English Today

cambridge.org/eng

POV: me, an empath, sensing the linguistic urge . . . to study the forms and functions of text-memes

Jacqueline Hirsh Greene and Hans–Jörg Schmid
Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany

Research Article

Cite this article: Greene JH, Schmid H–J (2024). POV: me, an empath, sensing the linguistic urge . . . to study the forms and functions of text-memes. *English Today* **40**, 97–104. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078423000469

First published online: 4 January 2024

Corresponding author:
Jacqueline Hirsh Greene;
Email: jacqueline@hirshgreene.com

1. Introduction

A catapult into the world of social media, the title of our paper may be incoherent to some readers. What on earth does *POV: me, an empath, sensing the linguistic urge* (. . .) mean, and when and why would speakers say it? The title contains a jumble of three so-called *text-memes* – (1) *POV*, (2) *me, an empath*, VERB-*ing* X, and (3) *the* X *urge to* Y – all of which will be encountered in this paper. What we are calling 'text-memes' are memes that, in fairly neutral terms, have a purely textual form, as opposed to a pictorial one. Similar phenomena, which differ regarding their forms and functions, however, have been labelled 'snowclones' or 'phrasal templates' (cf. Pullum & Whitman, 2004; Know Your Meme, 2007–).

Text-memes, as we identify in the sections to come, are ubiquitous in certain corners of the internet, particularly on the algorithmic 'feeds' of millennial and generation-Z internet users. They seem to constitute some kind of linguistic register in their own right. A message that could be conveyed using other words is instead said in, or through, a text-meme. Let us consider a couple instances of text-memes posted on Twitter:

(1) *me an empath avoiding people in emotional distress because im barely keeping it together myself*
(az [@1111azzzz], 2022)

(2) *me, an empath, noticing everyone at the funeral is crying and sad* [GIF]
(pudding person [@JUNLPER], 2022)

In example 1, the speaker expresses what seems to be a genuine concern that attests to their heightened sense of empathy. This is in contrast to example 2, in which a genuine claim to be an empath seems to be subverted, the irony laying in how plain the observation is (that one does not need to be an empath to realize that crying and being sad are exactly what goes on at a funeral).

To our knowledge, the phenomenon of text-memes as recurrent utterance types in the form of distinct types of internet meme has not received due attention by linguists so far. In this paper we investigate text-memes with regard to their forms and functions. Our main questions are:

a. What actually are text-memes and what are their formal and semantic characteristics?
b. What are the main functions of text-memes? What might text-memes 'do', so-to-pragmatically-speak?

2. What are text-memes?

2.1 Background: Genetics, memetics, or semiotics?

The notion of the meme emerged as an attempt to draw an analogy between cultural studies and Darwinian evolutionary biology (Dawkins, 1976). Richard Dawkins originally suggested that memes – i.e. trends, catchphrases, social norms, beliefs, and so on – are cultural material that transfer across generations and among populations (the comparison being that memes are encoded units of information which evolve and are societally transmitted by way of repetition and mimicry). The analogy, namely how it reduces the agency of the creators and spreaders of memes to subjects of automated transmission and evolution, has remained widely criticized by cultural anthropologists, biologists, and semioticians, among others (see Fomin, 2019: 331). Memes do

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

not spread themselves, nor do 'brains' spread them indiscriminately, as memetics would suggest. Instead, socially-aware agents decide to create, compare, select, package and circulate them (cf. 'hosting' a meme 'infrapsychically', cf. Castelfranchi, 2001: 21).

Taking consideration from all arenas with stake in the study of memes, Shifman's (2014: 14) three-part criteria of internet memes, as a subject of cultural and media studies in their own right, are a starting point for understanding text-memes: memes are '(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.' Of course, when we talk specifically about internet memes, which the field of memetics precedes, the process of this exact diffusion is reinforced and amplified by the affordances of social media (Schmid, 2020: 181, 314).

Literature in the field of linguistics seems to focus on the 'image macro' type of meme. Image macros are composed of viral images that are de- or re-contextualized by help of superimposed or adjacent linguistic elements (Bülow, 2023: 260). They have been studied in relation to their form-meaning correspondence, as pragmatic significations, and as realizations of collective conventions entrenched in (some) speakers' minds (cf. Shifman, 2014; Bülow, Merten & Johann, 2018; Zenner & Geeraerts, 2018; Denisova, 2019; Wiggins, 2019; Zappavigna, 2020; Bülow, 2023). The way in which image macros package a stable image with variable or semi-variable text (e.g. *one does not simply* X, Bülow et al., 2018: 21) is similar to the packaging of a stable text with a variable or semi-variable text in the case of text-memes (e.g. *me, an empath*, VERB-*ing* X). The variable text portion (e.g. *avoiding people in emotional distress because I'm barely keeping it together myself* or *noticing everyone at the funeral is crying and sad* in examples 1 and 2) is referred to here as the *co-text*. 'Co-text' in this case draws from Schmid's (2020: 19) notion, as the "utterances preceding and following a given utterance or part thereof."

The closest formal description of text-memes has been elsewhere assigned the term 'snowclones' or 'phrasal templates' (cf. Pullum & Whitman, 2004; Know Your Meme, 2007–). So-called snowclones would be template-like phrases such as 'X is the new Y' or 'to X or not to X', for example. The term 'phrasal template' is also quite general; it could refer to really any phrase which includes variable slots, such as those above, or anything such as 'X(adj) as a Y(animal)' as in 'blind as a bat' or 'stubborn as a mule', which we argue are not the same kind of linguistic patterns or phrasal forms as text-memes. 'Phrasal templates' as well as 'snowclones' differ from text-memes with regard to both forms and functions, which is noticeable in how typically simpler, less abundant in text, less narrative-driven, less obscure, and more constrained snowclones and phrasal templates are in comparison to text-memes. In addition, text-memes are products of social media creation and spread. The original purpose and connotation attributed to 'snowclones' are also at odds with our notion of text-memes. In an entry to *Language Log*, Pullum and Whitman (2004) coined the term as a way of describing 'cliché frames for lazy journalists'. Whereas *snowclone* emphasizes the imitative, 'cloned' property of meaning-making, *text-meme* emphasizes the creative, 'text' property of meaning-making.

2.2 Definition and form: Meme + co-text = text-meme package

Text-memes can be characterized as bipartite units, consisting of a somewhat fixed and a somewhat variable part (see Figure 1), despite that meme-users may likely grasp the entire construction holistically. Otherwise, i.e. if they are interpreted compositionally, it is unlikely that language users are able to recognize them as having a 'special significance' such as in their pragmatics or idiomatic-like expression. In the text-meme *me, an empath*, VERB-*ing* X, we would identify the fixed meme portion *me an empath* and the co-text VERB-*ing* X.

Memes and their co-text are complementary. Co-texts are the core of a speaker's communicative point in terms of propositional content. Memes in turn make a strong contribution to perspectivizing this content, e.g. by obscuring, enriching or questioning it and, most importantly, by placing it in the interpersonal relationship between writer/speaker and reader/hearer. Memes cushion the co-text, which also means that certain co-texts call for certain memes.

Co-texts are mostly variable, in that they can take on the topic of really anything. But in order for text-memes to cohere and have a maximal effect and reception as text-memes, co-texts must stick to formal and semantic conventions imposed by the meme. For example, it would be unconventional if the aforementioned text-memes were to instead have the following co-texts:

(3) [*Me, an empath, a person who avoids other people's emotional distress considering I am barely keeping it together myself.*]

(4) [*me, an empath, attending a funeral where everyone is crying and sad.*]

These two fabricated reconstructions of examples 1 and 2 illustrate how co-texts are only variable to an extent. Example 3 deviates from the convention imposed by the meme, in that *me, an empath* is followed by a relative clause modifying *me*. One would usually expect the meme to be followed by a verb phrase where the head verb takes the progressive *ing*-form. A particular semantic type of verb is also likely expected, typically either a psych verb such as *sensing, seeing*, or *feeling*, or at least some verb related to a scenario of having feelings akin to empathy (see *avoiding* in example 1). Although formally typical, example 4 is unconventional regarding the semantics of *attending*. There is no direct or obvious relation between (attending an event) → (being an empath), but maybe only when (attending a particular event) + (perceiving it in a particular way) → (being an empath). We could however hypothesize that speakers give less effort to ticking certain grammatical and even semantic boxes of the co-text than they give to reporting a meme somewhat uniformly. Again this expectation is based on the assumption that some degree of holistic processing is required for successful understanding of text-memes.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078423000469 Published online by Cambridge University Press

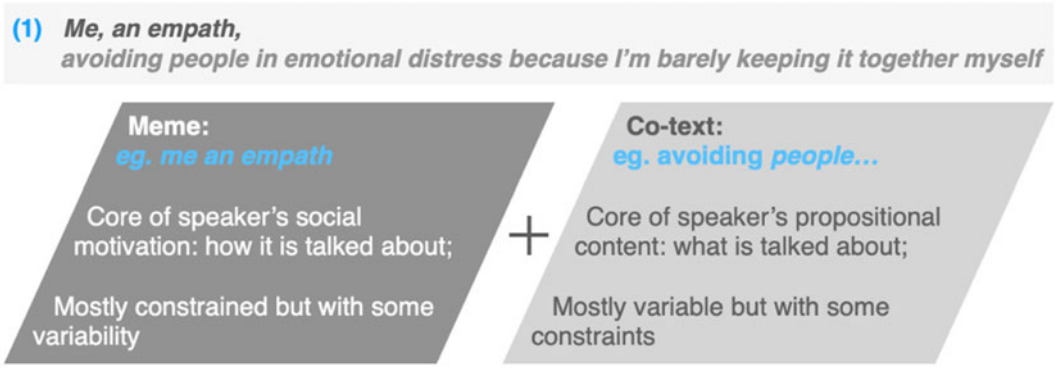


Figure 1. Visualization of the bipartite text-meme as 'meme' plus 'co-text'

The meme portion itself is formally constrained as well, but also flexible to some degree. Speakers have leeway in how they report the meme portion. As is also the case with co-texts, limitations to this creativity are imposed by recognizability. After all, memes have to be repeated uniformly enough to be recognized as a meme in the first place. One often finds ambiguous meme usage though:

(5) *As an empath, when somebody passes away it just makes me SO sad. Especially seeing their loved ones going through it. Shit sucks* ☺
(Aja Lou [@XO_Tamar], 2022)

(6) *The empath in me has had a really really REALLY tough week. To the point of physical exhaustion.*
(Brittaney Shanae [@bshanae_mua], 2022)

In examples 5 and 6, speakers identify themselves as empaths given some explanation, e.g., feeling upset by death, or having a particularly difficult week. One question here may be if other meme users would analyze these examples, despite variation in the stable meme portion, as evoking the *me, an empath* VERB-*ing X* text-meme. It could also be that *empath* is a current buzzword, and the phenomenon of calling oneself an empath is on-trend, apart from the text-meme construction. Such examples might be considered highly modified allusions to the meme, which rest on the key notion of *empath* and references made to the speaker. *As an empath, when* X, *then* Y (example 5) and *the empath in me* VERBs (example 6) deviate quite a bit formally from *me, an empath*, VERB-*ing* X. The question lies in the flexibility of readers to accept the meme in various altered states: e.g., if omitting commas, as in *me an empath* VERB-*ing*, is OK, and other changes in the noun phrase, as in *me, as the empath I am*, VERB-*ing*, are also OK, but *I am an empath because X* is not OK?

The issue of variability is probably quite functionalized, however, meaning that deviations from the norm would be recognized and more likely to be found acceptable by the 'meme-literate,' but not necessarily by the meme-non-literate (Procházka, 2014; Merten, Bülow & Johann, forthcoming). We can therefore perhaps settle on understanding text-memes as formally ambiguous; as forms that must nod to both to variability and stability. Yet to deviate from the norm and still be recognized as a text-meme requires that the particular text-meme has gained enough traction as a conventionalized 'utterance type' (Schmid, 2020: 19–28). Speakers have to know the formal, semantic, and pragmatic conventions of co-texts and memes, which are established and reinforced by usage and familiarity with that particular text-meme. And in order to become 'proficient' in text-meme usage, speakers must internalize specific formal and contextual characteristics of not just that one instance of a text-meme, but of an entire cache of other ones.

3. Functions

Coherent systems of functions in language have been proposed, for example, by Bühler (1934), Jakobson (1960) or Halliday (1994) (see Schmid, 2020: 18 for a survey). Instead of sticking to one of these, we will discuss functions of text-memes in an eclectic but tailor-made way. As the paper is programmatic and opens up a new field of inquiry, we focus on three different hand-picked text-meme types, having considered approximately 100 tokens per type extracted from the Twitter spotlight-search function. We are aware that text-memes are also ubiquitous on other social-media platforms, but will restrict our attention to Twitter in view of space limitations. For this reason, this paper only includes a small number of examples which are useful for illustrating the functional patterns highlighted below. Based on this selection, we put forward a division into six dominant configurations of sociopragmatic *functions*, in the vague sense of 'motivations for using text-memes and intended effects' (Table 1):

These six functions fall into two groups. The first group applies to memes and text-memes, which are both: phatic; indexical to the speaker, yet both addressee- and addresser-centered; referential to other memes, the genre, and to other pop-culture references; and social codes.

The remaining two functions, i.e. the narrative and therapeutic ones, seem to be more specific to text-memes. Text-memes often, though not always, exhibit the narrative function, characteristic of their predominant feature, *text*. 'Text' is not meant in the semiotic sense, where images also qualify as text or textual artifacts, but in a more narrow sense of the term, as a '*verbal* record of a communicative act'

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078423000469 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 1. Functions of text-memes

Function:	*Allows speaker to . . .*
Phatic:	*establish contact*
Indexical/interpersonal:	*index self and relate to others*
Intertextual/poetic:	*use and link up meaningful texts*
Social:	*assert or affirm in-group status*
Narrative:	*tell a story and self-mythologize*
Therapeutic:	*cope and engage*

(Brown & Yule, 1983: 6, our emphasis). Text under these terms does not only mean that there is a communicative act in some recorded form (Brown & Yule, 1983: 6); in addition, the notion of 'text' entails an element of coherence, or felt-coherence at the least. The narrative function explains how speakers tell coherent stories and self-mythologize, which is a more extreme and overt form of the kind of self-indexation present in all memes. The therapeutic function ties into the narrative function, in how speakers create distance from their message put forth in the co-text by using a meme as a hedge. The narrative and therapeutic functions elucidate how text-memes and image macros differ regarding their communicative capabilities or goals. Text-memes are intended to be easy to consume to those who get them, as are image macros, but key to these functions and to *text* itself, text-memes are generally more capable of conveying complex, content-driven messages.

3.1 Phatic, indexical/interpersonal, intertextual/poetic, and social functions

Initially our interest in memes and their communicative functions was sparked by the suggestion that memes mainly, or even only, communicate phatically, among an internet with increasingly 'empty' media (cf. Miller, 2008; Varis & Blommaert, 2015). Jakobson's (1960) *phatic function* describes speech as serving the purpose to 'establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication' (Jakobson, 1960: 355), i.e. it is language for the sake of contact. But if the point of posting online is most simply to make contact, then any post on social media, memes included, have an inherent *phatic function.*

When considering the examples 7 and 8 below which use the *POV* text-meme, we can see why a 'merely phatic' conclusion might be tempting. The *POV* text-meme is meant to provide a 'point of view', inserting the reader into the speaker's narrative about an event. The speaker rhetorically asks of the reader to consider that this propositional information is their own point of view; the text-meme as such originated as one that necessitated a video or an image that served as the POV. Examples 7 and 8 are however two extremely cryptic tokens of the *POV* text-meme. The hasty formulation in 7 suggests the speaker might have been drunkenly stating they are drunk. Example 8 is even more cryptic: what exactly is the point of view, with a co-text of just *peepee poopoo*? We can only speculate as to its intended meaning. Yet, even examples 7 and 8 go beyond the phatic function.

(7) *Pov drunk*

(Amber [@gentlearthquake], 2022)

(8) *pov: peepee poopoo*

(dead account. [@MarianneFESimp], 2021)

These examples still exhibit the *indexical function*, despite being not nearly as overt as other text-meme tokens in their indexicality, nor in what Jakobson called the *emotive function* of communication, which is language for the sake of speaker-centered expression. These text-meme tokens hardly reveal anything about the speaker or the context, and yet, the speakers index themselves as meme-users. This in itself reveals a particular membership belonging of the speaker. Zenner and Geeraerts (2018: 173) similarly describe image macro usage as marking an 'ingroup code of the digitally literate' (see also Bülow, 2023: 261).

Producing and sharing a meme is a highly performative act, even if practically a reflex. On the flipside of the indexical function is the *interpersonal function*, related to what Jakobson referred to as the *conative function* of communication, which is language for the sake of appeal. Memes constantly rely on an interface between addressers and addressees. They are self-referential and ultimately only meaningful by way of reception. That is, *if* reception is possible: the addressee has to be just as much in the know as the addresser. And if so, memes are then identified as intertextual references over word-for-word utterances, i.e., they are meant to be read as holistic chunks. For a meme to be considered a meme, prior and current usages are intertextually linked. Memes network with other internet material, sources of pop culture, and most importantly, with other memes (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017; Zenner & Geeraerts, 2018; Wiggins, 2019). This *intertextual function* is not at all specific to memes but rather to genres in general (De Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981). Example 9 from Twitter demonstrates the intertextual function by exaggeration:

(9) *Me (an empath) sensing that the feminine urge that my toxic trait is that we are not the same me n who??*

(A [@gaywarlord], 2021)

This example of the *me, an empath* VERB-*ing* X text-meme is composed entirely of other memes as the co-text: *the X urge to Y*; *my toxic trait is X*; *you/'re X, I/'m Y, we are not the same*; and *X: me and who?* The speaker jumbles together these popular text-memes to make one seemingly nonsensical chain of text-memes (perhaps criticizing the overuse of the text-meme types). If these intertextual references to the text-memes were unknown, then the indexical and interpersonal point of example 9 would be missed. The meaning of example 9 also lays in the *poetic function*. Using Jakobson's terminology, the poetic function describes how the form of the message reflects 'on itself.' That is, when the message design makes the meaning, and when the form of the message is the point - apart from the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078423000469 Published online by Cambridge University Press

meaning attached to the forms. Speakers do not only refer to the entities they talk about, but inevitably to the text-memes themselves (they are self-referential).

The notion of 'message makes the meaning' could also be explained in terms of the *social function*. This last function that we attribute to all meme types might be able to answer to a few special qualities of text-memes, such as their prolificity and tendency to change. Once memes are mimicked enough, they compete with other, newer, possibly even better memes. At that point, for a meme to survive rather than die, there is the potential to remix into something alike, but different (cf. 'memetic drive' in Blackmore, 2000; or 'intermemetic referentiality' in Esteves & Meikle, 2015; Wiggins, 2019). In the case of text-memes, it is common for either the form of the meme or the conventions of the co-text to easily and quickly change. For instance, a well-established text-meme, *the feminine urge to X*, has been significantly revamped over time. On its so-called 'adaptability', the text-meme even got a feature in the *New York Times* in an article titled 'The Timesian Urge to Explain a Meme (Kambhampaty, 2021). *Know Your Meme*, a vast and up-to-date encyclopedic web source on meme tracking, estimates the first instance of what became a text-meme to have been the following Tumblr post (Know Your Meme, 2007-):

(10) *the feminine urge to stab <3*
([coffeeheaux], 2021)

In early instances of the text-meme, the co-text would usually pair a transitive verb with no subsequent object. Semantically, the transitive verb would have little or nothing to do with what one associates with femininity, or 'feminine urges' nonetheless (e.g. *stabbing*). When in full throttle, there likely comes a split in imaginations of a fitting co-text of a text-meme type, and more variation in form too. Some interpret and use the text-meme ironically (example 11), and some more so at its face value (example 12). *The feminine urge to* X eventually allowed for an open slot to all kinds of urges, the modified construction being *the* X *urge to* Y (examples 13 and 14).

(11) *the feminine urge to get a lobotomy*
(Maria Is Online [@averyonlinegirl], 2021)

(12) *the feminine urge to understand him in the deepest way possible*
(Angélica García [@angelicaswild], 2021)

(13) *The nonbinary urge to crush the cockroach*
(Lin Biao School of Aeronautics [@Pondershevik], 2021)

(14) *The Marxist urge to die*
(Astrologically Oppressed [@PD8800], 2021)

Inevitably, some meme-users would deem even the revamped constructions 'dead memes', despite whether some still use it ('Dead meme: A meme that has become irrelevant or unfunny, often due to age or overly cringeworthy use' [Urban Dictionary, 2017). The following speakers took to Twitter their meta-level complaints about the text-meme:

(15) *Oh lord now politicians and brands making "urge" tweets. It is dead. Welp, time for the next trend lmao*
(trudy [@thetrudz], 2021)

(16) *The male urge to beat a meme until it's completely unfunny and dead*
(B [@Bguth_], 2021)

(17) *I don't CARE if the meme is dead I have the urge so I will EXPRESS it dammit*
(Jessica [@greyharuka], 2022)

Divergent opinions on the repute of a meme seems unavoidable. Memes are like codes, in that they must balance being encoded enough (i.e. they have to be obscure enough, for only the in-group to get them), yet not too decoded (i.e. they should not be too obscure, in order for the in-group to get them). Text-memes necessitating obscurity may seem counterintuitive, if the argument is that text-memes are communicative utterances above all else. Why should text be obscure if functioning predominantly to communicate? A certain level of obscurity is critical for memes to 'stick'. This is also a criterion that differentiates text-memes from snowclones or phrasal templates. For as much as memes function to be widely used and 'mimicked,' they also function to die, so that newer and cooler memes can be born. Relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1996) could give some kind of explanation for text-memes' quick, successful and curious rise and fall as communicative forms among some internet users. In this approach, the notion of *relevance* is understood as being a trade-off between the positive cognitive effects to be gained from processing an utterance and the energy required for doing so. Memes are not superficially 'relevant', by means of that terminology, but are rather only relevant on a deeper level, like in their obscurity and humor. The process of working out meme's relevance is rewarding, in that the reader can rejoice once having worked it out, gotten the point of the intertextual references, and can be satisfied with being in the know. As soon as a meme is overused, there is no longer a reward in store. This is also a property typical of expressions that leave a gap between what is said and what is meant (cf. 'euphemism treadmill', Keller, 1994; Pinker, 2002).

3.2 Narrative and therapeutic functions

An apt introduction to the distinct functionality of text-memes is to consider them stories, and speakers storytellers. It has been suggested that memes at large are analogous to storytelling and lore in how they retell a story repeatedly over time, spun by the speaker and their context (Esteves & Meikle, 2015). This analogy remarks more on how memes as a genre work. What we suggest here is that text-memes in particular often a particular *narrative function*. Narrative, most simply put, is the record of someone telling someone else that something that happened, (for a pragmatic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078423000469 Published online by Cambridge University Press

purpose). And, as is typical of narratives, there is always some kind of complication (Labov & Waletzky, 1967).

Each instance of a text-meme entails two indexical jobs related to narrative concerns: speakers index themselves in relation to some piece of propositional content (expressed in their co-text), and speakers index themselves as meme-users, to express the former. In this way, text-memes can serve as *self-mythologies*, in the sense that the speaker – the narrator – recounts on an event, real or not, pinning themselves as the main character in and against the world. These self-mythologies tend to represent the complication component around which the structure of narratives revolves. Maybe for this reason, an initial impression of text-memes is that they come across self-centered. This is a legitimate impression, because text-memes, even when the subject is not the speaker, are often collections of personal anecdotes and morals related to the experiences of speakers (remember examples 1 and 2, where speakers attempt to set the record straight that they are 'empaths'). And very often, the topics of such text-memes are overshares or taboos:

(18) *pov both ur cats died within 5 days :) i'm actually very mentally stable rn i'm not gonna kms at all*
(osh [@oshiewott], 2022)

(19) *pov ur breaking up with me but glee is on and i'm silently humming the songs to myself*
(tiana [@gagamilkies], 2022

Examples 18 and 19 from Twitter demonstrate what is meant by text-memes as mini-narratives: they set up a scene and describe an event representing the complication. In 18, the literal narrative is how the speaker reflects on the death of their pet cats and sarcastically attests they are currently 'very stable' despite also contemplating death; in 19 the speaker narrates humming while being broken up with. Beneath the hypothetic and hyperbolic tone common of POV text-memes, 18 and 19 likely reveal actual sentiments felt by the speakers: feeling devasted, or, being indifferent to something usually considered devastating. We mentioned that all meme usage indexes speakers as meme-users, but the narrative quality of text-memes takes self-indexation one step further. The therapeutic function might explain the question as to why this is. Why tell the story, and why use a meme to tell it?

We suggest that text-memes very often exhibit a *therapeutic function*, in which speakers use them to cope or engage with a wide-range of emotions:

(20) *Pov: you feel alone even though you live with seven billion people*
(Idkbincool [@Idkbincool13], 2021)

(21) *pov ur 9 years old droppin it low to london bridge by fergie at the roller rink. ur mom gave u $20 for arcade games n bad hot dogs. all of ur friends are here. they're about to play dead bug. all is well.*
(queef urban [@creature_cal], 2022)

The *POV* affords speakers a particularly easy, indirect outlet to speak from the 'you' rather than the 'I' perspective. It is a fixed formula to out oneself, own up to or open up about, for instance, feeling alone or basking in childhood nostalgia.

Global, collectively-felt events are also a favorite topic among text-memes, which play into the therapeutic function. A study on 9/11 and Iraq war pictorial memes or image macros, such as the *Mission Accomplished* motif (Silvestri, 2018), brought to light how memes can contribute to past or current social and political events by synthesizing them and raising awareness for them, and by doing so, take on immense responsibility for how online communities come to view the events (cf. Crovitz & Moran, 2020). How on one hand, it is hopeful that memes are segues to activism, and on the other, there is concern that memes offer a lightheartedness and humor which can make it a challenge to discern serious matters from the silly or simplified messages typical of image macros. It would be interesting to see how text-memes compare in this sense; for instance on the topic of the SCOTUS ruling to overturn Roe V. Wade:

(22) *POV: roe v wade is overturned you live in Texas and just found out you're caring an ectopic pregnancy and you can not terminate pregnancy because people think a fetus is more important than your own life.*
(Geraldine [@_geraldine_84], 2022)

(23) *Pov: its 2023. Abortion is illegal, condoms illegal and birth control is illegal . . .. I bet homosexuality dont sound so bad now do it?* ☺
(KNTY [@Mrkezzz], 2022)

Inherent to the more expansive, textual form of text-memes and the difference in their communicative abilities, we could at least initially suggest that compared to political image macros, text-memes could by nature allow for easier, more thoughtful argumentation and activism. Example 22 demonstrates this ability of text-memes well. Example 23, quite crudely, reminds us that text-memes are still memes, and that the extra creative license of text-memes is somewhat of a double-edged sword, just like with image macros. Meme-users can speak out against injustice just as much they can make light of it. Humor is of course an important feature in memes as entertainment devices, also as coping mechanisms for the speakers themselves, as might be the case in the examples above. To Silvestri's (2018) point, meme users indeed become stakeholders in important geopolitical affairs. While this notion seems promising on some fronts, for instance in countering political apathy among young people, the boldness and comedic delivery which has potential to be insensitive is an issue of concern when it comes to serious, unfunny issues. In their efforts to act or cope with current events, it is the individual meme-user's responsibility to decide how they set the tone.

4. Conclusion

What we have done so far is preliminarily sort through the most pressing criteria of our subject as a distinct, novel linguistic phenomenon. We introduced *text-memes* as types of internet memes. We have decided for a bipartite approach to the form of text-memes, despite that they are likely interpreted wholistically and dynamically. As illustrated by the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078423000469 Published online by Cambridge University Press

questionable reconstructions in examples 3 through 6, memes are not entirely fixed, and co-text is not entirely variable. Constructing both requires a calculated, though probably implicit, pairing of formal and semantic expectations. Lastly on form, we emphasized that text-memes are text-driven, an emphasis that profiles how they function as complex communicative utterances.

Our focus was mainly on functionality. We suggested a total of six functions that can account for how speakers 'do stuff,' knowingly and unknowingly, with text-memes. Four of the six functions are more or less applicable functions among all kinds of memes. We began with the *phatic* function. Text-memes can be plain silly or even seemingly nonsensical. Nonetheless, we maintain that text-memes are never merely phatic, but rather always phatic. Regardless of how expressive and speaker-centered the content of a meme is, text-memes first and foremost index speakers as meme-users, which is at the core of the *indexical* function.

All memes function to appeal as well: memes are made to be received. Central to the *interpersonal* function is the medium, that memes are meant (and need) to be public, widely shared phenomena. Memes also possess self-referentiality, which we discussed in the context of the *intertextual* and *poetic* functions. Intertextuality is the basis for why memes are memes from the start. Through their mimicry, memes are in constant reference to a network of other memes. The meaning of memes and text-memes is always at least partly, or even entirely, made by the message itself (recall example 9), hence their *poetic* function.

The *social* function highlights the role of memes as codes, whose obscurity facilitates their social importance. Memes are only codes as long as they leave a large enough residuum of society to stand outside 'the know'.

The other two functions we discussed are more specific to how text-memes often pattern, and may be what distinguish them as their own type. The *narrative* function explains how speakers position themselves in and against the world. The content of these self-mythologies can handle everything from nonsense to candid, unfiltered thoughts, overshares, or social taboos, all of which can be hedged by a meme. The *therapeutic* function considers how and why text-memes would be useful in hedging this kind of content. Text-memes afford speakers distance between themselves and their claims – a space that allows for the chance to cope or engage with their audience and context. Both narrative and therapeutic functions emphasize the expressive, indexical, and personalized quality of text-memes, especially when compared to image macros.

This paper sought to open up a conversation on the text-meme type of meme as formally and functionally meaningful. Understanding the lifespans of text-memes, which might very well be shorter-lived than other memes such as image macros, requires a look into a confluence of socio-cognitive elements that account for new and changed language. Having a closer and more detailed look at these elements has to be the topic of another study.

References

A [@gaywarlord]. 2021, April 5. *Me (an empath) sensing that the feminine urge that my toxic trait is that we are not the same me n who??* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/gaywarlord> [Tweets from this user are protected].

Aja Lou [@XO_Tamar]. 2022, June 28. *As an empath, when somebody passes away it just makes me SO sad. Especially seeing their loved ones going through it. Shit sucks* ☺ [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/XO_Tamar/status/1541798722509602816>.

Amber [@gentlearthquake]. 2022, May 21. *Pov drunk* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/gentlearthquake/status/1528126200660516873>.

Angélica García [@angelicaswild]. 2021, November 21. *the feminine urge to take care of him and understand him in the deepest way possible* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/angelicaswild/status/1462511704856662017>.

Astrologically Oppressed [@PD8800]. 2021, November 20. *The Marxist urge to die* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/PD8800/status/1461874506327216130>.

az [@1111azzzz]. 2022, March 15. *me an empath avoiding people in emotional distress because im barely keeping it together myself* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/1111azzzz/status/1503864358979448839>.

B [@Bguth__]. 2021, November 24. *The male urge to beat a meme until it's completely unfunny and dead* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/Bguth__/status/1463378015434395652>.

Blackmore, S. 2000. *The Meme Machine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brittaney Shanae [@bshanae_mua]. 2022, June 24. *The empath in me has had a really really REALLY tough week. To the point of physical exhaustion.* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/bshanae_mua/status/1540406889145683970>.

Brown, G. & Yule, G. 1983. *Discourse Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bühler, K. 1934. *Sprachtheorie. Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache*. Jena: G. Fischer.

Bülow, L. 2023. 'Image macros als ressource für sprachliche verstärkungsprozess.' In L. Bülow, G. Koch, U. Krieg–Holz & I. Trost (eds.), *Remotivierung in der Sprache. Auf der Suche nach Form und Bedeutung*. Berlin: Springer, 257–280.

Bülow, L., Merten, M. L. & Johann, M. 2018. 'Internet-memes als zugang zu multimodalen konstruktionen.' *Zeitschrift für Angewandte Linguistik*, 69, 1–32.

Castelfranchi, C. 2001. 'Towards a cognitive memetics: Socio-cognitive mechanisms for memes selection and spreading.' *Journal of Memetics*, 5, 1–20.

[coffeeheaux]. 2021, April 14. *the feminine urge to stab <3* [Tumblr Post]. Tumblr. <https://waltenfiles.tumblr.com/post/654739431049297920>.

Crovitz, D. & Moran, C. 2020. 'Analyzing disruptive memes in an age of international interference.' *English Journal*, 109(4), 62–69.

Dawkins, R. 1976. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

dead account. [@MarianneFESimp]. 2021, March 10. *pov: peepee poopoo* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/MarianneFESimp/status/1369733553815236614>.

De Beaugrande, R. & Dressler, W. 1981. *Introduction to Text Linguistics*. London & New York: Longman.

Denisova, A. 2019. *Internet Memes and Society. Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts*. New York: Routledge.

Esteves, V. & Meikle, G. 2015. '"Look @ this fukken doge": Internet memes and remix cultures.' In C. Atton (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Alternative and Community Media*. New York: Routledge, 561–570.

Fomin, I. 2019. 'Memes, genes, and signs: Semiotics in the conceptual interface of evolutionary biology and memetics.' *Semiotica*, 230, 327–340.

Geraldine [@_geraldine_84]. 2022, June 26. *POV: roe v wade is overturned you live in Texas and just found out you're caring an ectopic pregnancy and you can not terminate pregnancy because people think a fetus is more important than your own life* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/_geraldine_84/status/1540927119361880064>.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078423000469 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Halliday, M. A. K. 1994. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: E. Arnold.
Idkbincool [@Idkbincool13]. 2021, August 14. *Pov: you feel alone even though you live with seven billion people* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/Idkbincool13/status/1426356733065277443>.
Jakobson, R. 1960. 'Closing statement: Linguistics and poetics.' In T. A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 350–377.
Jessica [@greyharuka]. 2022, January 29. *I don't CARE if the meme is dead I have the urge so I will EXPRESS it dammit* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/greyharuka/status/1487276794734649345>.
Kambhampaty, A.P. 2021. 'The Timesian urge to explain a meme.' *New York Times*, December, 6.
Keller, R. 1994. *Sprachwandel. Von der Unsichtbaren Hand in der Sprache*. Tübingen: Francke.
Know Your Meme. 2007–. Online at <https://www.knowyourmeme.com> (Accessed December 13, 2022).
KNTY [@Mrkezzz]. 2022, May 9. *Pov: its 2023. Abortion is illegal, condoms illegal and birth control is illegal . . . . I bet homosexuality dont sound so bad now do it?* ☺ [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/Mrkezzz/status/1523652232532881409>.
Labov, W. & Waletzky, J. 1967. 'Narrative analysis.' In J. Helm (ed.), *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 12–44.
Laineste, L. & Voolaid, P. 2017. 'Laughing across borders: Intertextuality of internet memes.' *European Journal of Humour Research*, 4(4), 26–49.
Lin Biao School of Aeronautics [@Pondershevik]. 2021, November 15. *The nonbinary urge to crush the cockroach* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/Pondershevik/status/1460134425757458432>.
Maria Is Online [@averyonlinegirl]. 2021, October 26. *the feminine urge to get a lobotomy* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/averyonlinegirl/status/1452793199001493504>.
Merten, M. L., Bülow, L. & Johann, M. Forthcoming. 'Image macros as multimodal patterns: Image-language relations and norm-related adaption.' *Pattern Theory in Language and Communication.*
Miller, V. 2008. 'New media, networking and phatic culture.' *Convergence*, 14, 387–400.
osh [@oshiewott]. 2022, September 22. *pov both ur cats died within 5 days :) i'm actually very mentally stable rn i'm not gonna kms at all* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/oshiewott/status/1572847200643985410>.
Pinker, S. 2002. *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*. New York: Viking.
Procházka, O. 2014. 'Internet memes – A new literacy?' *Ostrava Journal of English Philology*, 6(1), 53–74.
pudding person [@JUNLPER]. 2022, January 3. *me, an empath, noticing everyone at the funeral is crying and sad* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/JUNlPER/status/1477777123448344580>.
Pullum, G. K. & Whitman, G. 2004. 'Snowclones: Lexicographical dating to the second.' Online at <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/000350.html> (Accessed December 14, 2022)
queef urban [@creature_cal]. 2022, February 15. *pov ur 9 years old droppin it low to london bridge by fergie at the roller rink. ur mom gave u $20 for arcade games n bad hot dogs. all of ur friends are here. they're about to play dead bug. all is well* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/creature_cal/status/1493641371252662283>
Schmid, H. J. 2020. *The Dynamics of the Linguistic System. Usage, Conventionalization, and Entrenchment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Shifman, L. 2014. *Memes in Digital Culture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
Silvestri, L. E. 2018. 'Memeingful memories and the art of resistance.' *New Media & Society*, 20(11), 3997–4016.
Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. 1996. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
tiana [@gagamilkies]. 2022, June 15. *pov ur breaking up with me but glee is on and i'm silently humming the songs to myself* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/gagamilkies/status/1537171772868468737>.
trudy [@thetrudz]. 2021, December 1. *Oh lord now politicians and brands making "urge" tweets. It is dead. Welp, time for the next trend lmao* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/thetrudz/status/1465833393522987012>.
Urban Dictionary. 2017. *Dead meme*. Retrieved from <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Dead%20Meme> (Accessed Mar. 5, 2022).
Varis, P. & Blommaert, J. 2015. 'Conviviality and collectives on social media: Virality, memes, and new social structures.' *Multilingual Margins*, 2(1), 31–45.
Wiggins, B. E. 2019. *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture Ideology, Semiotics, and Intertextuality*. New York: Routledge.
Zappavigna, Michele. 2020. '"And then he said . . . No one has more respect for women than I do": Intermodal relations and intersubjectivity in image macros.' In H. Stöckl, H. Caple & J. Pflaeging (eds.), *Shifts toward Image-Centricity in Contemporary Multimodal Practices*. New York and London: Routledge, 204–225.
Zenner, E & Geeraerts, D. 2018. 'One does not simply process memes: Image macros as multimodal constructions.' In E. Winter–Froemel & V. Thaler (eds.), *Cultures and Traditions of Wordplay and Wordplay Research*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 167–194.



JACQUELINE HIRSH GREENE is an MA student of English Linguistics at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich and of 'Mind and Brain' at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Greene obtained a bachelor's degree in 2019 in Linguistics and German as a double major at the University of New Mexico. Her research interests generally lie in the fields of semantics, pragmatics, psycholinguistics, and in internet language and memes. Email: jacqueline@hirshgreene.com



HANS–JÖRG SCHMID is Full Professor and Chair of Modern English Linguistics at LMU Munich, Germany. His research has been devoted to a wide range of fields in linguistics including linguistic theory, cognitive linguistics, lexical semantics, syntax, word-formation, pragmatics, sociolinguistics and language change. In his recent book, entitled *The Dynamics of the Linguistic System. Usage, Conventionalization and Entrenchment* (2020, OUP), he develops a unified model of how language works, integrating cognitive, social and pragmatic aspects, to explain linguistic structure, variation and change. Email: joerg.schmid@anglistik.uni-muenchen.de

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078423000469 Published online by Cambridge University Press