object or animal has a caption that is human-like, attributing human traits to animals, or the animal itself in the picture acts like a human, i.e. walking on two legs. This is seen in these examples, where an indifferent-looking horse in Figure 19 is assigned the task of folding clothes, implying human frustration with such task, or a cat, in Figure 20, successfully guesses their password, implying pleasure of a human in such a situation. Cats are a common manifestation of

anthropomorphism, as there is a whole meme trend revolving around them called LOLcats (@Jamie Dubs et al., 2008).



Figure 19 @GOD_DANGIT_BOBBY, 2024. Instagram. Anthropomorphism

Figure 20 @MRS.MIUKI, 2024. Instagram. Anthropomorphism

3.1.8 Alliteration, Assonance

Alliteration and assonance stand out as linguistic devices that playfully manipulate the vowel or consonant sounds of words in close proximity, as defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary. When read out loud, the text has a rhythm and becomes pleasant to hear.

In *Figure 21*, there is the repetition of sounds, mainly vowels, which makes it an instance of assonance, revolving mainly around the word *pookie* to convey romantic feelings towards someone using a caption that ends up pleasant sounding and thus conveys the positive feelings even better.

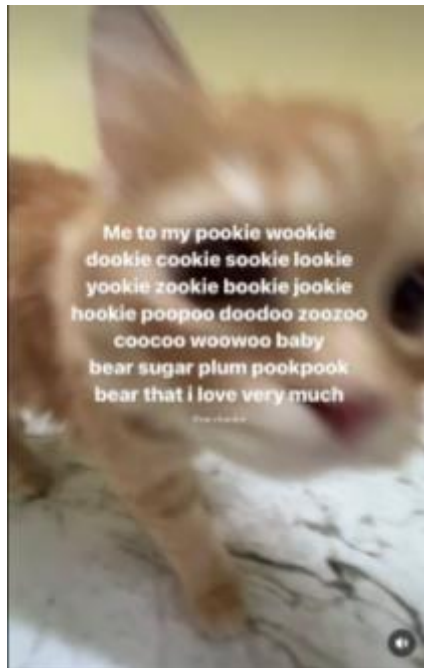


Figure 21 @MR.CHONKIE, 2024. Instagram. Alliteration

3.1.9 Paradox and Oxymoron

The strength of paradoxes stems from their seeming self-contradiction, and their goal is to catch a reader's attention, disprove their assumptions, and force them to reconsider. A common example is the phrase *less is more* (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998b), which can be used in relation to sleep, as a person might feel more tired even though they slept for a considerable amount of time. Both truth and error can be included in paradoxes; they do not always include striking juxtapositions; instead, they might indirectly offer new layers of meaning to concepts we take for basic, as seen in the example on sleep. An oxymoron, a hyponym for a paradox, is its condensed form that may be expressed in just two words. Word pairs like *a lonely crowd or loud silence are one of the* examples (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2010). These oxymorons convey a deeper meaning via the use of their seeming conflicts.

3.1.10 Malapropism

Malapropism is a linguistic device where a word is mistakenly used in place of another word that sounds similar, often resulting in a humorous effect. The term is derived from the character Mrs. Malaprop in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's play "The Rivals" (1775), who was known for her frequent misuse of words because of her ignorance towards the actual meaning of the words she used (Fay, Cutler, 1977). So, it is a common source of humour in various forms of writing, from

classic literature to contemporary social media posts. Whether intentional or accidental, malapropisms serve as a reminder of the complexity and beauty of language and its capacity to entertain and amuse when words take an unexpected turn. However, for the phenomenon to be malapropism, it must meet certain criteria: mistakenly used words must be real words, the target and mistakenly used words must not be synonyms, and their pronunciation must be somewhat related (Fay, Cutler, 1977).

For example, *these two vectors are equivalent* being replaced by *If these two vectors are equivocal*, here the author mistakenly replaced *equivalent* with *equivocal* (Fay, Cutler, 1977), and it meets the criteria of being malapropism. Both are existing words, have different meanings, ‘having the same amount, value, purpose, qualities, etc.’ in comparison to ‘not clear and seeming to have two opposing meanings, or confusing and able to be understood in two different ways’ and have similar pronunciation with both starting with ‘/ɪˈkwɪv/’ as written by Cambridge English Dictionary.

Internet memes intensify the comical effect of malapropism with the use of image macros, videos or gifs, complementing the verbal comical effect with visuals. For instance, in the video⁹, the caption *silly little car :3* is accompanied by the visuals of a cat and not by an image of a car, implying that the word cat was replaced with the word car. Purposefully misusing these words became a meme, as it is widely spread by internet users and simultaneously causing confusion among others who lack the context, as can be seen in a Reddit post titled “*“Car” instead of “cat” all over Insta and Facebook*” by a user @bpb1993, who raised a question where this trend comes from.

3.1.11 Spoonerism

Spoonerism refers to a linguistic device characterised by the intentional or unintentional reversal of initial sounds or letters, which may result in a humorous effect. It is named after William Archibald Spooner, a warden from New College, Oxford, who is mistakenly attributed to the unintentional use of the mentioned figure of speech because of his nervousity (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998c); however, not all reversals of sounds or letters may be humorous, but Spooner managed to make it humorous as it was intentional. For example, in this sentence by

⁹ @axlethekitty (2023), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@axlethekitty/video/7303217311979343109>

Spooner, where he reversed the letters “You have hissed all my mystery lectures” instead of *You have missed all my history lectures* (MacKay 1970).

In this example¹⁰, the author is trying to simulate a real-life situation where a customer makes a series of errors, using spoonerisms, while trying to order a meal. Instead of saying *ten piece, chicken nuggets*, the nervous character, in this case, a *Sad Hamster*, says: “*pen tiece nicken chuggets*” to achieve a humorous effect. The combination of *Sad Hamster* and misspelt order links back to the nervousity that may be attributed to spoonerism.

¹⁰@chopininov (2024), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@chopininov/photo/7339681450507193632>

4 Analysis of Popular Memes

Based on the observations made so far, an analysis of popular memes for each month during the last year, which is May 2023 to May 2024, will be conducted. Popular Memes are picked according to popularity polls on the site Knowyourmeme.com, which holds these polls each month, and the site's users vote on their favourite choice. As memes exist in many variations, one meme is picked from the top five entries of the poll to represent the vast range of what is popular and cover the various sources of memes.

4.1 May 2023 – I Am A Surgeon, Dr. Han!

The *I Am A Surgeon, Dr. Han!* meme that won first place in the May 2023 poll (Kachalin, 2023a) is based on a scene¹¹ from a TV series *The Good Doctor* from the second season, episode 17, where a surgeon with autism got excluded from a surgeon team by a senior surgeon and has a breakdown in front of him as a result of the previous actions (@Owen, et al., 2023). The dramatic acting contributed to the virality of this scene, and as it went viral, it also led to memes based on this scene.

It led to parodies¹² where authors altered the original video with sound and visual effects and even added a caption: “*I think blud is a surgeon,*” where *blud* denotes, according to Urban Dictionary user @Ms Corston (2003), a mate, the word *blud* is used widely on TikTok if referring to someone as a *bro* (Abed 2024). Or still image macros (See *Figure 22*), where the author repeats the script of the scene but replaces the original word *surgeon* and uses an internet slang word “*gooner,*” which refers to someone who is addicted to pornographic material according to Urban Dictionary user @Pornophile (2018) the image of the crying surgeon might reflect the dissatisfaction of someone with themselves if they are a *gooner*. This particular frame, showing the emotion of the junior surgeon, provides an opportunity to be used as a reaction meme in private conversation or an internet discussion, as it portrays a breakdown that can be used to mock someone or just portray sadness as the junior surgeon is crying. And videos in a format of image macros¹³, where the author labels the junior surgeon as “*The Virgin Surgeon*” based on his breakdown and the senior surgeon

¹¹ @Rapid Response (2023), <https://youtu.be/8byiwOY5XM0>

¹² @king_floppaman (2023), https://www.tiktok.com/@king_floppaman/video/7230046015154572570

¹³ @hacer_kun (2023), https://x.com/hacer_kun/status/1655295931351220224

as “*The Chad Doctor*” because of his nonchalant reaction to the tantrum, making a reference to meme characters Virgin, a low self-confidence man, and Chad Thundercock, an alpha male.

All things considered, these examples make us of the Incongruity theory with unexpected twists like the replacement of words tied to the scene or with added effects; further intertextuality enters the equation to supplement the out-of-pocket effect while referencing other memes.



Figure 22 @OWEN, 2023. I AM A GOONER DR. HANI! | I Am A Surgeon, Dr. Han!

4.2 June 2023 – OceanGate Titanic Submarine Incident

Memes are not just a result of viral media; they also come to exist due to viral events that get coverage on the internet by news outlets. The OceanGate Titanic Submarine Incident got turned into a meme and also won second place in a popularity poll of June 2023 (Kachalin, 2023b). On June 18th, 2023, a tourist submersible went missing while exploring the wreck of the RMS Titanic. On June 22nd, it was reported that the submersible imploded, killing everyone on board (@Philipp, et al., 2023). Although the event is tragic, it became a target of humorous reactions due to the rich people being on board as it cost \$250000 for the wreck exploration or due to poor construction and management of the submersible with only one window and the passenger space being small and the whole submersible being guided via text messages and controlled by a gaming controller (@Philipp, et al., 2023).

The OceanGate Submarine Incident led to memes with a hint of dark humour and absurd allusions to alleviate the event. It became a subject of memes that exploited the event, with memes referencing the event, as seen in *Figure 23*, wherein the first example, the author uses *Are Ya*

*Winning, Son?*¹⁴ meme due to the fact that the submersible was controlled by a gaming controller and in the second example (See *Figure 24*) the OceanGate submersible illustration is combined with a *Saddam Hussein's Hiding Place*¹⁵, as a joke because the submersible was nowhere to be found just like Saddam Hussein. The incident was also an inspiration for the collage of visuals (see *Figure 25*), where the author does not use pre-existing meme templates. However, they created an allusion to the incident through the use of a joystick graphic and mention of someone being a gamer, pointing out to the OceanGate submersible having only a gaming controller for steering.

In summary, the memes tied to the incident utilise all theories of humour - Superiority Theory, Relief from Restraint Theory, and Incongruity Theory. Someone might feel superior towards the passengers as they see their decision to take part in the underwater exploration as flawed. On the other hand, someone might be empathetic to passengers' dread and experience similar feelings. However, they can find relief in the memes regarding the situation. Lastly, Incongruity Theory manifests through the involvement of unexpected twists, which are, in this context, the references.

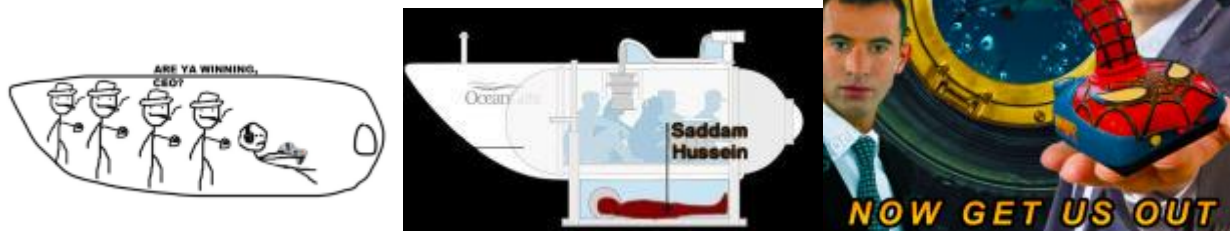


Figure 23 @IWAZARU, 2023. OceanGate Titanic Submarine Incident - Are ya winning, CEO?

Figure 24 @OEPERINOOOMORO, 2023. Saddam Hussein's Hiding Place | OceanGate Titanic Submarine Incident.

Figure 25 @KZN02, 2023. Submarine | OceanGate Titanic Submarine Incident.

4.3 July 2023 – Sisyphus-posting

Sisyphus is a character from Greek mythology who was punished in the underworld by the god Hades for his actions during his mortal life. He had to push a boulder up a hill, and every time he

¹⁴ @Mom Rivers, et al. (2016), <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/are-ya-winning-son>

¹⁵ @Philipp, et al. (2021), <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/saddam-husseins-hiding-place>

got it almost to the top, it rolled down, and he had to start again, resulting in him doing it for eternity until he succeeds (@Owen, et al., 2023). Although pushing a boulder up a hill is not Sisyphus' strong suit, he managed to secure second place in the popularity poll of July 2023 (Kachalin, 2023c), as internet users could verbalise their never-ending struggles through the meme.

In July 2023, Sisyphus became popular because of a trend called *One Must Imagine Sisyphus Happy*, which is from an essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, by Albert Camus (1942). The trend is about comparing a struggle through editing a picture over users' clips¹⁶ (@Owen, et al., 2023). Outside of video edits, users created image macros with a caption depicting their struggles. In *Figure 26*, the author says, "*The fucking dishes again*," voicing their dissatisfaction with doing the dishes every day through hyperbole. Although a hindrance for someone, it is not such a struggle as pushing a boulder for eternity.

Based on the examples presented, this meme allows someone to make fun of their struggles through the reference to Greek mythology. It might utilise both Incongruity Theory, through unexpected twists, and Relief from Restraint Theory by voicing the struggles of authors. In the form of an image macro, it also enables the use of different humour types, e.g. observational humour, self-deprecating humour or irony.

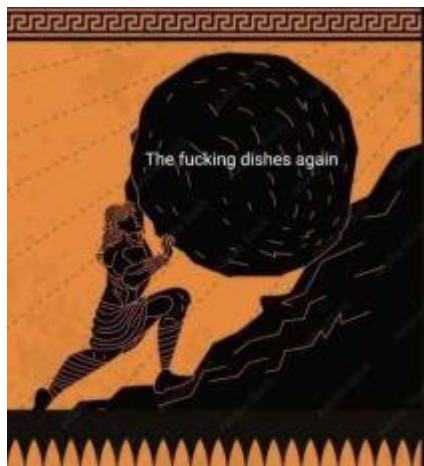


Figure 26 @OWEN, 2023. Sisyphus meme | Sisyphus / Sisyphus Pushing a Boulder.

¹⁶ @bookrobe (2023), <https://www.tiktok.com/@bookrobe/video/7251655449290820890>

4.4 August 2023 – Donald Trump's mugshot

In August 2023, Donald Trump was arrested regarding the 2020 United States Presidential Election and got his mugshot photographed, which became public (@Adam, et al., 2023), and he achieved first place in a popularity poll of August 2023 (Kachalin, 2023d).

Due to Donald Trump's expression of a blank stare, it enables its use as a reaction meme. Besides being exploited as a reaction meme, it found its utilisation in parodies or satire (See *Figure 27*), where the authors are clearly making fun of the public figure, or as an image macro (see *Figure 28*), where the author expresses his anger through observational humour and Trump's expression that fast-food restaurant Chick-fil-A is closed on Sundays (Chick-fil-A, [no date]).

To sum up, the meme references a significant event of the US president getting a mugshot for the first time ever in history (@Adam, et al., 2023). It might utilise Incongruity Theory with unexpected twists or Superiority Theory, as someone might mock Trump for getting a mugshot. Besides making Trump a target of parodies and satire, if used as an image macro, it can be exploited into different types of humour as the humour besides the intertextuality comes out of Trump's expression.



Figure 27 @ADAM, 2023. Hello Kitty Trump | Donald Trump's Mugshot.

Figure 28 @ADAM, 2023. Chick Fil A | Donald Trump's Mugshot.

4.5 September 2023 – Smurf Cat

The concept of memes is not tied only to viral content that can be further interpreted via text or photomontage, which can be proven with the meme *Smurf Cat*. It is a realistic art of a Smurf

resembling a cat with its facial features. The *Smurf Cat* is always accompanied by the song “The Spectre” by Alan Wake, particularly the part after 54 seconds (@Owen, et al. 2023). And finally, the *Smurf Cat* managed to win first place in a popularity poll of September 2023 (Kachalin, 2023e).

One might argue that this is not a meme as there is no text, and it is always the same. However, users always make different edits¹⁷, although on the same basis. To further prove that it is a meme, it gets referenced¹⁸, showing how the artist of the song might react when finding out why his song is popular, or even recreated in completely different ways¹⁹. The meme might utilise the absurdity revolving around a combination of such elements, which also proves the use of Incongruity Theory. The humorous effect manifest

4.6 October 2023 – Alligator Kick / Gumbo Slice

Alligator Kick is a meme that implements AI-generated images featuring a character, *Gumbo Slice*, who became a meme by himself outside of the alligator-kicking scenario (@Owen, @Zach 2023). The meme has secured fourth place in the October 2023 popularity poll (Kachalin 2023f).

The meme without text illustrates an absurd story of a man kicking an alligator over a slice of pizza (See *Figure 29*, *Figure 30*, *Figure 31*). The development of the story and further interpretation make it a meme. The meme even functions as an image macro (See *Figure 32*), where the participating characters are labelled according to the purpose the author might attempt to portray. In this example, the author portrays the struggle with life while their parents are mere observers and do not participate in the struggle.

In summary, the AI-generated meme utilises an absurd scenario that might portray self-deprecation if used as an image macro. Again, this meme proves the presence of the Incongruity Theory as the basis for the meme is unrealistic and thus unexpected and, in the case of self-deprecation, a Relief from Restraint Theory.

¹⁷@aim.vsp (2023), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@aim.vsp/video/7276075791627210016>

¹⁸@_eathet_ (2023), Available from: https://www.tiktok.com/@_eathet_/video/7276835029701938440

¹⁹@fanpage..doina (2023), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@fanpage..doina/video/7276919762918083873>



Figure 29 @OWEN, 2023. "Gumbo Slice" Black Guy Alligator Swamp (AI art meme) | Gumbo Slice.

Figure 30 @OWEN, 2023. Alligator Kick / Black Guy Kicking Alligator (original ai image) | Alligator Kick / Black Guy Kicking Alligator.

Figure 31 @WEARETHEWILD, 2023. Differences Settled | Gumbo Slice.



Figure 32 @REDDIT MOMENTS, 2023. Alligator Kick / Black Guy Kicking Alligator - It do be like that | /r/memes.

4.7 November 2023 – Josh Hutcherson "Whistle" Edit

Similar in nature to the *Smurf Cat*, Josh Hutcherson "Whistle" Edit²⁰ meme gained the internet's attention in November 2023 as the movie *Five Nights at Freddy's*, where the actor Josh Hutcherson plays, was released. The edits are always accompanied by the song "Whistle" by Flo Rida, and the cover that is used in the edits is performed by Joel Merry (@Owen, et al., 2023). The edits secured second place in the November 2023 popularity poll (Kachalin, 2023g).

The meme revolves around the idea of being played on a vast range of devices. Someone would usually expect popular media to be played on a phone or a personal computer, but the author in this

²⁰ @hutchers (2023), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@hutchers/video/7297282635833855264>

example²¹ played it on their gaming console, ironically saying, “*Y’all something is wrong with my copy of super mario wonder,*” and not expecting the edit. Internet users played it even on objects, e.g., a garage door²². Some interpretations²³ fooled their viewers by playing the edit in a seemingly unrelated clip of an ice tray.

Similarly to the *Smurf Cat*, the *Josh Hutcherson “Whistle” Edit* heavily utilises the Incongruity Theory and absurdity of the edit to convey a comedic effect and does not offer much opportunity for a verbal joke.

4.8 December 2023 – Kurt Angle 1,000-Yard Stare

Kurt Angle 1,000-Yard Stare meme revolves around an exploitation of Kurt Angle’s, a professional wrestler, blank stare. Kurt Angle uploaded a video of him introducing himself on his new TikTok profile, where he, unfortunately, stared blankly at the camera, which resulted in the clip getting viral and then being exploited into memes (@Owen, @Zach 2023b). The meme is based on another meme called *1,000 Yard Stare*, which features an American soldier with a blank stare towards the viewer, portraying PTSD (@Owen, @Zach 2023c). Kurt Angle’s blank stare managed to secure second place in the December 2023 popularity poll (Kachalin, 2023h).

The meme is either used as a reaction meme or an image macro, often with a distressing caption, as the blank stare proposes an opportunity for such a caption. This example²⁴, with the caption “*how the genie looks at me after I wish for unlimited vodka instead of life saving surgery for my son,*” conveys the shock of a genie whose wishes are limited, as he expected a noble wish instead of a selfish wish which wastes a life. Or in these examples^{25 26}, the authors utilise frequent social media vocabulary, such as *mf* or *yapping*, conveying annoyance with someone else. *Mf* is an acronym for ‘motherfucker,’ (@TurnM3Up, 2019) which in this context portrays frustration with someone else because of an overused joke. *Yapping* means ‘to continuously talk for an extended amount of time than is usual’ (@Man glaser, 2023). In the presented example, the author even

²¹@plasticl0v33 (2023), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@plasticl0v33/video/7300477480488701230>

²²@soiledtrunks26 (2023), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@soiledtrunks26/video/7299986554087312670>

²³@greysxvsp_ (2023), Available from: https://www.tiktok.com/@greysxvsp_/video/7300611368196082986

²⁴@thebasedlander2 (2023), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@thebasedlander2/video/7308073150795812129>

²⁵@super_snax_ (2023), Available from: https://www.tiktok.com/@super_snax_/video/7308839543447293230

²⁶@bobcratchit76 (2023), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@bobcratchit76/video/7309607713766460704>

points out that their “bro” did not comprehend the implied annoyance with the repeated dry response “that’s crazy.”

In the presented examples, the meme utilises dark, observational and absurd humour through both Incongruity Theory and Relief from Restraint Theory. Although the examples have captions, the humorous effect arises from the link between the visuals and the verbal.

4.9 January 2024 – Dancing Toothless

Dancing Toothless is an isolated scene from a viral 2D animation (@Cas van de Pol, 2023) based on an animated movie called *How to Train Your Dragon*. The meme version of the animation is always accompanied by the song "Driftveil City" from the game *Pokémon: Black & White* (@StormShockTV, et al., 2023). The meme secured first place in the January 2024 popularity poll (Kachalin, 2024).

The meme comes in the form of edits²⁷, similar to *Smurf Cat* or *Josh Hutcherson "Whistle" Edit* or in the form where it is exploited for a joke. The examples that utilised it for other purposes than just edits often portrayed positive feelings during distressing situations. In the first example²⁸, the author conveys their newfound joy even though they are lost in a supermarket. And the second example²⁹ follows the same form of newfound joy in a miserable situation.

Again, in these examples, it is evident that they apply absurdity to everyday situations via observational and self-deprecating humour or make the original absurd. They are prime examples of Relief from Restraint Theory, as the scenarios they present have apparent pent-up emotions and then the release of them; however, Incongruity Theory is still utilised as the new interpretations introduce new twists to the meme.

4.10 February 2024 – Sad Hamster

A hamster with bulgy puppy eyes grasped the internet’s attention, which resulted in the *Sad Hamster* meme; it is most often accompanied by a violin tune from the song “Wos Is Me!” by

²⁷@theusualpersonguy (2023), Available from:

<https://www.tiktok.com/@theusualpersonguy/video/7315386128373157152>

²⁸@i0hades0i (2023), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@i0hades0i/video/7315082428949859627>

²⁹@f4ithful.v0id (2023), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@f4ithful.v0id/video/7315662316798774571>

Richard Myhill (@Adam, @Zach 2024). The hamster secured first place in the February 2024 popularity poll (Kachalin 2024b).

The meme is used in a context where a stimulus might result in an emotional response, i.e., sadness. As the meme portrays a reaction to a stimulus, it might be used as a reaction meme. In the first example³⁰, the author did not use it in the form of an image macro but utilised the capabilities of the social site TikTok and added a post caption, "*This is me if you even care...*" that links it to the context of the situation the meme is trying to convey. The example with its caption references [author's input] *BTW If You Even Care* catchphrase meme, which is added as a caption to pictures of animals to convey innocence and evoke a feeling of guilt in the reader (@sakshi 2023). In the second example³¹, the *Sad Hamster* meme acts as a part of another meme *First Look at Inside Out's New Emotion Character*, to fulfil the other meme's purpose, introduced as a new emotion into the group of characters that consists of human emotions (@Phillip Hamilton, 2023). In the third example³², the meme is utilised as an image macro where the author uses the hamster as a medium to convey their feeling in a situation where they say, "*Me listening to the smart kid telling the answers to the questions after exams,*" implying that their answers are different.

In the examples, the meme utilises everyday situations to convey observational humour and self-deprecating humour through anthropomorphism. If used as a reaction meme, it utilises the user's wittiness. The meme additionally implements both Incongruity Theory and Relief from Restraint Theory as it is tied to emotions.

4.11 March 2024 – No Chick-fil-A Sauce Girl

No Chick-fil-A Sauce Girl is a viral video³³ that developed into a meme, and the video features a Chick-fil-A employee displaying a range of facial expressions accompanied by nuances of humorous dialogue (@Owen, @Zach 2024). The meme secured third place in the popularity poll of March 2024 (Kachalin, 2024c).

³⁰@schmetterling471 (2024), Available from:

<https://www.tiktok.com/@schmetterling471/video/7334411831726886176>

³¹@ishanvyas99 (2024), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@ishanvyas99/video/7337043288354082080>

³²@bageera519 (2024), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@bageera519/video/7335845509124459783>

³³@.diane.marie (2024), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@.diane.marie/video/7338638049334611246>

The original served as an inspiration for parodies³⁴ or as a script for reenactments³⁵. It implements slapstick humour and Incongruity Theory as it mainly revolves around the unexpected expressiveness of the employee. The dialogue may be perceived as a catchphrase as it is always unaltered, only reenacted.

4.12 April 2024 – Erm, What the Sigma?

A catchphrase meme, *Erm, What the Sigma?* That developed from a private conversation where one of the participants imitated Squidward³⁶, a character from the TV series *SpongeBob SquarePants* (@Owen, @Zach, @Philipp, 2024). The meme is a parodical reaction (@Lessons in Meme Culture, 2024) to so-called “brainrot memes,” which are abundant in low-effort content that is frowned upon (@TheRealJohnnyAppleSeed, 2023). The catchphrase secured first place in the popularity poll of April 2024 (Kachalin, 2024d).

The catchphrase was implemented in edits³⁷, where the selection of used visuals implies that the edit revolves around the meaning of *sigma male*, which refers to ‘a popular, successful, but highly independent and self-reliant man’ (What Is A “Sigma Male”?, 2021). It also found its utilisation as a reaction to various clips³⁸, where the characters act as the viewers.

Its inspiration was to mock a specific category of memes, and its virality allowed it to develop into a meme. Further interpretations joined the mockery of the excessive absurdity of “brainrot memes” in a parodical manner utilising the Superiority Theory and Incongruity Theory.

4.13 May 2024 – Galvanized Square Steel

Galvanized Square Steel is a satirical meme that possibly critiques the housing crisis. The meme is in the form of an animated video that revolves around remodelling rooms to utilise them to their maximum potential for the recurring character, Little John. Accompanying the video is a narration done by an AI, which narrates the remodelling in a humorous matter and always exploits the same

³⁴@rangojalex (2024), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@rangojalex/video/7343342980490661162>

³⁵@_angelomarasigan (2024), Available from: https://www.tiktok.com/@_angelomarasigan/video/7343588673960660232

³⁶@annamae_83 (2024), Available from: https://www.tiktok.com/@annamae_83/video/7342629875255168298

³⁷@velo.am0 (2024), Available from: <https://www.tiktok.com/@velo.am0/video/7343468224446467374>

³⁸@huugh_mungus (2024), Available from: https://www.tiktok.com/@huugh_mungus/video/7352566660466806058

jokes, e.g. “square galvanized steel” or “[xxx] borrowed from an aunt” (@Philipp, @Zach 2024). The meme secured first place in a May 2024 popularity poll Kachalin (2024e).

The meme evolved from grounded remodelling³⁹, where the recurring jokes were the sole element that made the videos humorous, until the meme developed into remodelling that was devoid of rationality⁴⁰. Eventually, the later interpretations utilised physicality in the meme instead of only the verbal narration. In conclusion, the meme implemented satire, absurdness, slapstick and the Incongruity Theory.

³⁹@homedesign369 (2023), Available from:
<https://www.tiktok.com/@homedesign369/video/7309877116991032618>

⁴⁰@homedesign369 (2024), Available from:
<https://www.tiktok.com/@homedesign369/video/7376625369085922603>

5 Conclusion

The thesis categorised possible instances of humour types and linguistic devices through observation, alongside listing short surveys of memes. As a result of the categorisation, further analysis of a corpus of popular memes provided few notable discoveries.

Firstly, the thesis reveals that understanding memes lies in understanding the references in the meme, the references range from current world events to memes themselves. Memes can include multiple references at once, which makes them harder to understand, and as the meme develops further, it can have layers of those references. Consumers of memes thus need to follow the development of the meme from the start, when it began as a viral media, or retrospectively follow them to their roots.

Secondly, the most prevalent humour in memes is, of course, digital humour, as memes appear online and need to abide the principles, then it is followed by self-deprecating humour, surreal/absurd humour and observational humour. Although memes allow an opportunity for linguistic devices to be used, as seen in the popular memes, which reflect the internet interests, they do not appear often, if not intertextuality, because memes rely on them. Moreover, the analysis of popular memes reveals that the simplest memes are often the most popular as they require little to no cognitive function and, thus, are stripped of anything that would require close observation of the meme and spending more time than is necessary.

Thirdly, memes rely on the element of surprise, often manifested in new, unexpected interpretation that differs from what they have seen so far, or they happen to implement an unexpected twist.

In conclusion, navigating the world of memes requires knowledge of references, both currently trending and no longer popular ones. While the use of linguistic devices might be rare, the representation of various humour types is not. From digital to absurd, memes tap into the most relatable parts of every day or internet experiences. The most popular memes are often the simplest – making them easy to digest and enabling the users to move to another one quickly. However, the next time you encounter an image macro, edit or a clip with a caption you do not understand, take a moment and explore its layers instead of labelling it as nonsense.

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