"I don't always look at memes, but when I do, it's for a class": Using Memes to Demonstrate Language Rules

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"I don't always look at memes, but when I do, it's for a class":
Using Memes to Demonstrate Language Rules

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Abstract

This activity uses Internet memes to demonstrate the pervasiveness of language rules and culture's effect on language in online culture. Numerous introductory communication courses include a discussion on verbal communication that focuses on language rules and the effects of culture on verbal communication. The most relevant language rules for memes are the regulative rules that guide action and how we use language (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1979). In this exercise, students analyze and evaluate language rules present in popular online memes. The students identify the language rule utilized in each of a pre-chosen set of Internet memes and generate at least three memes of their own that fit within the theme and language rules of the meme as a communication form. Students also answer questions regarding culture's role in meme topics and language choices.

Courses

Interpersonal Communication; Public Speaking; Language; Media; Intercultural Communication; Computer-Mediated Communication

Objectives

- Students will evaluate memes to determine the language rules employed as well as culture's influence on the meme's message.
- Students will also create their own examples of well-known memes using correct, meme-specific language and culture-based rules.

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Introduction and Rationale

While the word "meme" has become a widespread part of the pop culture lexicon, meme theory is actually much older and broader than these now-popular digital, captioned photographs. Memes are ideas, beliefs, or patterns of behavior that spread throughout a culture (Dawkins, 1976), including songs, phrases, clothing, and images (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). More informally, and more recently, memes have come to be thought of as images overlaid with text that spread by imitation via the internet. However, this particular type of meme, while a large part of internet culture, is actually only one mode of meme communication, and is more precisely known as the image macro.

Image macros generally consist of an image in the middle of a pictorial frame with white text above and below the image. For simplicity, throughout the remainder of this essay, the term "meme" will be used to refer to a particular picture or graphic image or the body of various messages using that image (e.g., those using the image known as *Grumpy Cat* http://www.grumpycats.com/memes/), over which any number of text choices can be laid with different effect. The term "image macro" will refer to a given meme with specific text overlaid (e.g., "I had fun once. It was awful." http://www.grumpycats.com/memes/i-had-fun-once-it-was-awful/).

Other popular memes include those known as *LOLcats*, *Ermahgerd*, and *First World Problems*. These and many others can be found on Memegenerator.net and other similar websites, which allow any internet user to select a meme-specific picture and insert his or her choice of text to create a personalized image macro. The content of the text is usually humorous, and the text follows language rules that are exclusive to each particular picture/meme. For example, Grumpy Cat memes nearly always contain negativity, often including the word "no." Exploring the text rules on the image macro is the focus of this teaching activity.

Numerous introductory communication courses and textbooks contain discussions about verbal communication that include information regarding language rules (i.e., pragmatics) and the effects of culture on communication. Regulative rules are those that guide action and how language is used (Cronen, Pearce, & Harris, 1979). These are the most relevant language rules for this teaching activity because, essentially, regulative rules explain the patterns of language that should be utilized when creating an image macro to maximize its desired impact on one's intended audience.

Additionally, memes allow students to learn about culture's role in message content because memes are often influenced by cultural norms and expectations (Burgess, 2008), and only memes and image macros that properly represent the socio-cultural environment are spread, or "go viral" (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2012). A shared culture or background is key to understanding any given image macro's premise and "punch line." Each social group develops a culture that includes the basis of humorous interactions (Holmes & Marra, 2002). Joking is interactive, referential, and embedded in a context (Fine & De Soucey, 2005). The message's intended audience must have a shared reference point in order to make sense of the humor. The more familiar a viewer is with multiple image macros created from a particular picture/meme, the more likely he or she will understand the joke communicated in the text of a newly-viewed image macro created from it. In this single-class teaching activity, students identify a

meme's language rules and work together to produce original, language rule-compliant, and situationally-appropriate content for that meme.

Being involved in classroom activities can aid in the learning process (Astin, 1984). Further, by applying communication concepts (i.e., language rules) to information they are already interested in or knowledgeable of, students are more likely to be motivated to comprehend the material and have a positive classroom experience (Schiefele, 1991). That's why memes make such useful classroom examples.

Description of the Activity

Before class, the instructor chooses three or four popular memes to use in class. Memegenerator.net and memesly.com are examples of websites that contain several image macros categorized by meme title, such as *Bad Luck Brian, Socially Awkward Penguin, and Success Kid.* The instructor selects three or four exemplar image macros from each meme title chosen. These meme images are easily downloaded to a PowerPoint handout, or the instructor can show or print them directly from a website. To learn more about each meme, knowyourmeme.com provides a thorough description of the meme's origin as well as the message type typically portrayed by the meme. Knowing the history and common usage of the meme helps the instructor and student situate the meme in context.

The day of the activity, the instructor begins by providing an example of a meme, its language rules, and relevant cultural considerations so that the students understand the objective of the activity. Intended to serve as an example for the class, the instructor shows the variations of the one meme (e.g., show three examples of image macros generated from the *Success Kid* meme). When showing the meme examples, the students identify the language rules of that meme, focusing mostly on the regulative rules that govern how language and sentence structure are utilized in that meme. For example, *Success Kid* is typically used to indicate a positive outcome of a problematic situation. A picture of a toddler making a fist in accomplishment is in the center of the frame with white text above and below the image. Examples of *Success Kid* text include: "Don't know a question on a test // Answer is in another question," and, "Late to work // Boss was even later." The main language rule for this meme is that the top line of text typically reveals a mundane problem or situation, and the bottom line of text reveals a triumph over that problem. In addition, the text is rarely in proper sentence format.

Students then identify and discuss how the content of the text is (or is not) affected by cultural aspects. That is, what does the audience need to know prior to viewing the image macro in order to understand its message? For example, in the previous *Success Kid* example about test-taking, the audience will likely need to have an understanding of being a student and taking tests, being fortunate and attentive enough to recognize that an answer to one question can be found in another question.

After the example is shown and discussed as a class, the instructor breaks the class into groups consisting of four or five members. Each group will receive a different meme to evaluate and are given a printout of that meme's exemplar image macros. One copy per group is sufficient, for one student usually reads the text to the other group members. The groups are instructed to evaluate their memes for language rules utilized in the body of image macros created from that meme. The students should also be able to

recognize the image macro's common premise (e.g., awkward situations, unfortunate situations, dumb teenagers) and its implied audience. After identifying language rules, the groups should generate at least three examples of their own that fit within the meme theme and language rules. One example should be context-specific to the university or geographic region to highlight the importance of cultural impact on message content. When groups have discussed their rules and created their own examples, the class reconvenes. Each group briefly identifies their meme's language rules and reads their original image macro examples. If possible, the instructor should show the picture used in each group's meme category (from the website) to the class, so the students can also see the image that would accompany the text.

As an alternative, the instructor can choose not to use small groups and, instead, focus on one or two memes as a class. The remainder of the activity continues as previously described.

Debriefing

The following questions can help guide the class discussion about the students' examples and other language rules related to memes:
1. What were some common language rules?
2. What is the general theme of the meme?
3. How does culture play a role in the meme's topics and language used?
4. What background information is needed in order to understand the meme's premise?
5. Who is the implied audience?
6. What happens when an image macro is created that does not follow the relevant language rules?

Based on the amount of classroom time that is available, this discussion can take as much or as little time as necessary. The instructor can also show examples of poorly-constructed image macros (e.g., when language rule are not followed) and have the students identify why the language does not follow the rules. During the discussion on culture's role in comprehending and replicating a meme, it is also useful to show image macro examples that are specific to the university or region (or a completely different university) to demonstrate how being a member of the culture (e.g., the university) is required in order to understand their intended messages.

Appraisal

In this activity, the students are able to see how regulative rules are used and what happens when those rules are not followed. Because most students are familiar with memes, they are able to identify with them and thoughtfully contribute to the class discussions. Students are also able to see how culture plays a role in language use and message construction. Further, since this activity has students identifying language rules and creating their own image macros based on those rules, the exercise focuses on the higher order thinking skills identified in Bloom's Taxonomy (i.e., Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation; Bloom, 1956).

This activity can be expanded or modified in a variety of ways. To amend this activity, the instructor may wish to have the students speculate as to why some memes are more "contagious" than others. Jonah Berger's (2013) popular book, *Contagious*, and Knobel and Lankshear's (2007) chapter on characteristics of successful memes would be useful to read in conjunction with this activity to further determine what makes a meme contagious. The debriefing then might require students to identify characteristics that lead to a meme's s success (or demise). Another option is to expand on the notion of "genre," including notions of permanence and change. The related class discussion can include a dialogue about the evaluation of image macros and their language use. That is, how has language on an image macro transitioned from one topic or tone to another? Overall, this activity challenges students to analyze popular Internet memes and consider the cultural implications of them rather than blindly consuming them.

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